

## THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: A CONVERSATION WITH BELL HOOKS

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**GEORGE BROSI:** I thought it might be constructive for us to talk about the concept of the beloved community. In our last conversation it seemed like we were lightly dancing around that concept because we talked about the topics that you have dealt with in your writing. Love has been a huge dimension of your work and also liberation. It seems that, in a lot of ways, the beloved community is a concept that has come out of struggles for liberation in an attempt to express how the process of liberation can be infused with love. This concept assumes a group effort to change social institutions and an effort to make the means of that struggle consistent with the ends. The beloved community defines the relationships among those working for change and also the desired result of these efforts. In other words, those of us working for institutional change endeavor to become a beloved community among ourselves as we are striving for all of society to exemplify the beloved community.

**BELL HOOKS:** Martin Luther King was my teacher for understanding the importance of beloved community. He had a profound awareness that the people involved in oppressive institutions will not change from the logics and practices of domination without engagement with those who are striving for a better way.

One of the things that has always made me sad is the extent to which civil rights struggles, black power movements, and feminist movements, have, at times, collapsed at the point where there was conflict, and how conflict between people in the groups was often seen as a negative. The truth is that you cannot build community without conflict. The issue is not to be without conflict, but to be able to resolve conflict, and the commitment to community is what gives us the inspiration to come up with ways to resolve conflict. The most contemporary way that people are thinking about as a measure of resolving conflict and rebuilding community is restorative justice.

**GEORGE BROSI:** How one relates to conflict is determined partly by whether you see the people on the other side as your enemies or you see the institutions as the problem. If you see everybody as having redemptive qualities and being capable of redemption, then conflict isn't as big a burden because it's not me against you, it's a question of how are we going to work this out.

**BELL HOOKS:** It's funny because in my own career as a lecturer going around our nation, the one time I was booed was when I talked about how I had hopes for even someone like George Bush, that I had to believe in his capacity to change or be changed because that's part of the vision of beloved community. I was surprised that it was progressive people who were very much against the concept that he could change or be transformed. It seems to me that's been a part of a flaw in our thinking as progressive people. We've been as eager often to have an enemy as people consider the political right to be. If we think about living in a small community, one thing is that we are very aware of our differences. It is very obvious that, in order to live in harmony, we have to come to terms with those differences. And some are more difficult than others, in particular, religious difference. I remember, when I first came to Berea, and I was going to put my Buddha on the porch, people actually said to me, "Well, you know there might be people who will shoot at your Buddha." And I said, "Well, that's hard to imagine," and of course that didn't happen. But you know what did happen? People did notice that I had a Buddha, and people did ask me about it. There were good Christian people who felt that it was a graven image and therefore was violating to God. But I talked with people, and said, "I've talked to Jesus, and Jesus understands that I don't worship at the Buddhas." I told people, "Jesus told me his heart is big enough for the Buddha, 'he can hold the Buddha in his heart.'" I think often that community requires a whole new language and a whole new way of communicating because our language itself is so infused with the politics of domination. It's either Jesus or the Buddha, and not that there can be a language that looks beyond those categories. That's exactly what Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan discuss in their incredible book *The Raft is Not the Shore*, a Buddhist/Christian dialogue.

**GEORGE BROSI:** That whole concept of inclusion is so key to notions of the beloved community

**BELL HOOKS:** Absolutely.

**GEORGE BROSI:** And I think that one of the things that was transformative about the civil rights movement compared to earlier movements for social change in America was that inclusivity, that idea as enunciated by Martin Luther King that people aren't our enemy: institutions are our enemy; people are all capable of change. And so the word engagement, in some ways, has more of those kinds of connotations than the word struggle. And when you have that kind of a consciousness it changes things. In the sixties, I worked with a lot of young people who came from families

who were involved in the left of the thirties and some of them still have a pretty narrow view of what they consider the struggle for social change. For example, there was a fourteen-year-old girl, Julia Bluhm, who asked some women's magazines to change the body image they were portraying of women, and I put up something on facebook bragging on that. Some of my old friends didn't respond to that because that wasn't part of what they saw as "the struggle."

**BELL HOOKS:** Yet, as always, some people were way ahead of their times. Right here in Berea, the founder of our community, John G. Fee is an outstanding example. I think people forget that John Fee didn't just have a vision of a school, but that he actually had a vision of beloved community. He knew it was not something that would come about organically, but that it would have to come about through people's beliefs, values, and the choices they would make in their lives.

**GEORGE BROSI:** He was a believer in interspersion, not just integration, and he planned the town of Berea, a white family in this house, a black family in that house, a white family in this house, a black family in that house.

**BELL HOOKS:** I've had the good fortune to speak with individuals who were children, and who lived that and really talked about the difference that made in their lives. So, once again, we're not talking about some pseudo-sentimental idea of community, but community that is a practice, and as Fee understood, a community that had to be strategically organized. The children who lived the covenant of "we are all people of one blood," didn't just spout that as a meaningless slogan, it changed their lives to live in that integrated world which was really a utopian world given where the rest of the nation was, given where Kentucky was around racial apartheid.

**GEORGE BROSI:** It is amazing what was accomplished and then mostly destroyed years ago. It seems like we are constantly going backwards and going forwards essentially at the same time.

**BELL HOOKS:** I feel like one of the most important notions that have been brought to us recently, primarily by the eco-freedom movement, is the whole idea of things being holistic. I just finished reading Jeffrey Sach's book *An End to Poverty*, and one of the terms that he uses is "differential diagnoses" when he argues that part of the difficulty of building global community is that we have a tendency, especially in our economic policies, to look in a very one dimensional way at other cultures and to have a kind of one dimensional view of how everything should work. With the notion, for example, of trade not aid. But he says that there has to be trade and

aid because there are some countries where there's no navigable water system, where transport is very hard, so the idea of a certain kind of lucrative trade happening there is not simple. Holistic medicine, or holistic healing, is a similar concept. The very notion of what it is to be a citizen has to be opened up and has to be inclusive of different practices of citizenship being dependent on the circumstances in which people live. It's one of the things that is positive about Berea, Kentucky, as a place where there are many, many people in our town who are concerned about maintaining community and who understand that there is no such things as automatic community. Community comes not only from engagement and struggle but from a willingness to be open. So, we're back again to concepts of radical openness. I live my life as a grown black woman in Berea where there are not many adult black women, but I live daily with a sense of belonging to and with everyone that's here. So even when I see people that visually might look like that hillbilly person with confederate flag and...

**GEORGE BROSI:** the "wife-beater" shirt

**BELL HOOKS:** The whole thing. I send love. The truth of life is that eighty percent of the time, I get that recognition back from whomever I am giving recognition to, and it always reminds me of something that I think about all the time when I think about community, which is not to judge.

**GEORGE BROSI:** How horrible is that: to call a kind of shirt a "wife beater" as if everyone who wears one is guilty of spouse abuse. That is such a good example of the opposite of seeking a beloved community.

**BELL HOOKS:** Let's talk about whether certain things are positive ingredients of communicating. Two things that are very bad for community making are judgment and blaming. I think that it's very hard—and I do believe we learn this in small communities if its positive—to maintain friendships with people who don't think like us. I often laugh and say this is why the Divine Spirit developed the concept of family, because for many of us, it is within the family that we learn that struggle of bonding across difference, especially if you have a large family like I grew up in with five sisters and one brother. I was one of seven siblings, and you and your wife, Connie, created a family with seven siblings. You recognize that there are profound differences. Even though you may have been raised in the same household, in the same environment, you may have profound differences of opinion and belief and in how you maintain closeness. This is why we have been given the grace, I say, of reconciliation. I remind myself daily that reconciliation is always possible.

**GEORGE BROSI:** The philosopher who first enunciated the expression, beloved community, Josiah Royce, was one of the founders of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Martin Luther King, who popularized the concept, was a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Central to the notion of beloved community is the idea that there can be reconciliation as opposed to victory.

**BELL HOOKS:** Exactly, and so we accept both of those concepts of restorative justice and reconciliation, because restorative justice does take away a notion of blame and replace it with an accountability vision which means that we can be mutually accountable for healing even though there might be a person who is “a victim.” How do you resolve that within the context of community?

**GEORGE BROSI:** We’re all victims. Everyday all of us get victimized, and that’s been one of the insights that’s come out of this whole conversation about bullying. The research shows that a huge percentage of the people who identify themselves as bullied also identify themselves as bullying and vice versa. It’s not necessarily like it’s this one group of people over here and this other group of people over there.

**BELL HOOKS:** If we understood the politics of domination, we would understand how the very concept of bullying is built into our cultural ethos. I mean, the one-upmanship, the competition, I’ve gotta be better than you; our sports metaphors are so often metaphors of war and of killing the other, destroying the other. That’s why I think Riane Eisler’s book *The Power of Partnership* is so crucial as a vision of how we move from that kind of thinking to models that place harmony and balance above that sense that destructive conflict is natural, winning out over the other is natural. It’s been very disturbing to me to see a world where we seem to be going backwards about gender. I hear more and more people referring to notions of what’s natural. It’s natural for men to want to have more sexual partners; it’s natural for women to want more affection than sex. It seemed like part of the joy of the feminist movement was that it exploded all of these notions of what’s natural.

I think that one of the gifts of living in community is that, in fact, you do see people change; you do see people move from positions that are negative. I had that experience with one of the workman on my house in the hills that had been really racist, didn’t want to have anything to do with me as a “nigra livin up the street.” Then his brother died. His brother was an embodiment of a beloved community advocate and practitioner. When the surviving brother saw all of the people who came to say good-

bye to his brother and he saw how incredibly loved this man was by very different people, he had a transformation. He had a change of heart. He realized there must have been something going on for his brother, and that he, the racist, sexist, white man, lived a very isolated life, like a lot of people, especially older, male people who have lots of negative thoughts and activities in relationship to anybody they consider different—gay, colored people, whatever. What he began to see was that when he extended himself in the way of love, his world opened up. He was not isolated anymore. It was really quite amazing. It was like witnessing a miracle. And so we see again how the experience of genuine beloved community can change you.

We see a lot of that beloved community coming out at times of extreme crisis, during Katrina, during other times of crises, after 9/11, when people who are different come together and work together. We have to talk about it, like any love relationship. As Rilke says, love itself is about work. It's about the effort that you bring to it and the will, and so is community. Community is about what we bring to it, and community is based in knowing. I cannot really be with you in genuine community if I am not willing to know you. And to know you, I may have to know things that scare me or turn me off. One of the big issues of my life, which is interesting because I grew up in the hills and we had dogs, is that I've had a long-time phobic fear of dogs, and yeah a dog did try to bite me once as a child. It's been interesting to even try to live in community with that difference, because lots of people in small town America, in Berea, Kentucky, have dogs. And it's an interesting effort. People say, "bell doesn't like dogs." And I have to correct them and say, "I have an irrational fear of dogs, but it doesn't mean I don't like dogs." We're always in the binary. Either you hate dogs or you love them. Not that I can say, "Actually I have this phobia, and I've been working on it, but it has nothing to do with hating dogs." I think that's one of the big keys of beloved community is really struggling with xenophobias and fears of all kinds.

**GEORGE BROSI:** Which is the concept of reconciliation, basically, that I am not fighting against him. Rather, I am in the process of reconciling our differences.

**BELL HOOKS:** And we see that in so many eastern martial arts that don't involve wanting to hurt your opponent, but involve wanting to get into balance with your opponent so that you're learning how to protect yourself without causing someone else harm.

**GEORGE BROSI:** That's interesting...

**BELL HOOKS:** Like Tai Kwan Do or other things that are crucial to learning balance. For me one of the practices that is crucial to beloved community is equanimity, and that comes to me, from Buddhism, the practice of balance. Let's say we're having a local struggle as we've had here in Berea to have alcohol or not, legally. Of course, we know that probably the majority of people in Berea drink alcohol, so the question isn't then, whether we're keeping people from drinking by not having legal alcohol, because we're not. Where do we meet? Frequently it is the more fundamentalist Christian people who want there to be no alcohol. Where can those two parties meet? It's a big issue, and it's been a divisive issue in our community. Who knows how many lives have been lost because people get on the highway to drive longer distances to get their alcohol and maybe drink along the way. How can you have balance? When I grew up my grandparents made their own alcohol, made their wine and stuff. The key was not to teach us not to drink, but to teach us how to drink in balance, how to enjoy the spirits without overdoing it.

**GEORGE BROSI:** The whole tradition of the Women's Christian Temperance Union came out of the progressive era, and so in some ways its anomalous for the WCTU kind of activist to be at loggerheads with people who see themselves as progressive activists who are "wet." There should be so much in common. The WCTU kind of activist is concerned about the impact of alcohol in families and the whole "dry" impulse is such a humanist kind of impulse. It would be so wonderful to achieve reconciliation between these forces because those two kind of spirits are so similar. It's such a shame that they're not working together because both sides are pro-family in a sense.

**BELL HOOKS:** Which takes us right back to the issue of blame and of really being right. If we think of how imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy has pushed itself globally, it's pushed itself around a concept of being right. Until we can move away from that kind of absolutist thinking, we can't have the beloved community. Most people think that community means that we all think alike, or we'll all be taking the same action, when genuine community is inclusive and says, "We're actually different but part of what we are working towards is how to be together in our difference." It's hard not to hold the church in our society accountable for being antithetical to community. Churches in the United States still remain one of the most segregated locations in our culture, and yet the sacred teachings of the Christian faith are all about inclusion, all about working with difference, all about saying that it's not what color you are

or what language you speak, it's whether you hold faith, whether you are faithful. As the Dalai Lama says, we might be able to do without religion because it's all about ritual and strategies of power, but we can't do without spirituality, which is about values: faith, compassion, forgiveness, all of those things. Until we have a more accurate understanding of community, we will fail often at community building because people think it means that we all have to think alike or we all have to be alike. I think it's very sad that most people of color don't think they can just walk into any church on a Sunday morning because they think about race and class and whether they would actually be welcome in that church. I have to say, not to privilege black churches, but I have never heard of a black church that when some white folks walked up in it they weren't just totally welcome as can be with us in the community of spirit.

**GEORGE BROSI:** That's certainly been my experience. You have to have a sense of your own weaknesses and foibles in order to understand and to desire reconciliation. If you think, I am perfect, but this person has a problem, this person is a dry voter or this person wears a "wife-beater," then reconciliation is impossible. If you see yourself as being involved in a process of self-improvement and getting better, and if you see that within your own self are conflicts that can be resolved through reconciliation, then you can see the same thing in your family and in your interpersonal relationships. The person who has this experience of reconciliation on a personal level, hopefully can then see the third level, the broader level, the whole community. This person is then able to see the possibility of imperfect people working together to resolve their differences.

**BELL HOOKS:** In fact, when I first began to do mini workshops around race and gender, I would say to people, "Is there anybody in the room who imagines that they could have a romantic relationship that would have no conflict, that there would be no difference of opinion?" And of course nobody can. And I said that if you can envision that with a romantic partner—a desire to have understanding and to work for reconciliation, to honor commitment and connection, then the same skills you use in a romantic relationship are the skills that we have to use when we are dealing with difference on a larger scale. Dealing with people who are gay, dealing with racial difference, religious difference, all the spectrums of difference.

**GEORGE BROSI:** The three Greek words for love come in pretty handy in this context. If you understand reconciliation in terms of the "eros" kind of love, romantic love, then maybe you can understand it in terms of the "filia" kind of love, brotherly love or love in interpersonal relationships, and

then you can understand it in terms of “agape” love, the broader love of country or community.

**BELL HOOKS:** I think that part of what a culture of domination has done is raise that romantic relationship up as the single most important bond, when of course the single most important bond is that of community. Marriage many years ago was really a communal act. When I think about and wrote about my parents in *Belonging*, I recognized that part of what kept them committed for sixty years was the fact that their marriage was part of their community life. It was not something that was separate from their community life. We have to beware of the extent to which liberal individualism has actually been an assault on community. The notion that “real freedom” is about not being interdependent, when the genuine staff of life is our interdependency, is our capacity to feel both with and for ourselves and other people.

**GEORGE BROSI:** The whole notion of beloved community is, in a sense, the golden mean between individualism and collectivism. The notion of beloved community is just as antagonistic toward collectivism as it is to excessive individualism because in the beloved community people have a sense of responsibility toward the whole, and yet they’re still involved in self-fulfillment. Thus beloved community is antithetical to the whole idea of an in-group, because it is inclusive.

**BELL HOOKS:** Yes, that’s why we need the practice of equanimity, of balance, of how can I be both self realized and at the same time responsive to the practice and need of community. And I think that’s a challenge in our society because our society tries to replace self-realization and community with individual notions of success and moving ahead and autonomy. This new book that everyone’s talking about, *Going Solo*, recognizes that masses of Americans are living by themselves, and this is being praised as progress, but I don’t see it as progress at all. I see it as us moving further away as a nation from cultivating and valuing those skills of building community. Wouldn’t it be great if we had the models that some European countries have of buildings where people live together and they have both private space and communal space, and they have communal values that they share.

**GEORGE BROSI:** One very rare example of this kind of community in Appalachia is Elderspirit in Abingdon, Virginia.

**BELL HOOKS:** The irony is that practically the only place where people of difference in our culture are living together is in nursing homes and in assisted living, but they are not necessarily building community because that’s not the agenda of those places. You can each be in your lit-

tle capsule. I doubt if my mother had ever been gone from her home for even two weeks, and she was really never around strangers that much. And then suddenly she got a tragic illness, and there she was in a little room with a stranger and no privacy whatsoever. Well, that's not community. It's not even conducive to community frequently because it's a power-struggle, usually from the beginning, around space and desire and one person wants the TV on all the time, and the other person doesn't. But this is what we have done in our culture with aging and with how we deal with aging people and illness. Let's isolate them. Lets put them in these inadequate camps when they could be living in glorious states of beloved community.

**GEORGE BROSI:** In Wendell Berry's book about racism...

**BELL HOOKS:** *The Hidden Wound*.

**GEORGE BROSI:** Yes, thanks, bell. In that book, Wendell Berry writes about how the professions that involve caring for people are the least well-paid and require the least education and the least in-service training.

**BELL HOOKS:** And for a country that is so racially segregated, it's often the only time in a white person's life that they come in contact with a black or brown person because so many of the vast numbers of caregivers in elder homes and assisted living are brown people and black people, just as they are predominantly female people of all colors. No one's really looking at that, or daring to chart the transformations of elderly, racist, white people who find themselves with a caring person who's black or brown who gives them a level of attention that absolutely no one else in their life is giving to them. Their racism melts, because everything that they ever believed is challenged and deconstructed. One thing we can say as we begin to close George, is that when we talk about radical openness as essential to the building of community, we have to be willing to hear the voices of people not like ourselves. We have to be willing to respect people's different ways. It's been really hard for me. I often think I know what's best, especially when it comes to ordering other people's lives. It's very hard sometimes to accept that somebody may not be doing it your way, but the way they're doing it is the way that works for them.

We haven't talked about our last concept that we really have to speak about because it is needed, which is forgiveness and the capacity to forgive. It's when we are able to forgive that we open up the space where our capacity to be close to one another is more important than our capacity to maintain a rift. Two years ago I had a big conflict with the head of Women's Studies at Berea College. We had previously been both friends and colleagues, and then we had a big conflict around this book, *The Help*. Both of us immediately stood our ground, and said "I don't have to talk to

you, I don't have to be whatever with you." But then, because we are both committed to community, we recognized how crazy that was. If you made a list of the things that we were together on and the things that separated us, there would be a ton of things on the together list and just a couple little petty things on the separating list. What we know in life is that a lot of people let those two things that may have separated them cancel out the hundreds of things that may have bound them together. That, to me, is why the whole quality of forgiveness is so crucial. Forgiveness allows us to look at those differences. It allows me to say, "wow, you may have done this thing to hurt me, but look at all the other ways in my life that you may have touched me, that you may have opened up something for me." Forgiveness is not about erasing accountability. Forgiveness allows us to let go of a grudge or our rage while at the same time holding on to a concept of accountability. It allows us to let go of blame.

**GEORGE BROSI:** Hopefully most people have practiced forgiving themselves.

**BELL HOOKS:** Now George, that's a truly hopeful concept because I think its precisely because most people find it so hard to forgive themselves, that they are so unwilling at times to forgive others.

**GEORGE BROSI:** Exactly. Those two things are connected. People need to get to a place where they can forgive themselves, forgive family members, and then expand and forgive beyond the family, beyond the self. I keep thinking of those three dimensions of life and of how we can achieve a confluence between self-improvement and improving our relationships with other people and having a more constructive impact on the direction of the world as a whole. Part of that is making sure that our means and ends are consistent. I have seen quotes like "be the change you hope to make" or whatever. We are not saying that is enough. The whole concept of the beloved community assumes engagement in efforts for institutional change, and the kind of personal and interpersonal changes we are speaking of make our efforts for social change that much more compelling.

**BELL HOOKS:** Absolutely. Which takes us back to integrity, when there is congruence between what we think, say and do. That's a big cultural crisis right now, and one of the things that can solve that crisis is the practice of community because no one is healed in isolation, and as we begin to work with others, we have to engage all of these things we are talking about: compassion, forgiveness, a willingness to listen, to hear difference, a willingness to be inclusive and all of those ingredients come together to make it possible for us to experience the joy of community.

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