

# Response to Erfan

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*In **The Many Faces of JEDI: A Developmental Exploration**, Aftab Erfan describes how each developmental action-logic makes sense of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) initiatives within organizations and suggests implications for later-stage people. In this response, I describe six ways her paper contributes to a better world and suggest three ways to make her vision even more expansive and enticing.*

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**Editor's note:** Amiel Handelsman's response to Aftab Erfan's article arrived just prior to publication of this issue. I sent Aftab Amiel's response, and from her holiday retreat time, she sent the following note.

I could not be more delighted that my little “many-faces paper” has been met with such thoughtful engagement in anticipation of its publication. I wholeheartedly appreciate Handelsman's response – his highlighting of key concepts which made me feel understood, and his colourful rephrasings that helped me see my own thoughts in a new light – even as I observe that Handelsman and I have a somewhat different sense of what is “timely” in terms of a vision and next steps for the JEDI movement. Admittedly, the Redefining within me had a small tantrum over the fact that my 19-page paper is appearing alongside a 16-page response by a [nominally] white man (will they ever just pass the mic?!). But I am excited for the dialogue that has been opened here, and I hope that the length of our contributions will provoke, rather than douse, more of this conversation in our communities.

## Introduction

I am energized by Erfan's “many faces” approach to JEDI, commitment to embracing every action-logic, and plea to later stages to cut Redefining some slack. This paper raises the bar for all of us engaging in JEDI work and should prompt thoughtful skeptics of it to pause before launching their next critique. It provides revisioning of the highest order.

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If we are to succeed in this venture, it would be useful to build an even larger tent of intentionality for all those new JEDI faces, bodies, and hearts. This means drawing more people into the conversation and offering a sufficient variety of aims and experiences to keep them engaged. Exploring one's complicity in injustice gets some people into the tent, but not everyone, and it certainly doesn't keep them there for long. Such is the nature of projects conceived by the Redefining action-logic, however broadly imagined by later action-logics and however many perspectives they embrace. As I feel into the Redefining action-logic within me, I trust it to light a fire in my belly, awaken sensations in my heart, and prompt me to question what I've taken to be true. At this point, Redefining has done most of its job. To take the next steps – imagining a new future, holding it in tension with the brutal facts of today, and initiating effective action – I need a wider and more reconstructive approach.

## What Makes This Important

### 1. Explanatory Power

This paper is the first effort I've seen to make sense of the complexity of JEDI initiatives by walking through the developmental journey step by step (or, rather, stem by stem<sup>2</sup>). The feeling I had upon reading it was a mix of gratitude and astonishment. Neither JEDI nor vertical development were new to me, but the meshing of them together in such an elegant and generous manner struck me as novel and useful.

When I say “useful” I am referring to the paper's explanatory power. It helps us make sense of what is otherwise confounding. Take, for example, the opening anecdote about the graduate student and department director. I can imagine dozens of ways to interpret this story. Most of them don't explain what's going on in a way that produces timely action. Some interpretations would make things worse. It is into this scene that Erfan enters with a question: what if the student has a more complex system of meaning making than their boss?

Boom. Flash of insight. Now I have a way of explaining the tension between these two individuals that opens vistas. As a reader, I feel compassion for both actors. There is nothing wrong with them. They are both in full integrity with their action-logics. Putting myself in the shoes of the student, I begin observing the relationship differently. I stop expecting the boss to respond like I would. I pause before taking actions that, due to the developmental gap, are likely futile. I start accepting my boss for who they are – like, Erfan says, a younger sibling. Or consider a second analogy: a short person playing basketball. If you throw an alley-oop pass above the rim to a 5 foot 6 player, it's unlikely they will jump that high, much less dunk it in the basket. The first time you realize this, you stop getting angry when the play fails. The second time, you don't throw the pass.

*The Many Faces of JEDI* is filled with illuminating explanatory moments like this. I personally resonated with Erfan's description of the Achiever. After graduate school, I spent a year helping a community foundation explore ways to support Black American entrepreneurs in the city of Detroit. Each day, I drove into the city to meet with pastors, directors of community development

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<sup>2</sup> Erfan writes, “Dimensions of development are distinct from each other and provide scaffolding for one another like bean stems.”

organizations, and bank officers. *There must be a way to align all these interests...but how?* Each evening, I drove back to my Ann Arbor apartment, the walls of which were filled with personal declarations, inspirational quotes, and professional goals. Achiever artifacts, to be sure. In the end, I left the project before it was off the ground. My public explanation was a desire to help a former professor of mine run for Governor. Privately, I felt myself floundering. Why had this happened? At the time, I didn't have an explanation and felt ashamed. Nearly a quarter century later and prodded by Erfan's descriptions, the explanation is clear: my Achiever action-logic was no match for the complexity of the undertaking. Writing these words produces the opposite of shame. It relaxes me, and I feel acceptance, because it would've been unrealistic to expect anything different from someone at that action-logic. Perhaps it's time to update Thomas Harris's classic book about transactional analysis, *I'm OK, You're OK*, for a new era. The new title: *My Action-logic Is OK. Your Action-logic Is OK*. Beneath my flippancy is a serious insight: in today's world, mutual acceptance across the developmental trajectory goes a long way.

A second example shows up in the section on the Expert. If you've ever felt puzzled by the propensity of JEDI professionals to count, count, count, this section provides a helpful explanation. Metrics and dashboards about hiring and retention aren't signs of a pathology (what would we call it: Numberitis?). Nor does fervor for formal training classes represent stunted creativity or stubborn refusal to realize that people learn through experience.<sup>3</sup> Instead, these habits are in full integrity with the Expert action-logic. Although we might not need as much formal training or as many bar graphs as Experts are wont to provide, we *do* need some, not only to satisfy Experts in the room, but also because human endeavors benefit from data, and the desire for data is part of who we are. Once again, describing how an action-logic approaches JEDI helps us understand why folks do what they do. This new interpretation evokes patience for behaviors that can frustrate later stage folks, reminds us of how that behavior tangibly benefits us (when supplemented by other perspectives and approaches), and invites us to embrace that very dimension (don't you secretly love a good histogram?) within ourselves.

## 2. A Full Developmental View of JEDI

Anyone who hangs around so-called integral circles for more than a few minutes quickly encounters frustration with the Redefining action-logic, particularly its stance toward diversity, inclusion, and antiracism. This was true in the fall of 2000 when I joined the Ken Wilber Reading Group in San Francisco, and it is true today. My colleagues and I invest an extraordinary amount of attention in critiquing and lamenting this single action-logic. Sometimes I wonder if we've all had microchips with tiny speakers implanted in our ears that play the audio version of Boomeritis<sup>4</sup> over and over again every night. One reason for the irritation, as Erfan points out, is that we are always fighting back against the action-logic we just transcended. It's like high school students who are embarrassed by how ridiculous middle school was. ("I would never want to go back there!").

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<sup>3</sup> The classic 70/20/10 rule, a back-of-envelope summary of a two classic Center for Creative Leadership studies, says that 70 percent of learning comes from on-the-job experience, 20 percent from peers and mentors, and only 10 percent from formal training and books. Critics of formal training like to point out that in practice, the ratios are exactly the opposite.

<sup>4</sup> A book written by Ken Wilber (his worst, in my assessment) that highlights the excesses and absurdities of extreme academic postmodernism.

Another reason is that many folks at the Transforming action-logic live, work, and play in the Redefining milieu. A close friend of mine does business with dozens of yoga teachers and spiritual practitioners. He frequently gets attacked for “appropriating” Hindu culture in his music even though he honors it with unflagging consistency. This is an example of what an old mentor of mine called “no good deed goes unpunished.” It is often the Transforming folks most committed to justice and diversity that get flogged because (a) they’re nearby and (b) they violate a sacred principle of deconstruction: thou shalt not reconstruct. Being on the receiving end of this is particularly painful when you’ve dedicated yourself to honoring diverse traditions. Unlike me, my friend doesn’t spend hours upon hours coaching managers in corporations and businesses, so he doesn’t frequently encounter the frustrating aspects of Expert and Achiever. Is it any wonder, then, that he gets exasperated by the poisonous dimensions of Redefining yet barely says a word about earlier action-logics?

There. I’ve now devoted a full paragraph to Redefining. That’s enough for now, and here’s why. An exclusive focus on this action-logic – as though it were the only game in town – may be understandable, even predictable, but it isn’t serving us very well. Conversely, we have much to gain in conversations about JEDI by examining the gifts and limitations of *every* action-logic. Erfan’s paper provides such a comprehensive treatment.

There are three reasons why I appreciate this “many faces” approach. First, it reminds us that there are legitimate motivations for participating in JEDI at (almost) every action-logic, and we could do worse than accepting them on their own terms. As Erfan writes, “Could we see the strategic advantage in agreeing on the destination and the basic path to get there, even if we’re travelling for a variety of reasons?” To me, this question offers a twin-challenge for people stepping up to JEDI leadership: one, design interventions in ways that honor all of these disparate motivations and meet the social needs (e.g., status, certainty, autonomy)<sup>5</sup> underlying them; two, frame such interventions linguistically and emotionally in ways that resonate with each action-logic. This second point is a version of the old advice, “Don’t just do good things for people. Tell people what you are doing for them so they can recognize it.” Each action-logic responds to its own enticements.

Second, in later-stage circles, Redefining gets more than its share of not only vilification, but attention, period. Imagine a pie chart that shows how much time people spend discussing each action-logic’s strengths and foibles around JEDI. Redefining would fill up nearly the entire pie! Slices representing the other action-logics would be barely visible. This isn’t an argument for spreading criticisms more evenly (though that’s not a bad idea). By omitting exploration of other action-logics, we make it harder to design later stage interventions and less likely they will succeed. After all, how can you create practices and scaffoldings for action-logics you rarely discuss? On this note, Erfan’s analysis fills the void.

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<sup>5</sup> I’m thinking here of David Rock’s SCARF model of social needs that comes out of neuroscience. SCARF stands for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness. According to the research Rock cites, being denied these social needs shows up similarly in scans of the brain the brain as being physically threatened. In claiming that these social needs underlie the motivations of the action-logics, I’m making a large claim without providing any basis for it. A topic for another day...

A third reason to give due attention to earlier action-logics is that it reminds us (yet again!) that Redefining is itself an enormous evolutionary achievement. Just look at the limitations of what comes before (see, I told you this wasn't a bad idea): As Opportunist, to quote Rodney Dangerfield, I look out for number one while trying to avoid stepping in number two. Useful at times, but not as a guiding motto! As Diplomat, I exert enormous energy trying to match the JEDI moves and outfits of people around me and “live in constant fear of being disposed of by my in-group.” Exhausting! As Expert, I “depersonalize conflicts and objectify the problem” and lean too heavily on data and metrics. Where's the juice? As Achiever, I'm all about uplift, progress, ROI, and doing well by doing good – yet don't have the stomach to deeply explore injustice, trauma, and inequity, much less consider how those affect me on an interior level. Too much sugar, not enough spice, and no medicine that tastes sour but heals the body!

The point, again, isn't to spread vilification around evenly, but to remember that none of these earlier action-logics is up to the task that Redefining uniquely fills: looking candidly at the horrors, contradictions, and disparities that stain the past and contribute to suffering today and welcoming everyone who has been left behind. In this sense, Erfan fulfills her primary stated hope of building understanding for Redefining in the JEDI space. She does this not only by showing what I can see and do at Redefining, but also by demonstrating what other action-logics *cannot* see and do. Redefining means I'm only three-fourths of the way up the mountain, but that in itself is an impressive climb. I can see things from here not visible from below.

### 3. A Call to Embrace Redefining Within Ourselves

In a section directed to Transforming and beyond action-logics, Erfan writes, “We need to pay attention to how much time we spend acting from Redefining, and how much of that is in fallback or out of a need for easy belonging.” Her invitation here, I think, is to notice how and why such folks participate in the less healthy dimensions of Redefining – almost as a way of saying, “Watch out.” Yet, given her purpose of viewing “many faces” from both sides, I suggest we (anyone who identifies with this tiny slice of humanity at such later stages) interpret this invitation more broadly. What if we made it a practice to notice not only, as she puts it, when we fall back into Redefining, but also when we embody the best dimensions of Redefining? Think of this as appreciative inquiry applied to an action-logic that isn't itself wired for appreciation.

Recently, while reading a book about mid-19<sup>th</sup> century United States (Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*) I was reminded that for years, much of the anti-slavery movement favored colonization – moving both “free” blacks and the would-be-emancipated to another country. This left me with a sick feeling in my stomach and the thought, *So, even the good guys weren't so good.* Before long, I started feeling shame that I had forgotten this fact – that for years I had considered anti-slavery synonymous with recognizing the full humanity of Black Americans, which was not the case. Then, I noticed anger rise in my chest. My whole body felt hot. I wanted to *do* something, to right this wrong, to make this better, to shout at the sky, “Everything you told me about Abraham Lincoln is wrong!” This experience, which transpired over all of ninety seconds, was a form of contact with the Redefining action-logic within me. *Things aren't as they appear. Seemingly noble motives are impure. And behind it all is power, raw and unrelenting.* Although these statements don't summarize my view of the world, they cover

a lot of important ground. Acknowledging their validity, however partial, contacts me with a part of myself that I love and would not want to live without.

Experiences like this (and not all happen while reading history books!) have a second benefit. They help me feel more compassion for others' Redefining expressions, however irritating, because these expressions live within me. You might describe this as wise. I think of it as pragmatic. When someone is accusing me of "white fragility," for example, I *need* this reminder that Redefining lives in me (along with other inner and outer conversation microhabits<sup>6</sup>) in order to stay centered and grounded rather than fight, flee or freeze. In other words, it's in my self-interest (both enlightened and narrow) to keep my Redefining parts nearby and ready for a spontaneous embrace.

The same, of course, is true for all of the action-logics. Although they might not all want hugs – Achiever might prefer a high five, Expert a star of distinction, and Diplomat a laminated membership card – each action-logic deserves to be embraced for what it is and what it offers. On this note, I was inspired by Erfan's use of the first-person voice throughout the paper. I've seen this done with other development frameworks – most memorably for me with the Enneagram. Yet this is the first time – or, at least, most meaningful one – I've witnessed it in writing with action-logics. How refreshing and inspiring. May we all follow this positive example.

#### 4. A Preview of Emergent Capacities

It's often said that life at later action-logics can be a lonely place. I remember Susann Cook-Greuter writing something like this on the sentence completion test (as it was then called) she scored for me twenty years ago. I instantly felt less alone. A similar thing happened a decade later in a workshop I took with Terri O'Fallon. She described how often folks at Transforming and Alchemical stages are misunderstood and misinterpreted. I instantly felt better understood and more accurately interpreted.

Herein lies a deep gift in reading how the Transforming and Alchemist action-logics make sense of JEDI: Being pointed toward your current or potential capacities. With Transforming, I am reminded of what's possible right now. To begin, there is "building new supporting walls in order that the old walls can be taken down," and using whatever tool, practice, or approach meets the moment – including the act of creating create safe and brave spaces<sup>7</sup> for folks to stumble around with JEDI. There is also embodying love and transformation in this moment, an aim I describe in my work as not just *being the change* but also, because humans live in conversation, as *speaking and listening as the change*.

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<sup>6</sup> Conversation microhabit is my term for a tiny action we take while speaking or listening. Inner conversation microhabits include taking a four-six breath (inhale to a count of four, exhale to a count of six), doing a quick body scan, wiggling your toes, and silently saying a particular word like "patience" or "I got this." Outer conversation microhabits including paraphrasing, gently probing, appealing to nobler intent, and redirecting the conversation. In collaboration with my colleague, Mike Cohen, I've created *conversation skill drills* to practice these microhabits in a high-rep, high-reflect fashion.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term "safe and brave" to distinguish these spaces from others that are only safe (in that they don't call upon courage or build resilience) or only brave (in that they don't provide sufficient psychological safety).

An example of speaking as the change is framing a difficult conversation around, say, an organization's hiring practices, as "my side of the story, your side of the story" and being aligned with this in my body. Such words don't just describe a pre-existing reality. They bring a new reality – the possibility of holding your perspective and mine as equally worthy of consideration – into being. As you share your side of the story, I can sustain this respectful differentiation of perspectives by paraphrasing what I've heard and gently probing for clarification. Meanwhile, I can listen as the change by making my habitual interpretations (many of them filled with cognitive bias) objects of awareness. I name them in my mind just as, during meditation, I might name a thought passing through my mind. Similarly, if the other person expresses strong emotion, I can note the physical sensations this generates in my own body and feel how these are my sensations, not theirs. This, in turn, reminds me that they, not I, are generating the strong emotions they express. This is one example of how transformation happens in the moments of speaking and listening.

With Alchemist, I see what lies ahead. How often do I "hold contradictions inside me with tenderness?" Or "wonder into the mystery of what is unfolding?" Not so often, my friends. Not so often. These are potentials – enticing, even beguiling – but potentials nonetheless. When Erfan describes such ways of being, particularly in the context of JEDI, I feel called to embody them, almost as though being given pointing-out instructions for meditation. "*Amiel*," the voice whispers, "*This is who you are.*"

## 5. Marginalization as Accelerator of Vertical Development

Erfan suggests that adversity is a powerful force in fostering psychological and spiritual development. Given the examples she provides – "Black, Indigenous, refugee, disabled, trans and queer folk" – I think that in the JEDI context she means a particular form of adversity: participation in marginalized groups. Although she mentions other adverse conditions like poverty, war, and illness, it's hard to tell if the growth opportunities she connects to marginalized groups also are available to people who experience themselves as individually marginalized even if they don't belong to a marginalized group or folks who've experienced adversity not related to marginalization. Would "two-eyed seeing<sup>8</sup>," for example, be accessible to a straight white man who grew up poor in Appalachia, felt like an outcast around wealthier kids in college, was sexually abused by the football team doctor, and has now returned from Afghanistan with PTSD and a sense that nobody understands him? Perhaps someone has researched this.

Either way, Erfan's core point here stands: The everyday lived experience of being different, outside, and overlooked creates as fruitful conditions for growth as a carefully designed 12-month training program (and, if you recall the CCL<sup>9</sup> studies cited earlier, probably better). Confronted by

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<sup>8</sup> "Two-eyed" seeing is a capacity for navigating complexity that is associated with people from indigenous groups and that, Erfan writes, "comes from a daily need to survive in contexts where one doesn't quite fit in." As I understand it, this is a later stage capacity than "double consciousness" as W.E.B. DuBois defined it: "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," which resembles Robert Kegan's Socialized Mind. A closer analogy to "two-eyed" seeing is Ralph Ellison's reinterpretation of "double consciousness" in his essays and the novel *Invisible Man*. For Ellison, double-consciousness is not merely a burden. It is also a useful capacity.

<sup>9</sup> CCL is the Center for Creative Leadership

surplus complexity, marginalized folks learn “to be alert to the nuances of a situation, moment-by-moment unfolding of group dynamics, presence of multiple conflicting perspectives and visions, the influence of the rules of the game and their arbitrariness, and access to creative problem-solving and bold alternatives.” These are remarkable capacities that represent the very best of what adult development offers. If marginalization opens the door to such capacities, it is a door that is pivotal for the future of humanity (see: Climate change, pandemics, liberal democracies on the rocks, and gun violence). Having said that, I assume that the people she describes – primarily university students, perhaps – represent the leading edge – the exception rather than the norm – of their identity communities. (It would be interesting to study what combination of inner resources and outer support nurtured their growth beyond that of, say, elementary school classmates of theirs who didn’t develop such capacities.) If so, perhaps the takeaway here is that this leading edge of marginalized groups is larger, more agile, and less dependent on formal programs due to the life experiences of the people inhabiting it.

In making this point, Erfan takes pain to clarify that she isn’t glorifying oppression or injustice. I read this as a nod to the *Redefining within us* that might suspect otherwise. However, for anyone hanging out in *Transforming* or *Alchemist*, this disclaimer seems unnecessary. Acknowledging that your life conditions have helped you grow suggests nothing about the morality of those life conditions. It describes what has happened. It does not assess the goodness of those experiences. For example, one of the most profound growth experiences of my life happened after my wife and I lost our first child and only daughter shortly after her birth. (She was born just a wee bit too early). This loss and the trauma that accompanied it rocketed me off on two simultaneous journeys: One into grief, the other into positive psychology. I would not be the same person today without these experiences. Yet every time I learn that someone I know is pregnant, I pray for their baby’s good health, because I would not will on anyone the agony of losing a child. And I am mindful that the experience of infant loss is and has long been significantly more common in Black American neighborhoods and families. In fact, the very first paper I wrote as an undergraduate public policy student was about expanding prenatal care for low-income mothers. At the time, I associated infant loss with so-called “blacks” in the inner city. It had nothing to do with me. Today, I know otherwise. Somewhere in there is a lesson about paying attention to others’ suffering, not only as an act of love, but because “but for the grace of God, go I.”

## 6. A Trojan Horse for Vertical Development

Erfan writes that “the centrality of *difference* to the JEDI conversation, and its invitation to be self-reflective on our own complicity in injustice, could make it a potent space in which people can be compelled to grow.” Here she is writing not only about people who have been marginalized, but everyone, particularly folks centered at later action-logics.

I had a similar thought in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder. It seemed as though a window of opportunity had opened, not only to reduce police violence and other injustices “out there,” but also to spark profound individual and collective growth “in here.” In my writing I experimented with several different ways of articulating this. For example, it felt important to offer an alternative to the idea that antiracism is merely about being an “ally” to others’ projects. Claiming your own self-interest, as opposed to acting from altruism (a motivation that Ibram X. Kendi criticized in his first book, *Stamped from The Beginning*), struck me as more likely to evoke



sustained commitment. It also seemed more in tune with honoring the full humanity of Black Americans (if I'm just doing this for you, what does this say about you?) as well as more likely to earn others' trust (because it doesn't take a cynic to hear declarations of pure altruism and wonder about the speaker's sincerity).

Since then, I've met many later stage folks intrigued by the opportunity to grow through JEDI and antiracism work. Although most have limited appetites for "pure" Redefining approaches, they recognize the growth opportunities that Erfan describes. Some might not even see JEDI as a trojan horse. Once you've mined your life experience for twists, turns, and defining moments related to JEDI, the value of this exploration for development becomes apparent. With this in mind, it's worth summarizing the stretch moves Erfan highlights: Illuminating the ways action-logics act on JEDI and on each other. Explaining why well-meaning people botch things up and get on each other's backs for doing so – but aren't destined to. Demonstrating how to simultaneously embrace a person or worldview *and* nudge it to stretch. And committing to the possibility that our actions, skillful and clumsy, resolute and restrained, virtuous and imperfect, might just bring more justice, equity, diversity and inclusion to the world within and around us.

Don't Criticize. Supplement.

Having outlined the contributions this paper makes to both JEDI and adult development, I now offer what I call a "supplemental perspective." This is based on the premise that if you want to expand a picture of reality to include more of what's good, true, and beautiful, don't criticize. Supplement. Don't shout, *Look at these imperfections!* Ask, *What if we were to supplement these ideas with others? Might we find new vistas in this integrated mesh?*<sup>10</sup>

## More JEDI Faces Require a Bigger Tent – A Supplemental Perspective

Erfan's core premise is that we're more likely to realize the aims of JEDI if we honor how every action-logic relates to these aims and can contribute to their fulfillment. This is the "many faces" vision. As I reflect on the specific aims she describes, I notice myself yearning to expand them. This expansion seems important because the existing aims, at least as described in this paper, seem primarily an expression of the Redefining action-logic. They are about including marginalized groups and reflecting on your own complicity in their exclusion (assuming you are not among the marginalized yourself). These are essential, yet I think we can aim more broadly. In particular, I wonder how the Transforming action-logic might approach this challenge. Not only by using its capacities to pursue what I'm calling Redefining goals, but to reimagine what the goals of JEDI might be. Given Transforming's access to polarity thinking, a systems view, and many other dimensions of complexity, what aspirations for JEDI are possible and enlivening? Here I see an opportunity to expand beyond the picture Erfan paints.

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<sup>10</sup> For three other examples of this, see my *two-part series* on the book *White Fragility*, *this effort* to understand what makes Mr. Trump tick through both his Enneagram type and action-logic, and *my prior article* in this journal, *Nine Paths of Growth: Integrating Immunity to Change with the Enneagram*.

At Transforming, Erfan writes, “I use my power to create spaciousness and amplify the voices of those who have been on the margins – then create careful space for the voices of dominant groups, too.” This is wise and necessary. Yet does it represent the full potential of the JEDI project? Or even the most that Transforming could make of JEDI’s intentions? The central intent in this statement and, it seems, in Erfan’s overall conception of JEDI, is to help “marginalized” people gain more voice and help “dominant” groups reflect on how they might support this more effectively. Again, these are essential aims. What if we were to supplement them with others?

My engagement in the JEDI conversation, tracing back to my days as a college student, has largely been around “race,”<sup>11</sup> specifically in the United States. It is in this arena and geographic focus that I have given JEDI the most thought and am most inclined to wrestle with the past and reimagine the future. In the past few years, my own stance on “race” in the United States has undergone a substantial revisioning and expansion. I feel just as strongly about including more voices in organizations, supporting Black American leaders, reforming criminal justice, reducing wealth inequality, and improving health and educational opportunities. It’s important to me that all of us have equal opportunities to prosper and, more foundationally, to live a minimally decent life.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, I’ve observed that these aims, when not connected broader a humanizing vision, feel incomplete and are easily thwarted by other interpersonal and cultural dynamics.

## How Big Aims Get Thwarted

Two such dynamics stand out: The inclination to define myself as a “rescuer” and the powerful pull of the antiracism discourse toward guilt and resentment. Let’s start with the rescuer. As long as I position myself as purely an advocate for others’ interests – whether by combating systemic racism or making myself trustable by coming clean with my complicity – and don’t stand in my own interests, I am at risk of becoming a rescuer. My job in this role is to protect “victims” from their “persecutors.”<sup>13</sup> This has serious downsides: It is condescending. It dehumanizes the people I’m helping and the ones I’m protecting them from, because it’s hard to see them beyond these roles. And, most subtly, it dehumanizes myself. My virtues, flaws, yearnings, interests, and dreams get shrink-wrapped into a narrow motivation to be others’ ally. (Note: In case it’s not apparent, I’m not attributing any of this to Erfan, but instead to the way my sense of self shifts when adhering to specific aims without an aspirational vision).

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<sup>11</sup> In the United States, we use the word “race” in many different ways. Here when I say “race,” I’m referring to what I call Race as Topic – a short-hand way of summarizing a variety of conversations related to what in the past went by other names like “the color line.” I’m not referring here to Race as Biological Classification, a concept that below I assess to be meaningless genetically and harmful. Nor to Race as Culture – like when the word “Black” means not a biological race but a cultural group with similar ancestry like Black Americans. I’m currently writing a paper that explores all of this in more detail.

<sup>12</sup> In a minimally decent life, girls and boys go to school with food in their stomachs. When sick, they have access to a primary care doctor and a way to get there. This is not about economic equality. It’s about creating a “floor” of decency and dignity.

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to the drama triangle (victim/rescuer/persecutor) model of dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics described by Stephen Karpman.

Things become even stickier when pursuing my long-held aims in the midst of today's discourse around antiracism. I've written at length about this elsewhere<sup>14</sup> and am here to supplement, not critique. Suffice it to say that this discourse tends to evoke in me either guilt or resentment. Each of these is a mood, defined here as a persistent emotional state and assessment that creates a particular predisposition to action. This differs from the common conception of moods as short-lived, as in "I was feeling down, but then I found a twenty-dollar bill on the ground, and my mood improved." In my definition, a mood has staying power. If emotions are like the weather, constantly changing, moods are like the climate (at least our experience of it prior to climate change), persistent over months and years. Within the family of moods, guilt is the assessment that "I've done something to harm you and can never make it better." It predisposes me to apologize (important and useful when sincere, but harmful as a habit) and even self-flagellate. When stuck in a mood of guilt around racism, whether systemic or individual, exterior or interior, I may feel like a "good" person doing noble work. But my actions get distorted and my own sense of dignity shrinks. This is not an ingredient for constructive action. And, like every mood, guilt is contagious. Hence the shared mood of guilt that can arise in particular anti-racist forums.

The mood of resentment operates similarly but in the inverse. Here the assessments are "You've done something to harm me and can never make it better" and "If you've been harmed, it's because you deserve it." My instinct here is to punish others. I might react to the slightest remark by another person to accuse them of "centering white people." Or, to put myself in another perspective, of accusing everyone of being racist. The actions that resentment conditions me to take aren't constructive. And, like guilt, resentment is contagious.<sup>15</sup>

Why these dynamics matter is that they thwart me in pursuing heartfelt intentions like including marginalized voices, reducing police violence, and increasing Black American prosperity. It's as though these intentions get gobbled up, distorted, or squeezed of juice (pick your metaphor) by the overpowering force of the rescuer role and these two de-energizing moods. It's not an even fight. What's missing are aspirational aims with the power to do two things: first, expand my role beyond that of the rescuer (if not beyond the very notion of roles), and, second, shift my mood to one more conducive than guilt and resentment to timely and effective action.

## **Moving Beyond the Rescuer Role**

Let's start again with the rescuer role. Growing beyond this is possible when I inhabit stories in which I am not a side player serving as an "ally" but a central protagonist. This does not refer to the classic individualistic (male) hero who battles dragons and returns home with a chalice (though that tale has its time and place). Instead, this is more akin to how my colleague, Jewel Kinch-Thomas, describes the heroine's journey. It is a journey we take together. We are all protagonists with virtues, flaws, and aspirations. And we engage in it for a collective purpose larger than – but including! – ourselves. This is self-interest writ large. I am unabashed about my narrow interest, whether it's to make friends, earn a living, or feel good about myself. (Long live the Opportunist and Diplomat and...). I also claim a broader interest – to support my community,

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<sup>14</sup> See my two-parts series on White Fragility cited above.

<sup>15</sup> Guilt and resentment also reinforce and are recapitulated by the drama triangle.

organization, family, and tribe. And an even broader interest, like serving humanity. The energetic force of being part of a story like this makes the rescuer role look modest indeed.

## **Shifting from Guilt and Resentment to Energizing Moods**

A second attribute that makes an aspirational aim worth pursuing is that it shifts me out of guilt and resentment. Here we can choose from (not that this is all conscious choice!) several alternative moods that are more energizing. One is a mood of ambition, here defined not as the desire for success but the assessment that “We can do this.” Or perhaps it evokes in me a mood of wonder, where “The future is uncertain, and I’m curious how things will turn out.” Or acceptance, where, even as I long for a better future, I accept the brutal facts of today. Acceptance may sound passive, but it isn’t, particularly when coupled with ambition. The civil rights movement in the United States was arguably grounded in a combination of acceptance and ambition. Think of the restaurant sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, or the children who walked through mobs to integrate schools. We’re in the terrain of what Albert Murray called “stomping the blues.” We respond to misery and uncertainty not by fighting or collapsing but with “dance-beat elegance ... which is to state with your total physical being an affirmative attitude toward the sheer fact of existence.” I’m also reminded of the “tragi-comic” attitude toward life that Ralph Ellison tied to the Black American experience. As Ellison wrote, “This has been the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death, and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences.” In this sense, insisting on alternatives to guilt and resentment honors and is rooted in the Black American experience.

With these criteria for an effective aim in mind, let’s turn now to the task of creating a bigger tent for JEDI’s many faces. What might be aspirational aims for JEDI in the context of “race” that move us beyond the rescuer role and evoke affirmative moods? Here are three that in recent years I’ve learned to take seriously and now propose for your consideration.

### **Aim #1: Embrace Each Other’s Humanity**

As a nominally “white” man, what if I were to focus my attention on appreciating the full humanity of Black Americans<sup>16</sup> (and others – but let’s stick with this simplified picture)? This means not only how they’ve been excluded and injured, but also how they are as fully human and fully American as me, in all the complexity that these terms entail. Let’s say I focused like a laser beam on this challenge. What new conversations would I engage in? How would I listen differently in the conversations I’m already in? What new commitments would I make – and what old commitments would I sever? What new books would I read and podcasts would I listen to??

Humanizing someone is fundamentally different from the tracking all the ways they’ve been dehumanized (and excluded and harmed). It is a reconstructive project. As such, it’s more

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<sup>16</sup> Here I use the term Black Americans to refer to a cultural group, not a racial category. The word “black” is too closely tied to the notion of “race.” Also, the cultural practices, vernacular speech, and physical movement of Black Americans is very different from those of people with similar amounts of melanin but from, say, Nigeria or Grenada.

intriguing to me and more likely to call on my deepest virtues and curiosities than the exploration of exclusion, which is often deconstructive in form and intent. In fact, what better way is there to truly include another person than to see them as fully human as myself? To clarify, this is not “we are all one.”<sup>17</sup> This is “we are all human,” with all the difference and sameness conveyed by that term. As my colleague, Greg Thomas, has taught me, if you want to honor the full humanity of Black Americans, focusing exclusively on their marginalization and your contribution to that marginalization doesn’t accomplish the task. On the contrary, it can be demeaning, because it excludes most of what makes Black Americans human beings. This means their agency, personal virtues and capacities, and expression of the highest civic ideals. It also includes their dreams, curiosities, life experience, flaws, temptations, and foibles. When you take seriously someone’s full humanity, the idea that they are defined by their exclusion, however persistent and painful, seems inaccurate, if not patronizing.

A good example is how we talk about Black Americans’ place in the United States. The Redefining action-logic often speaks of Black Americans as being outside of and separate from “white” American history and culture. This assessment is well grounded with regards to political and economic exclusion but completely off base in terms of culture. From music and art to dress and language, there is no American culture without Black American culture. The latter has so deeply influenced the former that it’s simply inaccurate to speak of them as separate. From this vantage point, Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder aren’t just legendary Black American musical artists I admire. They’re human beings whose music, style, and creativity has infused my own. Cultural ancestors of mine, to be sure. You could call this antiracism, but it’s really more about E Pluribus Unum – out of many, one.

If you think about it, democracy in the United States also wouldn’t be what it is today without Black Americans. Just consider the subtitle of Martha Jones’s book *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*. This is the story of women who were marginalized three times over: by nominally “white” women in the suffragette movement, Black American men in the church, and millions of “white” Americans in the struggle for civil rights. And yet they persevered with courage and ingenuity – along with moods of acceptance and ambition – to advance the country closer to the ideals of its founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. This interpretation of history neither sweeps suffering under the rug nor enshrines it as a defining trait of a people. Instead it’s a testament to the country’s contradictions and imperfections and capacity to wrestle with them.

We can also tap into the notion of “rooted cosmopolitanism.” As articulated by the philosophers, Anthony Appiah and Danielle Allen, this is the vision of being rooted in a local, vernacular culture while simultaneously identifying as a citizen of the world. It provides an alternative to the particularism of identity groups (whether marginalized or “blood and soil ethno-nationalists” and the universal sensibility of feeling equally comfortable everywhere. Rooted cosmopolitanism embraces the polarity between these interdependent opposites. In the realm of JEDI, it is unity within diversity. I see and appreciate your difference from me. I also am curious about what makes us similar. Making such declarations isn’t ignoring economic exclusion, police

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<sup>17</sup> A sentiment, according to Erfan, that the Achiever action-logic often holds.

violence, or inequalities in the criminal justice system. It's saying that I care about you because part of you is inside of me.

Embracing each other's humanity through any of these paths feels more expansive and attractive to me than the aims of including marginalized groups or combating racism. You can be pro-inclusion and antiracism without necessarily humanizing folks. But it's hard, I think, to see another's full humanity and then not want to embrace their voices and create social and political structures that welcome them. In this aspiration, the rescuer doesn't get much traction, and we experience moments of shame and anger rather than persistent moods of resentment and guilt.

## **Aim #2: Deconstruct Race**

Perhaps it's time to use our Redefining powers to deconstruct a concept that for centuries has remained untouched despite its destructive impact: Biological race as a category for classifying human groups. In writing these words, I'm crossing a line of taboo. Tracking people by racial categories allows us to quantify important data like who's suffering disproportionately from Covid or sickle cell anemia or who's more likely to be incarcerated for the same offense, like crack vs cocaine.<sup>18</sup> Take away those Census Bureau classifications, and the antiracism project might as well be dead. Or so we assume.<sup>19</sup> As importantly, many Black Americans and their allies are committed to reconstructing race. Instead of *we're a different race that is inferior to you*, it becomes *we're a different race that is equal to you and special in its own ways*.

In this context, deconstructing race can feel like going out on a limb. Yet it is a worthy aim. What we call "race" may sound innocuous (look at all the official institutions that ask me to check the box), but it has little to commend itself and is the cause of great harm. It is biologically and genetically meaningless,<sup>20</sup> was invented to justify chattel (personal property for life) slavery and keep poor folks with different ancestral origins from rebelling,<sup>21</sup> and is a driving force today in the "white power"<sup>22</sup> movement. The concept of "race" doesn't by itself produce racism, but it is central to the ideology of proud racists as well as the unconscious habits of everyone else. It even sneaks

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<sup>18</sup> In the United States, the penalties for possessing crack cocaine, used more by Black Americans, have long been far more severe than the penalties for possessing powder cocaine, which is more tied with "whites"

<sup>19</sup> In *The Arc of a Bad Idea*, a book about deracialization, Carlos Hoyt proposes an elegant solution: have the U.S. Census (and other institutions that collect such data) ask people not for their race (as objective fact) but instead as how other people identify them. In other words, to switch the language of these categories from race to racial identity, from fact to interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> According to scientists, each of us shares 99.9 percent of our genetic material with every other human; the genes that code for skin color and facial features code for little to nothing else; and there is enormous variation in skin color on the African continent, including variants for light pigments also found in European ancestry.

<sup>21</sup> In the 1670s, the colony of Virginia created laws that distinguished "white" people and "black" people, at a time when using "white" to describe skin color was only five years old. This happened after "white" indentured servants and "black" indentured servants and slaves united to rise up with arms against plantation owners, an event known as Bacon's Rebellion.

<sup>22</sup> A term that the historian, Kathleen Belew, among others, uses to describe the mix of white supremacist ideology and apocalyptic thinking. As evidenced in the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, this is a violent movement whose collective mood is at times both resentful and euphoric.

into our conversations as ways of rationalizing racism itself. Karen and Barbara Fields refer to this as “racecraft.” When we say, “A police officer shot an African American man because of his race” or “the company excluded people from hiring interviews because they are Black,” we are attributing these actions not to the habits of the offender but to the “race” of the target. As the Fields’s write, racecraft “highlights the ability of pre- or non-scientific modes of thought to hijack the minds of the scientifically literate.”

Deconstructing race, coupled with humanizing each other, meets our two criteria for aspirational aims. It invites us into a heroine’s journey rather than into the role of rescuer. We are jointly unlearning habits that we jointly learned together without knowing it. When coupled with humanizing others, it steers us away from moods of guilt and resentment and toward acceptance and ambition.

If our reckoning with racism is long overdue, so too is our jettisoning of the ideology of “race” that buttresses it. Could this serve as an additional aim of JEDI and antiracism work? Even if we accept that this is a mighty undertaking that could take a generation or more to realize, consider how powerful and freeing it feels to stand for this vision of shared humanity.

The journey, of course, starts with each of us.

### **Aim #3: Reclaim Our Humanity by Deracializing Ourselves**

In a related vein, I’d love to see later stage folks of every hue take on the following transformative JEDI project: Deracializing ourselves. This is the individual corollary to the collective project of deconstructing race. As envisioned by Carlos Hoyt in *The Arc of a Bad Idea*, deracialization means undoing a lifetime habit of calling myself “white,” my neighbor down the street “brown,” and my business colleagues “black.” I may be *identified* as “white.” My neighbor may be *marked* as “brown.” And my colleagues might be *nominally* “black.” But these are terms of interpretation rather than assertions of essential nature. They acknowledge racial identity, which is real (and will remain so as long as most of us reify race), while also granting people the complexity and individuality that is their due. Instead of just decrying racism and my own complicity in it (or privileging from it), this involves refashioning the very way I identify myself. For the Redefining action-logic within me, such attention to language and power dynamics is appealing. Yet it runs up against a more complex task: Reconciling deracialization with my own commitment to antiracism. How can I combat something that I claim does not exist?

The answer, of course, is that this is a false choice. Just because most people falsely believe in race, and some of these people use the ideology of race to justify racism, doesn’t mean I need to do the same. I can recognize and see the pitfalls of others’ habits without falling into them myself. In other words, there is nothing contradictory in the notion of an anti-race anti-racist.<sup>23</sup> If this sounds complex, that’s because it requires me to take multiple perspectives at once: What’s objectively true, what I see about this, what others see about this, and what others see that I see about this. Not easy!

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<sup>23</sup> I’m aware that this term is a doubling down on a deconstructive stance. Oops.

Fortunately, with a bit of reframing, this becomes an opportunity to call forth (or be pulled by) the Transforming action-logic. As an exercise, I might journal about early life experiences when I internalized my racial identity as objective fact – and how this identification with a particular race shifted as I grew through the action-logics. As an ongoing reflection, I might pay attention to all the ways I and others recapitulate racial essentialism in our words and actions. As a practice, I might introduce terms like *nominally* and *identified as* when referring to anyone’s (false albeit socially acceptable) racial category. Here, as with other JEDI endeavors, I can “bring everything I have – theory, data, truth-telling, charm, humour.”

As a growth challenge, deracialization carries two additional benefits. First, it is not intrinsically built to induce a mood of guilt. Learning how I’ve become identified as “white” carries less moral tone than learning how I’ve been complicit in systemic racism. Both projects are important. However, whereas the latter predisposes many action-logics to guilt, the former sparks curiosity and a mood of acceptance. Second, the language I practice and the reflections I undertake in deracializing myself are not about rescuing. They are about reclaiming my and others’ humanity. I have skin in the game.

## Conclusion

I am inspired by Erfan’s “many faces” approach to JEDI and wish to see it succeed. Given the ways it can be thwarted, I propose we build an even larger tent of aspirational aims. Let’s remake JEDI as a transformational journey, and let’s do so by including a multitude of enticing motivations, practices, and paths. Come, if you must, to interrogate your complicity, but stay for the deracialization and humanization.