

## The Power of Love Coupled with Opportunity

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**T**HE KERNER REPORT states that “a sure method for motivating the hard-core unemployed has not yet been devised” but that the unemployed fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds represent “a great reservoir of under-used human resources which are vital to the Nation.”<sup>1</sup> In the last fifty years, I believe we have learned a reasonably sure method of tapping into this great reservoir. But we still lack the political will to fund effective approaches at the scale required.

The power of love coupled with opportunity is transformational when offered to young people who have endured poverty. It unleashes their positive energy, unlocks their many talents, and inspires them to build a successful life and help others. No matter how lost they have been, if they find a caring community that respects their intelligence and illuminates the way to build a productive life, their ability to learn and love is awakened. This poem by a YouthBuild student captures it movingly:

*Imagine a child captured in his rage;  
Anger, violence, it seems to be the only way.  
When he feels down . . . it's as if no one's around.  
When the world closes in on him,  
He only breaks down.  
To live in a world where ignorance nourishes a baby,  
Death is given by the handful,  
And sanity seems to be crazy,  
Searching and searching.  
It seems to never end.*

*For what, no one knows until it's found, my friends.  
That's why I'm glad YouthBuild is made of family and friends.  
In an unstable world it gives me stability.  
YouthBuild, my extended family,  
I'll love you until infinity.*

This infinite love—the exact opposite of violence and despair—is waiting in the streets of Harlem and Roxbury, in the backwoods of West Virginia and Mississippi, and in every community where young people are struggling. It rises with awesome predictability and passion whenever caring, respect, and opportunity replace the emptiness and terror so many youth face.

Liberating this infinite love takes more than just minimally preparing young people for jobs. It occurs when we create a respectful, inclusive, sharing community of peers doing good works in their neighborhood while participating in governance and civic engagement. When we do it well, they almost always call it their family. When they get to belong to a family-like community that fosters responsibility and invites them to become leaders and change agents, it turns out they have the deepest passion for changing the conditions from which they and their loved ones have suffered. They become a powerful force for good that, if supported over time, can transform their communities, in addition to their own lives.

I witnessed this awakening process for thirty-eight years as the founder and chief executive officer of the nonprofit organization YouthBuild USA. With thousands of colleagues, we built a network of 250 YouthBuild programs, sponsored by local nonprofit and public entities, in the nation's most hard-pressed urban and rural communities. In these programs, low-income students who have left high school without a diploma enroll full time for about ten months. They spend half their time learning construction skills and getting paid a wage building affordable housing for homeless and low-income people in their communities; they spend the other half of their time working toward their high school equivalency or diploma in highly supportive and individualized classrooms. It is all knit together with personal and peer counseling, deeply caring adults, and a major emphasis on leadership development and the internalization of positive values. At graduation, they are ready for college and employment. Staff offer follow-up supports for at least one year.

Participant Carmen Williams describes her experience:

Being a young woman from the streets of Philadelphia I never thought I would achieve anything. Drug and alcohol abuse to cope with wasn't anything compared to the sexual, mental, physical, and emotional abuse I also experienced. It was only two op-

tions for the life I was living: to be an addict like my mother, or to die like both of my parents. I didn't want to die, but I didn't have a reason to live, either, until I found YouthBuild. There was always something inside of me waiting to have the opportunity to become great. YouthBuild gave me that opportunity. It gave me the chance to heal. Here is where I am able to have the family I always wanted. The people here believe in me, even when I did not believe in myself. I aspire to be what YouthBuild has been to me, to another young person. I do not think there are words to express my gratitude. I will continue the march towards change using the core values I have learned from YouthBuild.<sup>2</sup>

It is this passion we can liberate through all the effective youth programs across the nation. With this energy we can build the movement needed to generate the political will to dedicate the resources needed for this most important societal goal of securing our nation's economic and social stability for the coming generations. Young black Americans and all young people emerging from poverty can and want to be the core of that movement.

## WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE NEED AND WANT?

In 2012, a multiracial group of young adults raised in both urban and rural poverty who had overcome many barriers with the support of sixteen different comprehensive youth engagement programs (such as YouthBuild, Year Up, Service and Conservation Corps, and others) formed the National Council of Young Leaders. They immediately developed "Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America."<sup>3</sup> This document calls for the expansion of six important pathways out of poverty for young adults who have fallen off track: access to higher education, internships, mentoring, national service, reentry programs, and comprehensive full-time programs. It then offers the details of change needed in five basic social systems that affect everyone in their communities: education, criminal justice, upward mobility, community development, and family supports. Thus, while calling for clear and structured opportunities for young adults to climb out of poverty in the short term, the members of the National Council of Young Leaders also call for changes in the fundamental conditions in their communities to improve the lives of all who reside there. Most of the system changes they call for have enormous overlap with those recommended by the Kerner Commission. I focus here on the pathways out of poverty and the role young people could play in building the political will to enact these changes.

## OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

The Kerner Commission reported that the majority of the young people who rioted in the sixties were young black men who were high school dropouts and unemployed.<sup>4</sup> It recommended the creation of two million public and private jobs to empower young people of all races to join the economy as contributing members.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, this was not done.

Most young people who leave high school without a diploma become stuck on the margins, are often incarcerated, and are rarely employed. They are not only black men. There are 4.9 million sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who are not employed or in school in the United States. They include all races, men and women, gay and straight, urban and rural, all faith traditions, documented and undocumented, able and disabled. Two million, or 41 percent of them, live in low-income households.<sup>6</sup> They will birth and raise the next generation in poverty if education and jobs are not available to them. This is a manageable challenge. If we were to address their needs and aspirations, we could end poverty in a generation. We could rejoice in the humanity of our nation.

We now call this group “Opportunity Youth” because they are both seeking opportunity and offering opportunity to our nation if we invest in them. They are coming of age, making real decisions as young adults about what kind of life they will live. In destitute communities, many of them have not seen any welcoming path they could choose that would lead to productive adulthood. By their own accounts, many expect to be dead or in jail before they reach twenty-five years of age.<sup>7</sup> But if we embrace them and offer real opportunity at this critical inflexion point in their lives, they will deliberately pivot toward hope. They have the agency to choose, but that agency means something only if good choices are available.

Just as recommended by the Kerner Commission, two million good choices should be provided. In a caring context, these young people should be offered everything they are seeking: a visible and important role in the community that brings them respect from their neighbors and families, skills that can lead to a decent-paying job, a fresh start on their education, personal counseling from respected role models supporting deep healing from past and present trauma, consistent respect for their intelligence from caring adults in authority who include them in key decision making, a positive and supportive peer group with whom they can share their common pain and admit that they want to change their lives, a set of positive values strong enough to compete with the negative values of the streets, a stipend or wage to live on while they are learning, a path to college or a career, and something to belong to that they can believe in. They need to be part of a minicommunity in which people genuinely care about each other, embrace positive values, and share a vision of a better world.

All these elements were deliberately built into YouthBuild and have demonstrated their efficacy. They exist with varying emphases in the many other successful youth programs that have emerged over the decades as local innovations and national networks. It is past time to expand all these programs to full scale—with “full scale” being defined as reaching either the limit of demand or the limit of capacity to deliver high-quality programs.

Achieving this requires four immediate steps that national leaders and advocates are working to implement. If the political will could be generated to produce the resources, we could implement these four steps and produce the two million jobs and career pathways needed by low-income Opportunity Youth. The four steps are the following:

### *Step 1: Expand Existing Federally Funded Programs*

Congress could fund the expansion of federally authorized programs to welcome one million Opportunity Youth each year as laid out in “A Bridge to Reconnection,” a study done by Civic Enterprises in 2012 and updated in 2016.<sup>8</sup> The size and scope of existing programs were studied, along with the growth that existing demand and capacity would allow. The programs recommended for expansion include short-term part-time and longer-term full-time comprehensive job training, adult education, internships, apprenticeships, national service opportunities, and reentry programs.

The best known of these programs are Service and Conservation Corps (118 sites engaging 13,000 youth annually),<sup>9</sup> National Guard Youth Challenge program (40 sites that have graduated 145,000 youth),<sup>10</sup> Job Corps (126 sites engaging 52,500 youth),<sup>11</sup> YouthBuild (260 sites engaging 9,000 youth),<sup>12</sup> AmeriCorps (about 6,000 Opportunity Youth),<sup>13</sup> and Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act grantees (about 95,000 Opportunity Youth).<sup>14</sup> These national programs have been evaluated using strong research designs and have been shown to produce positive impacts on some outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Of course, the moment new resources become available, wonderful new initiatives will crop up at the local level, created by committed leaders.

These federally funded programs are described in greater detail in the “Bridge to Reconnection” study. The study identifies 339,712 current opportunities and lays out how to expand this to one million each year with total annual federal expenditures of just \$6.5 billion.<sup>16</sup> The study shows in detail that \$170.9 billion in net fiscal gains would be produced by this investment through decreased crime, welfare, and health expenses and through increased taxes paid by the young people throughout their lives.

Another study reported that the lifetime direct cost to taxpayers for each twenty-year-old Opportunity Youth *not* reconnected to education or

employment is \$235,680.<sup>17</sup> The programs to reconnect them already exist, with proven results, at modest costs, with delivery systems already authorized in public law, with dedicated staff, strong demand from young people, and ample capacity at the local level to expand. These programs would produce an enormous return on investment (see Table 4.1). A Reconnecting Youth Campaign has been mobilized by a group of coalitions around this plan to produce one million program opportunities each year, initiated by the Forum for Youth Investment, YouthBuild USA, Jobs for the Future, the Aspen Institute, and the Center for Law and Social Policy.

### *Step 2: Reestablish Previously Successful Federal Programs*

A government commission could assess the benefits of reinstating highly successful federal programs from the past such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (1933–1942); the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program (1973–1982); and Youth Opportunity Grants (YOG) (1998–2005).

The CCC, as one example, provided direct training and employment to more than three million young men who in ten years built eight hundred parks and planted over one billion trees.<sup>18</sup> The CCC was responsible for over half the reforestation, public and private, done in the nation's history. (Sadly, the CCC was segregated, discriminated against black men, and was closed entirely to women, and even after an effort was undertaken to correct the racial discrimination, by 1936 black participation was up to only 10 percent.) Imagine what a new CCC could do in the present, absent discrimination and exclusion, and supporting the nonprofit organizations that have emerged to fill this space. The Corps Network, the national association of service and conservation corps across the country that grew out of the CCC and are now supported by a combination of local, state, federal, and private funding, has long advocated for the reestablishment of a CCC-like program to support the current network of nonprofits and engage thousands more diverse young adults, including Opportunity Youth and veterans.

### *Step 3: Collaborate with the Private Sector*

Corporations report over five million unfilled jobs for which they cannot find qualified candidates, especially in the areas of health, information technology, advanced manufacturing, retail, and construction.<sup>19</sup> *Fortune* magazine estimated two hundred thousand unfilled construction jobs in 2016.<sup>20</sup> In 2015 Starbucks launched the 100,000 Opportunities Initiative, now involving over fifty corporations that have collectively committed to hiring one million Opportunity Youth.<sup>21</sup> Starbucks also wisely created a

**TABLE 4.1 HOW TO REACH ONE MILLION OPPORTUNITY YOUTH**

		Estimated lifetime fiscal savings, by savings type								
Program	Agency	Number of OY served	Target for growth	Projected federal cost per OY	Cost at estimate for growth	Taxes	Crime	Health	Welfare	Total
<b>Comprehensive education and employment programs</b>										
Job Corps	Labor	52,415	65,000	\$30,106	\$1,956,890,000	\$6,857,500,000	\$890,500,000	\$2,721,550,000	\$627,900,000	\$11,097,450,000
YouthBuild	Labor	7,560	50,000	\$15,000	\$750,000,000	\$5,275,000,000	\$685,000,000	\$2,093,500,000	\$483,000,000	\$8,536,500,000
Service and Con-servation Corps	Various	14,780	65,000	\$10,000	\$650,000,000	\$6,857,500,000	\$890,500,000	\$2,721,550,000	\$627,900,000	\$11,097,450,000
National Guard Youth Challenge	Defense	9,000	20,000	\$13,890	\$277,800,000	\$2,110,000,000	\$274,000,000	\$837,400,000	\$193,200,000	\$3,414,600,000
Reentry Opportunities	Labor	6,130	18,000	\$7,300	\$131,400,000	\$1,899,000,000	\$246,600,000	\$753,660,000	\$173,880,000	\$3,073,140,000
AmeriCorps National and Civilian Community Corps	CNCS	138	1,400	\$29,674	\$41,543,600	\$147,700,000	\$19,180,000	\$58,618,000	\$13,524,000	\$239,022,000
AmeriCorps State and National	CNCS	6,260	50,000	\$11,063	\$553,150,000	\$5,275,000,000	\$685,000,000	\$2,093,500,000	\$483,000,000	\$8,536,500,000
<b>Subtotals</b>		<b>96,283</b>	<b>269,400</b>		<b>\$4,360,783,600</b>	<b>\$28,421,700,000</b>	<b>\$3,690,780,000</b>	<b>\$11,279,778,000</b>	<b>\$2,602,404,000</b>	<b>\$45,994,662,000</b>
<b>Short-term education programs</b>										
Adult Secondary Education	Education	132,500	248,700	\$300	\$74,610,000	\$26,237,850,000	\$3,407,190,000	\$10,413,069,000	\$2,402,442,000	\$42,460,551,000
Chafee Education and Training Vouchers	Health and Human Services	16,548	26,000	\$2,555	\$66,430,000	\$2,743,000,000	\$356,200,000	\$1,088,620,000	\$251,160,000	\$4,438,980,000
<b>Subtotals</b>		<b>149,048</b>	<b>274,700</b>		<b>\$141,040,000</b>	<b>\$28,980,850,000</b>	<b>\$3,763,390,000</b>	<b>\$11,501,689,000</b>	<b>\$2,653,062,000</b>	<b>\$46,899,531,000</b>
<b>Short-term employment programs</b>										
WYIO Youth Activities	Labor	94,390	456,801	\$4,424	\$2,020,887,624	\$48,192,505,500	\$6,258,173,700	\$19,126,257,870	\$4,412,697,660	\$77,989,634,730
<b>Subtotals</b>		<b>94,390</b>	<b>456,801</b>		<b>\$2,020,887,624</b>	<b>\$48,192,505,500</b>	<b>\$6,258,173,700</b>	<b>\$19,126,257,870</b>	<b>\$4,412,697,660</b>	<b>\$77,989,634,730</b>
<b>Totals</b>		<b>339,721</b>	<b>1,000,901</b>		<b>\$6,522,711,224</b>	<b>\$105,595,055,500</b>	<b>\$13,712,343,700</b>	<b>\$41,907,724,870</b>	<b>\$9,668,703,660</b>	<b>\$170,883,827,730</b>

Source: John M. Bridgeland, Erin S. Ingram, and Matthew Atwell, "A Bridge to Reconnection: A Plan for Reconnecting One Million Opportunity Youth Each Year through Federal Funding Streams," September 2016, p. 15, available at <http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/BridgetoReconnection.2016.pdf>.  
 Note: OY = opportunity youth; CNCS = Corporation for National and Community Service.

Youth Advisory Council for input on the supports needed for Opportunity Youth to become successful employees; and GAP has documented that the Opportunity Youth it employs have higher retention rates than other employees.<sup>22</sup> Expansion of the federal training programs described in “A Bridge to Reconnection” would prepare more youth for all these jobs and strengthen their success rates once they are hired by corporations. These programs would also prepare them for the union jobs that are now open in the construction industry.

#### *Step 4: Mobilize for Investment at the Local Level*

Each state, city, and county could create a study similar to “A Bridge to Reconnection” that identifies the number of young adults not employed or in school, the existing points of reconnection, and the new investments needed to invite Opportunity Youth into programs of education, job training, apprenticeships, community service, and leadership development that would prepare them for productive adulthood. Local public funds could expand existing options in those communities, create new ones to fill gaps, and work with local coalitions promoting collective strategies.

Following these four steps would fulfill the Kerner Commission’s recommendation to create training and non-dead-end jobs as a solution to violence stemming from racism, poverty, and resentment, and it would reconnect all the Opportunity Youth.

### WHO IS LEFT OUT AND NEEDS ATTENTION?

In addition to the two million low-income Opportunity Youth, another 166,900 young people ages eighteen to twenty-four are in federal and state prisons.<sup>23</sup> Despite having available the newly positive language of the term “Opportunity Youth,” which signals the potential value to society of young people who are not employed or in school, unacceptable and inaccurate language is still being used to describe a different subset of American youth. The terms “thugs,” “drug dealers,” and “gangbangers” are used to dismiss them as having no value, deserving nothing except punishment and contempt. Leaders in both political parties do not hesitate to use these terms to discount a whole category of people. This is a serious mistake made from ignorance and bias. It has contributed to and grown out of the policies from the War on Drugs and mass incarceration that have been well documented in the book *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander.<sup>24</sup> Many young people raised in poverty face a set of conditions that draw them down what seems to be the only lane open to them on a seemingly irreversible road to trouble. Sadly, society stands ready to punish them for the rest of their lives. Yet they are just as eager for opportu-



nity as those who never committed a crime, joined a gang, or sold any drugs or who did so but were never caught. Or if caught, were not charged with a crime, as occurs often in upper-middle-class white communities when teenagers commit youthful errors.

Through my work in YouthBuild, I have gotten to know many individuals who had previously been involved in gangs or drug dealing. Among them, I have never met one who did not prefer to be a successful, contributing parent and leader. Given the distorted opportunity structure flowing from racism and classism, it also turns out that the leaders of gangs, who have risen in the street culture, are often highly intelligent and creative, resilient and resourceful. Their talents, when harnessed for good, informed by newly internalized positive values, are very powerful.

To illustrate this point, Mike Dean wrote a book about his own journey from drug dealer to pastor and nonprofit leader.<sup>25</sup> As director of YouthBuild Franklin County in Ohio, he now offers youth the same opportunities that helped him leave the streets. Ely Flores, now founding director of a nonprofit called LEAD in Los Angeles, testified before the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives in 2008 about his experiences in a gang lifestyle before finding his way out.<sup>26</sup> Robert Clark, once incarcerated, now advises the Newark, New Jersey, public school system on education policy. Antonio Ramirez, once active in a gang, is now the founding director of United at Peace, helping young people end violence in Rockford, Illinois. James Mackey, whose father and brothers had been incarcerated, leads a movement in Boston called Stuck on Replay to amend the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which ended slavery “except as a punishment for crime.” Michael Donnelly, once gang involved, advises the police department in Bloomington, Illinois, on how to build positive relationships with youth. Antoine Bennett, who served eighteen months for a violent crime, later came to chair the homeowners association in Sandtown, Baltimore. He says, “I used to be a menace to my community; now I am a minister to it.”<sup>27</sup>

These stories, and thousands of others, are books and films waiting to be written and filmed. Behind them is an enormous force for good waiting to be liberated. Most Americans are unaware of this untapped talent and goodness. Most are equally unaware of the pain and despair in poverty-stricken urban and rural communities. Most have never gotten to know a young person who grew up hungry, who was periodically and unpredictably homeless because of his parents’ eviction for inability to pay the rent. They have not mentored a teenager whose father was incarcerated and whose stepfather abused him while his mother was at work at very low wages. They have not talked with teenagers who were invited by adults to carry bags of drugs here and there to get the fifty dollars that would enable them to bring some money and food home for their younger siblings. They do not know young people who moved through fifteen

different foster-care families, being abused in some, and going to ten different schools during their vulnerable adolescence.

Until the heartbreaking stories of pain and the incredible stories of resilience and goodness of the young people who transcend these conditions are widely known, it is unlikely that we can build the political will to offer the opportunities needed for all. Some media efforts are under way. Grads of Life is a media campaign from Year Up, another fine program for Opportunity Youth, to persuade employers that young people who have been through hardships have learned valuable life skills. To win the hearts and minds of the public, we need daily stories on every channel about people who have emerged from poverty and are giving their lives to bettering their communities.

## THE CORE CHALLENGE: BUILDING THE POLITICAL WILL TO INVEST IN OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL

The commission named the necessary condition: “to generate new will—the will to tax ourselves to the extent necessary to meet the vital needs of the nation.”<sup>28</sup> But how do we generate that will? Regardless of their unlimited commitment and skill, the efforts of a generation of nonprofit leaders to spread their marvelous programs to full scale, to meet the enormous demand and the heart-wrenching needs in their communities, have been stymied by lack of political will.

My own steady efforts since 1984 to build political support for YouthBuild as a publicly funded approach to breaking the cycle of poverty resulted in the authorization of YouthBuild in federal law in 1992 and a cumulative federal expenditure since then of \$1.7 billion; this allowed over 160,000 low-income young people to produce more than 35,000 units of affordable housing in over 250 urban and rural communities while working toward a high school diploma or its equivalent. Many emerged as superb local leaders.<sup>29</sup> It was clearly worth the investment. The affordable housing that students produced would have been sufficient impact, but the additional ripple effects from their personal transformations have been immeasurable.

The thirty-month 2016 interim report of a random-assignment evaluation done by MDRC on seventy-five YouthBuild programs shows meaningful gains for participants in GED acquisition, college access, wages, civic volunteering, and independence from public benefits.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the public investment has neither met the demand nor tapped the full capacity: over 2,000 distinct local nonprofit and public entities have applied to the government since 1993 for funds to bring YouthBuild to their communities, but only about 145 are funded in 2017. The steady demand from youth and from local organizations warrants about ten times the

annual investment, which in fiscal year 2017 was just \$84 million. Unfortunately, real antipoverty investment seems to be distinctly against the grain of our political reality.

Even the modest scaling achieved would never have occurred had very rare elected officials not stepped forward as champions. Back in the early nineties, Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and Representative Major Owens (D-NY-Brooklyn) stepped forward, recruited bipartisan support, and got legislation passed. They served as champions for the annual appropriation as long as they served in Congress; then Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Representative John Lewis (D-GA-Atlanta) took over, joined most recently by Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) and Representative Scott Perry (R-PA-York). Bipartisan support through four presidential administrations sustained the funding, and it was continued in the budget put forward by the federal Office of Management and Budget for the Trump administration in May 2017.

What was achieved over these decades was decidedly against the political trend. In 1991 when the YouthBuild legislation was first introduced, senior staff on the authorizing committee said to me, “Don’t get your hopes up. Senators introduce thousands of bills for their constituents that never pass. Congress is not going in the direction of helping low-income communities. Unless John Kerry cares more about poor people than any senator has ever cared about poor people, this is dead in the water.” Three weeks later the staffer called me and said, “You’re in luck. John Kerry cares. He told me it was my job to get this passed.” And so it did pass.

Later, in 1996, a staff member for House Speaker Newt Gingrich said to us, “You can forget about federal funding. Congress is not going to appropriate any more federal funds for programs that benefit poor people. It’s all going to the states.” (The federal appropriation for YouthBuild programs did survive through steadfast advocacy and bipartisan support.) Both of these statements were seared in my memory as unforgettable lessons.

Every year for twenty-five years, when lobbying for resources to benefit low-income youth and communities, I have been told on the Hill, “This is not a good year to ask for more. You are lucky and should be grateful for level funding.” This resistance to adequate investment must change if we are ever to reverse the conditions in America that predictably produce poverty, despair, hate, rage, and violence.

I am not alone. Many people working at the grassroots level have created beautiful little oases of caring and opportunity. Some have created national networks of oases. We have learned how to empower individuals and neighborhoods to transform themselves and overcome enormous obstacles. We know how to transform depressed communities into thriving communities fired up by hope. But we are weary of oases. We need to unite all our separate ingenious efforts into one great torrent of powerful

change that will bring the world closer to the vision we hold deep in our hearts. We are sick of witnessing poverty and despair and violence as if it cannot be changed. We are sad to be improving things for just a few thousand people when the conditions of poverty are damaging millions. *We need a breakthrough!* We have been caught in a paralyzing web of incremental struggle for small gains on too many separate and isolated single-issue fronts without overall vision or direction. I believe in patience and perseverance. I admire all the people who act from the bone-deep lifelong commitment to never giving up, never stopping, always doing the next task that could possibly contribute to a better world. I believe in being willing to take one small step at a time. It is a good way to live.

*But we need a breakthrough!* We need to break through our own willingness to settle for so little. We need to break out of our separate beautiful pieces of the work and weave them together into a more powerful whole. We need a larger movement, with higher expectations, broader goals, a more fleshed-out and coordinated set of goals that, taken together, would eliminate poverty and racism. I am aching for the breakthrough where we decide as a nation, a united nation, not to tolerate the ongoing slow and steady murder through poverty, despair, and criminalization of our own people. If America persists in neglecting our most impoverished citizens and assuming they are incapable of learning, working, contributing, and leading, we are doomed to the racism, violence, crime, poverty, divisions, and despair that our bad policies perpetuate.

The young leaders who developed the “Recommendations to Increase Opportunity and Decrease Poverty in America” in 2012 decided they needed a larger movement to achieve their goals. In 2015 they launched Opportunity Youth United to harness the passion for change among their peers by building a robust grassroots movement guided by principles of love and inclusion. They saw the need for unity among all affected groups plus allies.

Although poverty is disproportionately experienced by black Americans and other people of color as a result of the long-term structural racism in America, it is also importantly true that the largest single group of poor people in America is white. The percentage is lower among whites, but the absolute numbers are higher. According to census reports, 27 percent of Native Americans, 24 percent of black people, 21 percent of Latinos/as, 11 percent of Asian Americans, and 9 percent of white people in the United States lived in poverty in 2015.<sup>31</sup> Rounded off, this amounts to eighteen million white people, twelve million Latinos/as, ten million black people, one million Asian Americans, and one million Native Americans. The interests of all people living in poverty are similar. This fact must be understood and integrated into our analyses, our solutions, our organizing, and our politics. United and engaged, supported by allies, forty-two million poor people could build the political will to end poverty.

The perpetual neglect of poor people of all races seems founded both on a widespread assumption of their inferiority and on the private interests of a small minority that controls the flow of resources. Those who control the resources also control much of the narrative and many of the laws. We do not yet know how to persuade them that it is actually in their interest as humans to end poverty. But even if we fail to persuade them, they are a very small minority that should not control this democratic nation.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was building a multiracial, nonviolent, united movement for economic justice called the Poor People's Campaign at the time of his assassination two months after the release of the Kerner Report. Such a campaign is needed today. Racial equity, racial unity, and racial healing are all essential to our future together. Let us move to end poverty and racism. Let us build a fair and prosperous economy.

To do this we will need to tap into the infinite love that lies below the surface in our nation, listen to the hearts and minds of young leaders who have suffered from poverty and have a better vision, and build a dynamic movement that is a magnet to the best in all of us and together build a nation that is more wise, loving, respectful, and united and that produces a reasonable distribution of resources so that all people have the opportunities to fulfill their highest potential and their noblest aspirations within caring communities that offer respect and responsibility for all.