

Radical Collaboration to Transform Social Systems: Moving Forward Together with Love, Power, and Justice¹

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Introduction

Here is a hopeful story.

Last November, I went to Egypt to participate in the United Nations COP27 climate conference. The global climate crisis threatens all of us. It demands that we address a complex and daunting set of challenges at three levels: transforming our energy, industrial, food, transportation, and financial systems; transforming our underlying economic, political, and cultural systems; and, more fundamentally, transforming how we relate with one another and with our shared planetary home.

Although everyone is threatened by climate change and so everyone has a general interest in contributing to these transformations, different people and organisations and countries have very different specific interests, capacities, understandings, and ambitions. Think about the differences between subsistence farmers in Kenya and coal workers in Germany, between the governments of the U.S. and China, between corporations and activists, and between young students and middle-class retirees. To effect the necessary transformations, these stakeholders must find ways to work together—but this is not easy or straightforward.

In Egypt, 35,000 people—government representatives, NGO leaders, businesspeople, scientists—had come together from all over the world to work on these transformations. Everyone knew that they could not do much by themselves and that they therefore had to work with others—including with people they didn't agree with or like or trust. Every day for two weeks they met in hundreds of parallel meetings—panels, workshops, negotiations—to search for ways to move forward together. The main open area for accredited delegates consisted of three enormous single-story prefab buildings, each containing long hallways of open-sided pavilions where meetings of all sorts ran all at the same time all day long. It was a sprawling, cacophonous, societal transformation bazaar.

I found this experience both inspiring and overwhelming. Once I had left the conference and was able to reflect on it, I realised that it had helped me to get clearer on a few simple things. The collaborations at the conference had produced progress—but not nearly enough for us to be on track to prevent more and more climate catastrophes. It is not probable that over the coming years we will succeed in getting on track—but it is possible. Getting on track will require much more and much better collaboration—and such collaboration is possible.

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Philosopher Moses Maimonides said, “Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible, not only the necessity of the probable.”

I am hopeful.

Here is the primary question I’ve been asking myself over the past 30 years: What does it take to collaborate with diverse others to address the daunting challenges of our time? Or, to put it in more basic terms: What is the way of working and living and being together that is required of us now? I am a practical practitioner: I facilitate collaborations among diverse stakeholders who are trying to transform the social systems of which they are part. I started doing this work in 1991 in South Africa during that country’s transformation from racial oppression to non-racial democracy. This transformation was not straightforward or easy because there were the deep differences among South Africans in their positions, ideologies, cultures, and needs that had been produced and amplified by colonialism and apartheid. I facilitated a process called the Mont Fleur Scenario Exercise in which 28 South African leaders—Black and white, men and women; from the left and right and opposition and establishment; including politicians, businesspeople, trade unionists, community leaders, and academics—worked together over a year to chart a path to transforming their country. The participants in this exercise made a significant contribution to transforming South Africa.

It was through this extraordinary experience that I discovered my vocation as a facilitator. Over the decades since then, my colleagues in Reos Partners and I have facilitated tens of such multi-stakeholder collaborations, in all parts of world, at all scales, on all kinds of social transformations, including related to health, education, food, energy, development, justice, security, governance, peace, and climate. The gift I have received from working in many extraordinary contexts like South Africa is that they have shown me the dynamics of social transformation painted in bright colours. I think that exactly the same dynamics are present in ordinary contexts—in families, organisations, communities—but there these are often painted in muted colours and so are harder to make out. The extraordinary has enabled me to make out these universal dynamics.

My 30 years of practical experience, from Mont Fleur to COP27, has given me many opportunities for trial and many opportunities for error, and therefore many opportunities for learning. I have written five books, attempting to construct a theory from this practice and connecting it to the work of other theorists and practitioners. I was trained as a physicist and then as an economist and so, as the joke goes: I lie awake in bed at night wondering whether what works in practice can really work in theory. Today I would like to explain what I am learning about what it takes to collaborate to transform social systems, both in practice and in theory.

Collaboration is becoming both increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult. This is because the challenges we face involve more stakeholders who need and want to be involved in addressing these challenges, including because they are less willing to defer to experts and elites. In this context, the conventional way of collaborating—focusing on the whole, agreeing a plan, getting people to implement the plan—is becoming increasingly ineffective. To address our challenges effectively, we therefore need an unconventional way that I call radical collaboration. It is radical in that it is a way of collaborating that gets to the root of what is required to transform—rather than only reform—our social systems.

What does radical collaboration take? Essayist Oliver Wendell Holmes said: “I wouldn’t give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for

the simplicity on the far side of complexity.” Here is my attempt at such a useful simplification.

Radical collaboration is a way of working together with diverse others to transform social systems that engages three universal human drives: love and power and justice. Radical collaboration requires that we be able to work with all three of these drives—just like travelling through three-dimensional space requires that we be able to move in three ways: side to side, front and back, and up and down. This model of love, power, and justice doesn’t give us a recipe for social transformation: it gives us a map of the social territory we are in, so that we can understand what is happening, and a set of practices for making our way through this territory, so that we can transform what is happening. One of the pioneers of facilitation, Kurt Lewin, said “There is nothing as practical as a good theory.” I am working on this model because I think it’s practical. Today I would like to share with you my current understanding and to hear how this relates to your experiences.

Love

The first force that was driving what was happening at COP27 was the *obvious* one: the 35,000 people who participated did so because they were concerned about the climate crisis and wanted to contribute to addressing it. Their shared concern was summarised in the slogan: “keep 1.5 alive,” meaning working together to limit the increase in the global average temperature of the Earth’s surface to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Increasingly frequent and severe climate-related catastrophes around the world, including the disastrous flooding in Pakistan, were fresh in everyone’s minds. The participants understood that they were part of a global social-economic-political-technological-environmental-cultural system; that this system was dangerously out of balance; and that they needed to collaborate with diverse others to get it more into balance.

I call this first drive love. I am using this word not primarily in the sense of romantic love, but in the sense suggested by theologian Paul Tillich, who wrote: “Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated.” Everyone is driven by love—although they have different understandings of what it is that needs to be reunited (often they’re focussed on reuniting the smaller circles of their family or organisation or community). As fragmentation, polarisation, and demonisation increase, love becomes both more difficult and more important. The participants in COP27, for example, had come together to heal the separations—to bridge the differences—between people and planet, between the Global North and South, between East and West, and between governments, civil society, and business. Love arises from the reality of interconnection and interdependence: that we are part of larger wholes. If one dimension of social systems is such partness, then love is the drive that enables us to move “side to side” in this dimension.

Love is the essence of collaboration inasmuch as collaboration involves people coming together. When the members of the Mont Fleur team came together in 1991 from across their apartheid separateness (the Afrikaans word *apartheid* simply means “apartness”) to look for ways that South Africa could heal its brokenness, they were driven by such love.

But it was not until 1997 in Guatemala that I grasped the deeper potential of love for social transformation. I was facilitating a workshop one year after the signing of the peace accords that ended the 36-year genocidal civil war between the government, military, and urban elite on one hand, and the guerrilla groups and Indigenous farmers on the other. The workshop was the beginning of a project that brought together leaders from across these societal divisions to contribute to implementing the accords. These

leaders had been on different sides of the war and the room was thick with suspicion. Ronal Ochaeta, a human rights investigator, told the story of having gone to an Indigenous village to observe the exhumation of a mass grave from a wartime massacre. When the earth had been removed from the grave, Ochaeta noticed lots of small bones, and he asked the forensic scientist supervising the exhumation what had happened. The scientist replied that the massacre had included pregnant women, and the small bones were of their fetuses.

After Ochaeta told this story in the workshop, the room fell silent for a long time. Then the team took a break and afterwards continued with their work. In the years that followed, they collaborated on many national initiatives, including four presidential campaigns; contributions to the Commission for Historical Clarification, the Fiscal Agreement Commission, and the Peace Accords Monitoring Commission; work on municipal development strategies, a national antipoverty strategy, and a new university curriculum; and six spin-off dialogues. Through these efforts the Guatemalan team contributed to the transformation of Guatemala.

When researchers later interviewed the members of this team, several of them said that it was the moment of silence that had enabled them to make these collective contributions. One of them said, “In giving his testimony, Ochaeta was sincere, calm, and serene, without a trace of hate in his voice. This gave way to the moment of silence that, I would say, lasted at least one minute. It was horrible! It was a very moving experience for all of us. If you ask any of us, we would say that this moment was like a large communion.” Another said, “After listening to Ochaeta’s story, I understood and felt in my heart all that had happened. And there was a feeling that we must struggle to prevent this from happening again.” In the context of Roman Catholic Guatemala, “a moment of communion” means that the participants experienced themselves to be, literally, part of one body. Ochaeta’s storytelling enabled the team to connect to one another, to their situation, and to what they needed to do.

This Guatemalan experience focused my attention on working with love as the essence of collaboration and provided the climactic end to my first book, *Solving Tough Problems*. When I related this experience to facilitator Laura Chasin, she commented: “Your story reminds me of something I learned when my husband had a terrible accident. He was swimming in a lake and a motor boat ran over him. The propeller cut a gaping gash in his leg. We rushed him to the hospital, but the doctor said that the wound was too large to be sewn up. The only thing we could do was keep the area clean and dry. ‘The two sides of the wound will reach out to each other,’ the doctor said. ‘The wound wants to be whole.’ The dialogues you and I are involved in are like that,” Chasin continued. “The participants and the human systems they are part of want to be whole. Our job as facilitators is simply to help create a clean, safe space. Then the healing will occur.”

Radical collaboration employs love by bringing stakeholders together in a clean, safe space and a structured, open process that enable them to meet, connect, talk, share, and unite.

The specific reason I went to COP27 was to share the work of the “Radical Climate Collaboration initiative” that Reos had organised. The first product of this initiative was a publication entitled “Radical Collaboration to Accelerate Climate Action: A Guidebook for Working Together with Speed, Scale, and Justice,” which offers an integrated set of seven practices to enable radical collaboration. Two of these practices or “dos” are practical ways to work with love. The first is *Play Your Role*, which means working out your specific part or contribution to the systemic transformation. The opposite “*don’t do*” is *Ignore Interdependencies*, which means just doing what you want to do,

regardless of what others are doing and what is needed. The second practice is *Find Necessary Allies*, which means searching out the people with whom you need to collaborate to be able to play your role. The opposite is *Stay Comfortable*, which means just working with the people you know and like and agree with.

Radical collaboration must work with love. To avoid working with love is to ignore the reality of interdependence. Collaboration that does not harness love will not transform social systems. But working with love is not straightforward. If love is the drive to reunite the separated, then what is the whole that is being reunited? There is no such thing as “the whole,” except in some irrelevant cosmic sense. Poet Leonard Cohen wrote, “Though it all may be one in the higher eye, down here where we live it is two.” Down here where we live there are many “holons”: wholes that are part of larger wholes. For example, I am a holon in myself, and also part of the larger holons of my family, Reos, and of this group here today. One of the reasons it is not straightforward to address climate change is that the drive to reunite the separated is taking place in contradictory ways in many different holons at the same time: not only the holons of all life on Earth or all humanity, but also those of individual countries, alliances, and organisations. We need to work with love, but this is not easy.

Power

And working only with love is not enough to be able to transform social systems. John Lennon was incorrect when he sang, “All You Need is Love.” The theory and practice I outlined in *Solving Tough Problems* were inadequate: I was missing something. Ten years after the Guatemalan workshop in which Ocheata had told his story, I met with one of the members of that team, researcher Clara Arenas, who challenged the emphasis I had been giving to love. “Do you know,” she asked me, “that last week, the coalition of civil society organisations I am part of took out a full-page advertisement in the main newspaper here, saying that we would no longer participate in dialogues with the government? The government has said that a precondition for us participating in their dialogues is that we refrain from marching and demonstrating in the streets. But these actions are the main way we mobilize and manifest our power, and if dialoguing requires us to surrender our power, then we are not interested.”

What I was missing was power. Radical collaboration relies on the individual and collective power of the participating stakeholders who want to transform the system and to prevail over those who want to maintain the status quo. Collaboration that does not harness power will not transform social systems.

At COP27, power was the second driving force. The bazaar-like cacophony I experienced was the sound of thousands of stakeholders each expressing their power through presenting, proposing, pushing, pitching, and protesting, and through doing this making agreements and deals with others to be able to make larger contributions to addressing the climate crisis.

Tillich defined power as “the drive of everything living to realise itself.” Power in this sense does not mean primarily power-over, but rather power-to. Everyone is driven by power—although they have different understandings of what power needs to be used to do (often they’re focussed on their own power-to or that of their family or organisation or community). Power arises from the reality of the autonomy, agency, and ambition of each and every holon. If a second dimension of social systems is such wholeness, then power is the drive that enables us to move up and down in this dimension. (Here I am using “partness” to refer to the way each holon is part of larger holons, and “wholeness” to refer to the way each holon is a whole in itself.)

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was a student of Tillich. Building on Tillich's definitions of love and power, King said "Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites--polar opposites--so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. Now we've got to get this thing right. What we need to realise is that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anaemic. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time." This statement by King inspired me to write my second book, *Power and Love*.

Radical collaboration employs power when stakeholders are each enabled to assert their wholeness: their purpose, perspective, and position. The third practice or "do" of radical collaboration is *Build Collective Power*, which means working together with other stakeholders to find and enact ways to transform the system. The opposite "don't do" is *Force Your Way*, which means just trying to get everyone to do what *you* want them to do.

Radical collaboration *must* work with power. To avoid working with power is to ignore the reality of self-realisation and self-interest. But working with power is not straightforward. When different people and organisations, each with their own purpose, try to collaborate, they *usually* produce competition and conflict. The practice required to work with power is the fourth one, *Work Your Differences*, which means working through or around our differences. The opposite is *Demand Agreement*, which assumes, incorrectly, that progress requires agreement. We need to work with power, but this is not easy.

Justice

And working with love and power are also not enough to be able to transform social systems. The theory and practice I outlined in *Power and Love* were also inadequate: again I was *missing* something. And again it was Arenas who pointed this out to me when she told me: "I see a certain naïveté in your vision of a balance between power and love, in which things can be improved leaving everyone satisfied. How can that be? In a context of great imbalance or inequity, as in Guatemala, how can poverty be uprooted without some sectors of society being very dissatisfied? It is their economic interests which will be affected. I think that balance and satisfaction for all are possible in the realm of discourse, but not when you go down to 'real' politics in a context of enormous inequality."

What I was missing was justice. Philosopher Nancy Fraser says: "Justice is never actually encountered directly. By contrast, we do experience injustice and it is through this that we form an idea of justice." Justice, then, is the drive to reduce injustice. Injustice occurs in all societies. Injustice is some people using their power to exclude or limit or suffocate the power of others. The global Black Lives Matter social transformation movement was sparked by an egregious example of such suffocation, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for nine minutes until he died.

At COP27, justice was the third driving force. The injustice of the climate crisis is also egregious: the people who are suffering most from climate change, primarily in the Global South, are not the people who caused the change and have the means to adapt to the change. This injustice has been at the center of climate negotiations since the 1992 signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which recognised the "common but differentiated responsibilities" of different countries. Many stakeholders in the South are unwilling to collaborate with those in the North unless this injustice is properly addressed. The most important breakthroughs at COP27 were the agreements to bridge this gap by providing funds from the North to the South to compensate for historical loss and damage

due to climate change, and to enable “just transitions” away from fossil fuels to mitigate additional climate change.

Justice is required for collaboration to be able to transform social systems. Transforming systems effectively requires the participation of all stakeholders. Stakeholders who think that they are being treated unfairly will not participate: they will not contribute their power to effecting transformation, or they will use their power to try to block transformation. Collaboration that does not harness justice will not transform social systems.

Everyone is driven by justice—although they have different understandings of who is being treated unfairly (often they’re focused on how they or their organisation or community is being treated unfairly). In 2010, I started a project in Thailand to deal with the violent political conflict between pro- and anti-government forces aligned to different political, economic, and regional interests. The organisers of the project had set up a series of meetings for me with leaders from politics, business, the military, the media, the aristocracy, and civil society. For three full days I sat in a bright windowless hotel meeting room and talked with these people one after another. I was bewildered by this experience of listening to a series of strong-minded persons giving me their views of this complicated conflict in a context and culture that were unfamiliar to me. But later I realised that what I had been hearing was simple: every single person had been trying to get me on their side by convincing me that they were right and their opponents were wrong—and, more specifically, that they were being treated unfairly and were the victims of injustice. They were not simply complaining to me: they were appealing to our common concern for fairness.

Scholar Amartya Sen begins his book *The Idea of Justice* as follows: “In the little world in which children have their existence,’ says Pip in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, ‘there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt as injustice.’ The strong perception of manifest injustice applies to adult human beings as well. What moves us, reasonably enough, is not the realisation that the world falls short of being completely just—which few of us expect—but that there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate.”

Justice arises from the reality that an unfair social system prevents people from participating as peers and that such unfairness produces a drive to transform that system. Futurist Willis Harman said that this drive kicks in when people shift from seeing a situation as “unfortunate” to seeing it as “unacceptable.” If a third dimension of social systems is such fairness, then justice is the drive that enables us to move back and forth in this dimension. Justice transforms structures so that more people can employ more of their power and more of their love. Justice does this through cultural recognition, economic redistribution, and political representation. In moving from apartheid to democracy in South Africa, for example, the change in social structures included—albeit imperfectly—all three of these: recognition of the humanity and therefore the human rights of Black people, redistribution of economic opportunities to include them, and their representation in leadership roles.

Radical collaboration must work with justice. To avoid working with justice is to ignore the reality and consequences of injustice. But working with justice is not straightforward. Different people often have incommensurately different ideas of how to assess fairness and who is being treated unfairly. And it is difficult to transform social structures when the people who are benefiting from the status quo fight to maintain their power, positions, and privileges. We need to work with justice, but this is not easy.

Conclusion

Let me summarise: Transforming social systems collaboratively requires working with love and power and justice. This is the theory and practice that I started to articulate in my most recent book, *Facilitating Breakthrough*, and that I am continuing to work on now.

All three of these drives are present in all social systems. I feel all three of these drives within myself and I see all three of them on the front page of every day's newspaper. If you're trying to transform a social system and you aren't able to grasp and work with these all of drives, then you will find yourself confused and frustrated. Trying to move through social space while pretending that some of these drives don't exist is like trying to move through physical space while pretending that gravity doesn't exist: you won't get where you are trying to go and you will probably fall down and hurt yourself. All of the impactful social transformation processes I have been involved in over the last 30 years have engaged all three drives. The Mont Fleur process in South Africa, for example, was driven by love to overcome apartheid separation, power to engage a broad group of leaders in realising the national transformation, and justice to rectify racial discrimination.

Many people focus only on love or power or justice. This is always a mistake. Working only with love—ignoring power and justice—produces results that are, as King put it, sentimental and anaemic. In the climate field, for example, working only with love means paying attention only to the crisis at the level of the planet, and ignoring what different stakeholders are able and willing to do to address the crisis. In an organisation, working only with love means paying attention only to the unity and performance of the organisation as a whole, and ignoring what different team members are able and willing to do.

Working only with power—ignoring love and justice—produces results that are reckless and abusive. In climate, working only with power means paying attention only to the interests and actions of each stakeholder, and ignoring the impacts of their power on others and on the planet. In an organisation, working only with power means paying attention only to the interests and actions of each team member, and ignoring the impacts of their power on others and on the organisation.

And working only with justice—ignoring love and power—produces results that are legalistic and sterile. In climate, working only with justice means paying attention only to rectifying past wrongs, and ignoring what can and must be done now with an eye to the future. In an organisation, working only with justice means paying attention only to treating every team member equitably, and ignoring what they can and must be do now for themselves and for the organisation.

Working with love, power, and justice together is never easy because these three drives are in permanent tension. The fifth practice of radical collaboration is therefore *Care For Yourself*, which means attending to the human challenges of this work. The opposite is *Keep Pushing*, which means just continuously demanding more of yourself and others.

There is no stable static point of balance among love, power, and justice; we have to create a dynamic balance. We have to move back and forth among these drives and to discover our way forward through trial and error. Pragmatic compromise is always required. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping offered an image for such movement when he described the transformation of the Chinese economy towards “socialism with Chinese characteristics” by saying, “We are crossing the river feeling for stones.” The sixth practice is *Discover Ways Forward*, which means employing love, power, and justice as each is needed, taking one step at a time, learning and adjusting as we go. The opposite is *Drive Straight Ahead*, which means deciding on a course of action and continuing on this course regardless of whether it is working.

How do we create the love, power, and justice required to transform social systems? The good news is that we do not have to: every person has within themselves all three of these drives, and so we don't need to create them but only to unblock them. This crucial insight was given to me in 2017 by priest Francisco de Roux, just after he had been appointed as

president of the Colombian Commission for Truth, Reconciliation, and Non-Repetition. I was facilitating a workshop of Colombian stakeholders to discover how they could contribute to transforming their country to address its long-standing political, economic, and cultural conflicts. On the morning of the first day of the workshop, the participants were tense: they had major disagreements about what had happened and what needed to happen. Some of them were enemies, many of them had strong prejudices, and most of them felt at risk in being there. But they had come anyway because they wanted to make a difference.

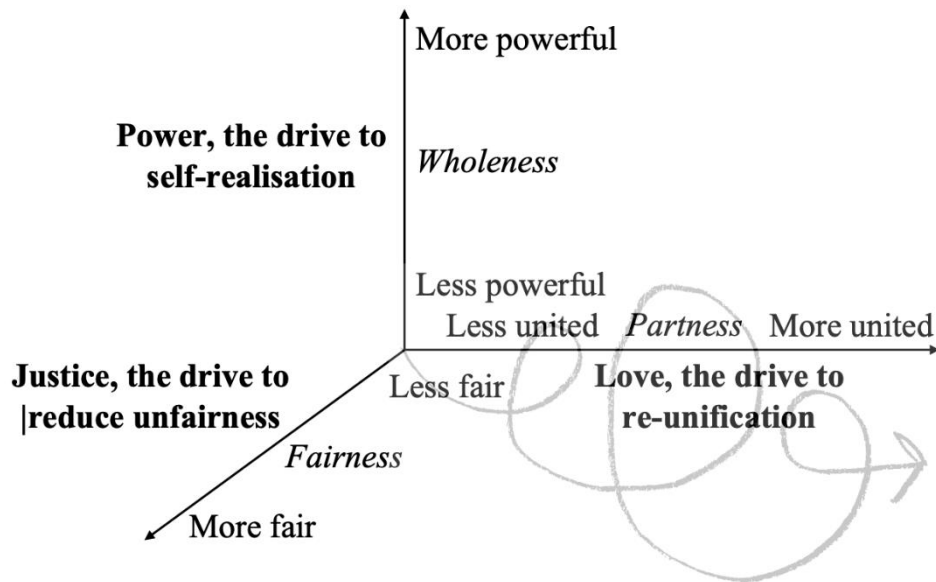
By the end of the day, the participants had begun to relax and to hope that they could do something worthwhile together. Then, when we all got up to go to dinner, de Roux rushed up to me, overflowing with excitement. “Now I see what you are doing!” he said. “You are removing the obstacles to the expression of the mystery!” De Roux was saying that enabling social transformation does not require creating love, power, and justice: it only requires removing the obstacles to the expression of these universal innate drives.

The last of the seven practices of radical collaboration is *Share Hopeful Stories*, meaning offering images of what is possible that help people find their way to move forward together. The opposite is *Assume Common Language*, meaning just dictating to others what they must do. The whole set of seven practices is a way to remove the obstacles to the expression of love, power, and justice.

Here, then, is the short version of the hopeful story I want to share. It is possible to transform social systems through radical collaboration. We do this through unblocking love and power and justice, and through feeling our way forward, towards a world with more love and more power and more justice. Making progress in this way is not straightforward or easy, but it can be done. And it must be done: it is the only way to collaboratively address the daunting challenges of our time.



Radical Collaboration Transforms Social Systems through Working with Love and Power and Justice





SEVEN PRACTICES FOR RADICAL COLLABORATION

Do

inclusive,
cooperative,
responsive



Don't

insular,
competitive,
rigid

