

“How Can I Help Neurodivergent Communities? It’s so overwhelming.”

Jessica Leza

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I was asked today: what can I do to support Autistic and disabled people now, as the Trump Administration and their lackeys move to enact ableist and eugenicist policies, attempt to dismantle 504, decrease access to psychiatric treatment, and claim that neurodivergent and disabled people pose a threat to the US’s existence and “American way of life.”

I wish I had an empowering, confident, concrete, accurate, straightforward answer like some type of activist cheat code. Instead, I have a more amorphous idea. I cannot tell you what to do. I can only give you a shove in what I think is the right direction and hope I put in just enough push to give you the momentum you’re looking for without toppling you over.

A Theory of Social Change

Currently, I suspect that in order to decide how to act to create social change, you need some type of conceptualization or theory of how social change occurs. A significant pillar in my theory of social change rests on the idea that “people with little access to traditional sources of power can and do change the world,” as said by Mark and Paul Enger in *This is An Uprising*.

But how?

Forgive me for referencing the Bible outside of a religious context, but it provides a good metaphor. In Judges 16:26, Samson is held captive and says to a young servant boy who was leading him by the hand, “Take me to where I can feel the pillars supporting the temple, so I can lean against them.”

In the Bible, Samson has super-strength, and by leaning on the pillars, he actually knocks the whole pillar down, and because the pillars were what held the building up, the temple collapsed. We can consider this a metaphor for the status quo or that big social problem we are trying to solve, the elephant we are trying to eat. The status quo is not inevitable and it is held up by a multitude of pillars, some of them holding a lot of weight, some only a little. To achieve social change, we must knock down enough pillars to bring down the building. This can be done in different ways. You can go after the biggest, most-weight-bearing pillar, focus on that as a large group, and bring the building down. But it might be more realistic for some people to break off into smaller groups and knock down some of the small pillars. Sure, you have to knock down more of them, but they are smaller and easier and need fewer people. Or, maybe you have a lot of people chipping away at that big pillar and people breaking off in shifts to chip away at medium and small pillars. This is a diversity of tactics. We don’t have to all go after the same pillar using the same tool; we just have to make sure we are focused on knocking down those pillars.

This is why I cannot tell you what to do precisely, clearly, and concretely. There is no way for me to know which pillar you are best suited to tackle.

Social and cultural change predates governmental or legislative change in the US. Our laws change in response to the culture - the culture does not change in response to the laws. Change the culture, change the country. But how, when the US is an oligarchy (rule by a small number of elites, in contrast to democratic rule by, of, and for the people)?

There is a theory that only 5% of a population is needed to turn out on the streets in order to topple a regime. Whether this is precisely true is less relevant than the fact that it is practically or functionally true. You do not need to persuade every person you meet to join a movement for change or support a cause. Some people are unmovable, do not expend your energy on them. Find out who is moveable, and move them at the rate and distance they are movable. We do this in small opportunities. Small moments. This is what I always come back to as a slyness, a sly advocacy, where you are staying aware as you move through life of little opportunities. Small moments, small conversations. Like Planting seeds. When we plant seeds, we know not every one will germinate, sprout, and turn into a mature, adult plant. Even under the best conditions, some seeds will not germinate. Farmers focus on the seeds that do germinate. We must do the same. Movements for change do not need to be perfect to be ultimately victorious – but they do need to be creative and committed.

Praxis

Praxis is your values in action. It's the way you act out or live out a theory. Praxis is when a tree protector lives in a tree to prevent a logger from cutting it down. Praxis is also when you pull over to the side of the road and get out to pluck a turtle out of the road and put him in the grass near the creekbed. Praxis is also when your angry client calls you a bitch, but you don't hold it against them or let it provoke you to mistreat them because you are living out the theory of unconditional positive regard in therapy.

When we ask, "What can I do to help Autistic people in this horrible timeline?" we are asking, "what does praxis look like right now, when things are so frightening and terrible and big?"

Praxis looks like keeping your eyes on the prize.

DO NOT GIVE UP. I know you may have nihilistic thoughts and feelings. It's OK to have those and you don't have to run from them, but you need to cope with them in a way that will not destroy you. I am not going to tell you how to cope – I am not going to tell you to journal and go on a walk and take a bubble bath. However, I am going to tell you not to hurt yourself, and I am going to tell you that it's perfectly acceptable to use your nihilism to survive and stay motivated not to hurt yourself. For example, there is nothing wrong with staying alive merely because you want to outlive Elon Musk. Please. Outlive your enemies. Every single one of them. Stay alive out of pure spite. There is nothing wrong with this. In fact, I have a lot of respect for you if you are hanging in there on sheer willpower alone and I think you should keep doing this regardless of whether others find it pleasing or not. Stay alive.

Keep your eyes on the prize also means stay focused and stay committed to the idea that social change is possible and that you have an important role in making it happen. You might not know what that role is right yet. That's OK. Sometimes we don't know what our role is until after we already did it. Just stay focused on the goal. Know that even if it isn't easy or realistic or probably, that it is possible, and that possibility, a statistical non-zero, won't fly by you without you at least trying to reach out and grab it.

Keep your eyes on the prize means it's not going to be a streak of easy victories. This is not one of those

singalong movies where we are going to save the camp from closing by having a talent show. There will be losses and you will feel defeated and you can't give up because of that.

Praxis looks like a diversity of tactics.

As previously mentioned, using a diversity of tactics to create social change means that as individuals and small groups, you examine your strengths and resources and act on those strengths and resources in a way that best leverages them towards promoting social change, and I do the same, and together we use different methods and approaches towards the same cause. We are knocking down different pillars, and we are knocking down the same pillars using different tools.

This is not an elephant that you need to eat by yourself, but it's an elephant that you can take a bite out of. Only you can best know where you will bite. What makes your bite powerful is combining it with those of others. This is why we organize.

Praxis looks like delivering a demand to power.

One of the easiest things that most people can do is to contact people in power, and most especially anyone you have a connection to that strengthens your influence and connection with. Traditionally, this means contacting elected and unelected government representatives, like senators and representatives, but it's important to think beyond politicians. In the US, businesses have a lot of power over the government, and pressuring businesses at their pain points can lead to faster change than calling politicians, like my senator, Ted Cruz, who couldn't care one whit for the opinions of their constituents. Pressuring a business can look like participating in, talking about, and encouraging participation in a boycott, but it also can look like a polite letter encouraging the business to make a public statement or commitment or asking the business to take some other form of concrete action or change. For example, it might look like asking MT organizations and businesses to make public statements educating the public about the value of Section 504 and taking a stand against striking it down.

Frederick Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." More often than not, businesses and organizations will not change or utilize their power and platform to demand change unless there is a demand placed. A demand will seldom be enough, and praxis looks like considering what type of pressure on a business or organization will best result in your desired results.

Praxis looks like community connection, organizing, and mutual aid.

One of the ways we make social change and protect is each other is through community and connection with each other. Some people call this organizing. Whether you call it organizing or not, forming connections with others, and maintaining them, and letting those connections help you mutually survive can be a powerful way to promote social change. Do you know your neighbors? Do you know who would need the most help if a disaster struck, or what types of help people on your street would need? Mutual aid in the form of financial exchange and support keeps people alive, but mutual aid is not a phrase that means charity or donations. It can be extremely powerful to help others in your neighborhood and community and to understand how your community can help you.

Perhaps you are asking, "How does getting to know your neighbors or people in your community help Autistic people?"

First, I don't know where you live, but I am willing to bet there are Autistic people living in your neighborhood. Connecting with your local community isn't just something that can feel good; it's a way to learn more about what people in your community are going through.

When we are thinking of eating this huge elephant of ableism, of eugenics, of repealing legal disability protections and denying access to healthcare and everything that is happening in the US and other parts of the world, and it is so big, so overwhelming, so anxiety-provoking. It feels so impossible to figure out how to "fix the problem." But just like in therapy, we might break a big task down into smaller parts to help our clients; we can do this ourselves in our approach to praxis or living out our values with the goal of tangible and material social change.

When you connect more with your neighbors or your local community, you might start noticing some things that are impacting the specific Autistic people in your community that are smaller, more concrete, more actionable. You might notice, for example, that there is a housing issue with a specific group home in which people's rights are being violated. You might notice that there is a concrete, realistic, feasible solution that some people have put forward. As a result, you might recognize this opportunity to use your voice, your small authority as a therapist or a community member or an adult who speaks English fluently, or your other strengths or resources to push for this issue with local people in power to fix the issue.

Will doing this stop the fascist takeover? I wish. But it will sharpen your skills and help you figure out what you are capable of, what you're willing and able to do, and what works and doesn't work for you and your community. It will connect you to people and open the door to larger actions. Those people you meet and work with on your local issue may be plugged in to larger actions and events, or it gives you numbers to call when you decide to organize your own event or protest.

Of course, there are already large movements performing large and small actions around the country, and for some people, these larger organized protests will be easier to attend.

Community connection also means workplace connection. This can mean putting effort into maintaining a good work relationship with those you wouldn't otherwise get along with, so that you can work together for better workplace conditions, but also because when you build these relationships, coworkers will be more willing to listen when you are called to advocate.

Praxis looks like sitting in the road with your neighbors and community members.

Praxis often looks like a protest. Protests can look like a die-in at a congressional office, a banner unfurled on a freeway overpass, or sitting in the road with hundreds of your neighbors to stop traffic. Only one person is needed to protest. Connect with your community to learn about local protests.

When you attend protests, remember: wear a mask to protect yourself from infectious disease and infringement of your rights using the surveillance and police state. Do not wear distinctive clothing – dress as generically as possible (for example, a plain black t-shirt and pants with no brands showing. Leave your phone at home. Do not take or publish photos of people's faces in a protest.

Praxis looks like a million sly little acts of everyday life alongside the biggest, bravest actions.

Another reason I cannot tell you prescriptively what to do is that the speed and intensity of traumatic policies and events are occurring at such a high speed that above all it means we have to be flexible and adaptive. This is one of the other benefits of connecting and reaching out to others, locally or globally, and strengthening

those connections. Those people around you can sustain you and help you be creative and adapt to events as they come down the pipeline.

All that said, I will leave you with a checklist with ideas that I hope will help you with your ongoing brainstorming as you try to respond, adapt, and support others while protecting your family and keeping yourself alive. These are just ideas. Some of them might not be a good fit for you.

For music therapists in the US in particular:

- ☐ **Wear a mask.** Preferably, wear a respirator. I like the 3M aura. It's an N95 mask with a foam piece on the nose, for a better fit. It's great if you wear glasses because the fit means your glasses don't fog up.
As I write this on February 18, 2025, in the last week's data reported in the US, more than 900 people died of covid; flu, RSV, bacterial pneumonia, measles, norovirus, tuberculosis, and other diseases are also widely spreading. We are also on the brink of a human bird flu pandemic. The state is now going so far as to attempt to criminalize wearing a mask. This makes it one of the most radical and most helpful acts you can do at the moment.
- ☐ Make a plan for each of your individual clients, groups, or services by considering which areas of new government policies are high-risk for that client and what you, as a music therapist, can offer within your scope of practice. This can help you determine in which areas you need to gather new information or resources, changes you might make to the treatment plan, etc.
- ☐ Do not comply in advance. Do not anticipate the demands of fascism and attempt to offer them part of what they want in an attempt to whet their appetite. Do not anticipate the demands of fascism and offer them everything they want, before they even make the demand.
- ☐ Learn about malicious compliance. There may be a situation in which you are put in an unreasonable situation. Sometimes, malicious compliance is a reasonable response to an unreasonable demand.
- ☐ Be noncompliant. In situations where you are being asked to do something illegal or unethical, choose noncompliance. You might disguise this as slowness, a lapse of memory, lost paperwork, missed deadlines, dropped calls, etc. "I was just following orders" is not an acceptable defense. Protect your clients.
- ☐ Contact AMTA or other MT organizations and ask them to make statements or take actions in response to issues like the challenge to Section 504, or the Trump Admin's statement that Autistic people and people with ADHD, asthma, and chronic illness are a threat to the American way of life.
- ☐ If you have a role in an MT organization, determine what your organization can do to defend Section 504. Then DO THAT.
- ☐ Consider in which ways it is safe and appropriate for you to advocate within your workplace, and with different people within your workplace. There are many different types of workplaces. You may have some environments where you can speak openly and safely about social justice issues and some in which doing so might put more than just your job at risk. While political topics are often discouraged at work, these are issues that impact clients and you may be able to bring the issue up in relation to client care. For example, in some public school district classrooms, a safe way to start a conversation might be asking, "Do we have a plan for how it might impact [client] if they remove Section 504?"
- ☐ Contact your elected representatives. Emailing is easy, but a phone call is harder to ignore, and a postcard or a letter takes up physical space in their office.
- ☐ Know your rights regarding interactions with ICE. If you see ICE out in the community, and you know that it is ICE, a lot of people recommend that you can yell "la migra!" to warn people. But let's face it. You're a music therapist. You can yell it, and then follow up with singing it, maybe make up a little song with some yelling and some singing, do some clapping. If you have a ukulele, pull it out and sing your "la migra is here, everybody run away" song. Make a big scene. Get your friends clapping and stomping

and singing along. You and I both know you probably have your cart with you. Get those tambourines out, girl. It's the moment you've been waiting for.

For everyone:

☐ If you have personal connections to businesses or organizations, consider your ability to influence, pressure, or persuade that business to take specific statements and actions. Some might shy away from such assertiveness, but a reminder that it is good and just to influence people and institutions to do the right thing. This could mean writing a letter to a business you often hire, or it could mean inviting your cousin over for ice cream and to brainstorm about what her small business can do to help disabled people in the community, or it could mean selling your sorority sister on the idea of hosting a fundraising benefit gala to raise funds for your local LGBTQ+ community center.

☐ When you hear someone saying something terrible, speak up and offer a contradictory view. Try to adapt your message and delivery flexibly according to your audience/conversation partner, but be gentle with yourself as you navigate these conversations. Even when you try to meet someone where they are at, things may not go well. Try to be thankful for these opportunities to experience humility and use it as an opportunity to learn and develop your skills, rather than a personal failure or inadequacy.

BUT REMEMBER, I am referring to in-person conversations with people you know and interact with casually and regularly. You are not obligated to counter every ugly comment online and usually the best option online is to block the account. If you choose to discuss these issues online, choose your battles wisely. Spend the most time on the people who are persuadable, people you actually know and have a relationship with, and people with whom you are confident they will not lash out in an attempt to ruin your life. **Do not engage with trolls who ask questions not to learn but to demean and waste your time. Learn what sealioning is and do not participate in conversations with sealioning interlocutors. Arguing with nazis may not be safe – some of these people cross the line.** Finally, remember that when people are ugly to you online, they are often reacting to their own fears and insecurities and recreating interactions they have previously experienced rather than delivering a genuine insight about you.

☐ Protect your privacy. Be cautious about what you post online.

☐ Donate to mutual aid fundraisers for Autistic individuals, Autistic-led organizations, and Autistic-led events.

☐ Remember the high overlap between Autistic and trans identity. Fight for trans rights, support trans organizations, and remain noncompliant when the state attempts to demand your transphobia.

☐ Organize and participate in protests and targeted boycotts.

☐ Take care of yourself. This doesn't mean using the commodity model of self-care, in which you purchase indulgence commodities for pampering leisure time. It means cultivating a practice of respect for your needs, like listening to your hunger signals and feeding yourself nutritious, enjoyable food or recognizing when it's time to turn everything off and lie in the dark under the softest blanket. Self-care often looks like being honest with yourself, saying no, and other annoying, easier-said-than-done best practices.

- ☐ Read books that will help you grow and mature your activism, like *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century* by Mark and Paul Engler, *Nonviolence: History of a Dangerous Idea* by Mark Kurlansky, or *Let This Radicalize You* by Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba.

Use your creative skills:

- ☐ Write essays, blog posts, social media posts, professional communications, press releases, and other forms of writing that draw attention to issues like the need to defend Section 504. Platform other writers who are working in this area.
- ☐ Write and share music about these issues. Collaborate with other musicians on larger projects that defend disability justice issues. Share and promote other musicians who are doing this work. Perform your work publicly.
- ☐ Make art. Make political art. You don't have to be a great artist. Put on your favorite music and make ugly, amateur art. Give it to your friends. Don't worry about making something to go in a gallery. Make something that is satisfying. Hang it up in the bathroom at the grocery store for strangers to see.

A Final Note

It is ridiculous to have written more than six pages knowing how, in the end, it can't help but be equally inadequate, incomplete, in need of revision, and cliché I think this question is so big and so much, and nothing I have said here is original or new, and this is a document that could be written and rewritten and there is a lot of room for improvement. Regardless, I hope that there has been something here to motivate you to believe that not only is there is a possibility for a better future for Autistic and non-autistic people alike, but there are ways in which you personally can play a role in bringing that future into reality. I look forward to hearing other people's ideas for how we can most effectively and tangibly support Autistic communities, especially ideas that require a group effort to make happen.