

THE PERSUADERS

At the Front Lines
of the Fight for
Hearts, Minds,
and Democracy

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for people to make mistakes in our movements." It was an unexpected comparison, the evangelism of her faith and the prison doors of her movement.

Now she said another thing that stayed with me. It had to do with people in the movement giving each other more space to pursue different theories of change. "My thing is like, 'You just got to take the risk of opening your heart as much as possible and getting as many people in here as possible, and respecting those in the movement that don't want to do the hard work.' But then letting the people in the movement who are willing to do the work do the work without being criticized for wanting to do the work and getting the white woke, folks that are in the movement that are genuinely the transformed white people who have come along and have evolved to be part of doing that work with us. And I think that we haven't figured out a coordinated way to do that.

"So that's kind of where I'm at," Sarsour said.

II

Loretta Ross

One day back in the 1970s, Loretta Ross received a letter from a prisoner she didn't know.

Ross—who is now in her late sixties and a pioneering activist, theorist in the Black radical feminist tradition, and co-creator of the theory of reproductive justice—was, at the time, working at the D.C. Rape Crisis Center in Washington. The center provided direct support to women via a hotline and pursued system-level change in parallel, using street theater to move public opinion and lobbying to influence public policy. Its mission was a world free from sexual violence.

A letter arrived from the Lorton Reformatory, a prison complex in Virginia that housed inmates from D.C. It was signed by a man named William Fuller who was more than a decade into a long sentence for rape and murder. The gist of his letter, as Ross remembered it, was this: "On the outside, I raped women. Now on the inside, I rape men. I want to stop raping. Can you help me?"

When the letter arrived, it befuddled Ross. For all its activities helping rape victims, the center had never conceived of its work as encompassing helping men not rape. "First, it sat there on my desk for a couple

of weeks as I tried to figure out, 'What am I going to say to this guy?'" Ross recalled in a twenty-three-hour-long oral history recorded by Smith College. "My first immediate visceral reaction is, 'We don't even have the money to help rape victims. How dare a rapist ask us for help?'"

It was an understandable impulse for Ross, who knew the pain and the enormity of sexual violence all too personally. When she was eleven, after visiting an amusement park in San Antonio with her Girl Scout troop and losing track of the group, she was raped by a man who offered her a ride home. Years later, an older cousin sexually abused her, which led to pregnancy, which in turn cost her a coveted scholarship she had earned to Radcliffe. Later, as a student at Howard University, she was gang-raped. At that university, she had immersed herself in books and ideas that explained the deep, endemic nature of sexual violence in a male-dominated world, the vastness of the societal affliction of which William Fuller was but a small symptom.

At first, Ross rejected the idea of investing her time helping one random man rape less, and when she raised Fuller's request with her colleagues, they agreed. But the decision somehow didn't settle the matter. Something about the dilemma they had been presented hung in the air. "We talked about it at the staff level," Ross recalled, "and we talked about it and talked about it with the board, talked about it and talked about it and talked about it. What should we say to this guy?" If Fuller's question wouldn't go away, it was perhaps because, in a few words, it had planted a doubt about the center's theory of change. Its mission was a world without rape, and its daily work was to support women at the personal and policy levels. But now the letter prompted a question that Ross felt hadn't been considered: "You could bandage women up all you want to, but if you don't stop men from raping, what's the point? Better bandages?"

So Ross decided that she would go check Fuller out. She drove to Lorton, subjected herself to the searches of her person and bags, and was asked whom she wished to see. Ross remembered holding up a brochure and telling them, "I'm from the D.C. Rape Crisis Center, and I want to talk to your rapist." (In fact, there were several rapists in the prison.)

She was led into a room with Fuller and a handful of other male prisoners. Fuller struck her at once. He was six feet four and ripped. "They beef up in prison to keep from being victims, and he was the master

rapist in this prison," Ross said in the oral history. "I mean, everybody was scared of William Fuller. I was scared of William Fuller. Gorgeous, though, very good-looking Black man. But apparently when he was eighteen, he raped, sodomized, and murdered this woman."

Now in his thirties, with time on his hands, he had become a reader—including of feminist texts. The feminist analysis of rape had influenced him, Ross realized, with some measure of shock. "His argument was that 'I believe that rape is a form of power and control, and I want to know how not to be a rapist.'" He told them rape for him was not about gender, because he would rape men or women; it was about his ability to dominate.

The meeting took Ross and her colleagues aback. Fuller somehow changed the women's minds about the possibility of changing him in turn. But now, having crossed that threshold, they confronted new questions. The risk of not doing this kind of work is leaving a problem to fester. The risk of doing such work is that the work would end up capitulating somehow, being co-opted. "We didn't want to be used," Ross recalled in the oral history. So Ross and her team drafted some guidelines.

Rule No. 1: "Nothing we could do could help them get out of jail, because nobody wanted these rapists on the street again. Not us." That meant no letters, petitions, parole requests. That wasn't the point. They weren't teaching prisoners not to rape so that the prisoners could get off earlier. They were teaching them not to rape to have fewer rape victims. Rule No. 2: "We weren't bringing anything into this jail for you. I don't care if you're dying. We couldn't bring you bandages, shoes, cigarettes, nothing." Rule No. 3: The only exception to Rule No. 2 was feminist literature.

They brought feminist texts into the prison, where Fuller organized a reading group—"five guys, all rapists, like this little clique he controlled," Ross recalled. A rotating contingent of Ross and her colleagues drove down to Lorton every Friday afternoon for a discussion circle with the rapists. They stuck with it for two years.

Eventually, other programs around the country would emulate the model—all because Ross overcame that initial, justified instinct to focus on those hurt by the problem, not those perpetrating it.

Several years later, she was walking around Washington, D.C. "I

hear this big, booming bass voice hollering out my name," she said in the Smith testimony. "My head whips around, and walking towards me is William Fuller. I didn't know whether to run, to cry, to holler, or what, because I never thought this guy would get out of jail in my lifetime." He was indeed out and working—in construction. He had continued to read—in fact, had gone back to school. He looked whole.

"He was a transformed man," Ross said in the oral history. "But he did that himself. I mean, we did not do that for William. He did that himself. Because he came into prison barely literate, and he taught himself to read, and it was through his practice, process of teaching himself to read that he had encountered this feminist literature. And so he was his own mentor. He was the source of his own determination and genius."

Fuller had done something improbable, but it was hard to imagine his doing it without Ross's gamble. She had made a considered decision that if one were serious about ending the phenomenon of rape in the world, one might try to work with people who perpetuated that phenomenon and whose minds were the least likely to change. Just as Sarsour thought of her work as being to build power around white domination rather than coax people away from it, until with the march she decided to try, so, too, Ross thought of her work as being to protect women from rape, until she opened herself to the possibility of helping men not rape. It wasn't her duty, wasn't her mission as she had understood it, wasn't likely to succeed, wasn't deserved, wasn't a justifiable diversion of resources from women, wasn't her theory of change, wasn't, wasn't, wasn't. She did it anyway. She sought to change a mind, on her terms, in her way.

Ross spoke of the episode as an early, instructive moment in the storied career she would go on to have as an activist, thinker, and institution builder. After running the Rape Crisis Center, she worked for the National Organization for Women, ran programs for the National Black Women's Health Project, served on the D.C. Commission on Women, led research on the Ku Klux Klan and other right-wing groups for the Center for Democratic Renewal, and founded the National Center for Human Rights Education. She wrote several books. She was best known as a leading activist in the reproductive justice movement, which, with echoes of the future fights over the Women's March,

challenged a pro-choice movement dominated by white women and focused on abortion rights, to the exclusion, Ross argued, of "the necessary enabling conditions to realize these rights," including "issues of economic justice, the environment, immigrants' rights, disability rights, discrimination based on race and sexual orientation."

As Ross fought these fights, the questions she had confronted when she opened William Fuller's letter would resurface again and again: When fighting for justice and change, how do you bring others along—those who are not there yet, and those who are actively complicit? In the movement to end oppression, is there space for imperfect allies? How imperfect is too imperfect? Do people who are part of a problem have a place in the search for solutions?

Like Sarsour, Ross was a persuader. She wanted her movement to be bold, unapologetic, ambitious, fearless, and, at the same time, more inviting than it often was. And, just as Sarsour had come to that idea of a movement with more bridges because of the bridges she had crossed, so, too, Ross's ideas seemed to flow from her own spanning of worlds.

Ross was born in 1953, to a family that wore the identities of Black, immigrant, and military. Her father had come to America from Jamaica and was a military man who moved the family constantly—Texas, Oklahoma, California. Ross did first grade at three different schools, in three different states. In most of these settings, Ross recalled being surrounded mostly by white people. She had little exposure to a Black community and only a faint awareness of race until she was older. "All my dad ever wanted to do was to assimilate," Ross said in the oral history. "All he ever wanted to do was to be the best G.I. he could be. He was a hyperpatriot. I mean, we were the ones that, you know, flew the American flag on Memorial Day. We were the ones that went to the gun shows."

Ross credits her childhood with shaping a comfort with navigating difference. "It wasn't something I had to learn," she recalled in the oral history. "It was something that I grew up with that I can now apply, that it wasn't like, 'Oh, now I've got to learn how to get along with white people because I grew up in an all-Black environment.' That's not true. Nor did I have to learn how to get along with Black people

because I was living in an all-white environment. That's just not true. And so I was drawn to work that brought people together."

Ross's parents also shaped the persuasive instincts she would bring to her activism. Each of them was politically complicated, a vessel of clashing ideas, and she grew to understand that you could win them over by pitting one thing they believed against another thing they believed. Her father was highly conservative, "the classic immigrant who was more conservative than other African Americans," she said in the oral history. He was a member of the National Rifle Association. Ross's mother was a born-again Christian, "probably against every progressive value I tend to stand for." But both parents also supported Jesse Jackson's campaign for president in 1984, presumably because he was a minister. In fact, Ross said, her mother supported Jackson even as she sent money to another, differently oriented pastor, the right-wing fundamentalist Pat Robertson.

Growing up this way shaped an attitude in Ross that was realistic but never fatalistic about the difficulty of changing minds. She and her parents saw the world differently. But sometimes there were cracks that let a new thought in. "With the right words, with the right persuasion, I could convince them to join me," she told me. "Like when my father retired from the military and he found out that the government had privatized his health care, when they had promised him that he'd have health care for life—except when he needed to go into a nursing home. Then he was more than willing to listen to me about a human right to health care, probably in a way that he wouldn't have listened when he didn't need health care."

Ross developed more awareness of racism as a teenager, attending a high school named after Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. The school actually held mock "slave auctions," Ross recalled, "where you bid on your classmates and they got to be your slave for a day." She protested that. The school also held two separate proms, one white themed and one Black themed, though anyone could attend both. But it was only later, at Howard University, that Ross's racial and political consciousness truly blossomed.

She read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, by Alex Haley, and *The Black Woman*, by Toni Cade Bambara, and felt transformed. "It was like a whole new world had been opened up to me," she recalled in

the Smith testimony, "because I had not thought of myself as—I don't want to seem silly as saying I hadn't thought of myself as Black or a woman before I read those books, but the politics of being Black, the politics of being a Black woman, I hadn't really thought about up until my freshman year in college."

She got involved with Black nationalist politics and tenant organizing in Washington. She was part of a Marxist-Leninist discussion circle called the D.C. Study Group and an antiapartheid organization called the South Africa Support Project. She became an informed and fierce critic of capitalism and patriarchy, white supremacy and imperialism.

Ross's growing immersion in theory and activism gave her new frameworks for processing the sexual violence she had experienced as a young woman, as well as other systemic cruelties. While at Howard, she was sexually harassed by a professor demanding sex for a better grade. While trying to focus on her studies there, Ross had to struggle with her mother over custody of her own son because of family laws stacked against women. And she was rendered infertile by a flawed contraceptive implant called the Dalkon Shield, which inspired her work on reproductive health.

So Ross had experienced the brutalities of living on the wrong end of power, and she had acquired, in time, a theoretical structure to make sense of those experiences. She also had, from her youth, an ability to negotiate a diverse array of people and their attitudes and an instinct for helping people evolve. All of this shaped the particular approach she went on to take as a professional activist to changing systems and changing minds, being more resistant than most to writing others off—a resistance that had been tested when she received Fuller's letter.

As Ross approached seventy, she had become a mentor to many young activists who reminded her of earlier incarnations of herself. And something that had come to worry her as she observed their battles was the phenomenon of callout culture within their movements and beyond them.

She first noticed it when, trying to connect with her grandson, she finally joined Facebook. (It didn't work. "Once I got on Facebook," Ross told me, "he decided that was for old folks.") As she scrolled, she

was taken aback by the rage and hostility she saw, especially from those ostensibly working to win other people over to their visions.

"People just say anything that they want to each other," she recalled telling a young organizer who worked with her.

"Oh, you mean calling out?" the activist replied.

"You named it?"

"Yeah, we talk about calling out all the time."

"Well, what do y'all do about it?" Ross remembered asking.

And, Ross told me, "she just kind of shrugged like, 'Ain't nothing we can do.'" (This answer didn't satisfy Ross, who began to research a book about the problem.)

The culture of callouts took her back to the 1960s, when the FBI, through its notorious COINTELPRO program, infiltrated leftist organizations and sought to destabilize them by, among other things, spreading gossip and lies. The goal, she said, was "to try to splinter us apart, to make us turn on each other. So the calling-out tendency has been there as long as I've been conscious. The question became, what do you do with that?"

Back in those days, Ross and her comrades would have SCCU sessions—for self-criticism, criticism, and then unity. In a meeting, before you could call out someone else, you had to explain how you had contributed to the situation. Before calling out, you looked in. You were compelled to take a broader view of complicity and fallibility. Then you could air your criticism. Finally, having aired things and hopefully cleared the air, the goal was unity. "This is an activist practice that we had to engage in to withstand COINTELPRO," she said.

So Ross had been thinking about the callout problem for a long time, and in recent years she had devoted time and research to investigating a term long used by activists but with a lower cultural profile—"calling in." She defined it this way: "For me, calling in is a callout done with love. You're actually holding people accountable. But you're doing so through the lens of love. It's not giving people a pass on accountability—like you don't have to pay attention to the fact that they said something racist or that they caused harm to another person. No. It's not ignoring it. But it's about seeing a pathway or multiple pathways for addressing accountability through the lens of love."

To Ross, calling in was far from the dominant approach these days.

The callout was ascendant in the political culture. It was not lost on Ross that an earlier connotation of the phrase "calling out" was challenging someone to a death duel. She was especially concerned by the problem of calling out in her own movement spaces. She worried about the threat to power building. She had fought on behalf of the marginalized for all of her adult life, and she was worried about lost occasions to come together and mobilize a broader coalition.

In her writing and activist work, she had developed a theory called "circles of influence," which was a guide for navigating these kinds of coalitions and alliances of the imperfect without blowing it all up. It was about how a political actor should deal with differences with people she called their 90-percenters, 75-percenters, 50-percenters, 25-percenters, and 0-percenters.

Ross defined her 90-percenters as people who shared most of her general worldview: "that capitalism is problematic, that racism and homophobia and transphobia and anti-immigrant bias are bad," and so on and so forth. The problem she observed with one's 90-percenters is that instead of focusing on the vast area of overlap, they fixated on the 10 percent divergence. "I might work on reproductive justice, while someone else works on immigrant rights or trans rights or whatever," she told me. "I think that the 90-percenters spend too much time trying to turn people into 100-percenters, which is totally unnecessary. I mean, there's certainly enough oppression to go around that we can all work on it in our own different ways and never run out of oppression."

Ross was speaking of those who say things like "If you're not working on my issue from my angle, then you're erasing my issue. If you're championing economic justice, you're problematic for minimizing race. If you're championing racial justice and fighting white supremacy, you don't post enough about the ills of capitalism. If you're focused on long-term climate change, you're neglecting the here-and-now needs of poor communities." She found this compulsion to make others into one's clones "totally unnecessary." "Why," she asked, "are we trying to get everybody to work on the thing we think is most important when there's a lot of stuff that needs to be changed?"

Outside that inner ring of the like-minded (if often fractions) was Ross's next circle—an activist's 75-percenters. "These are people who probably share a good portion of our worldview, but not totally," Ross

told me. "For example, I work on abortion rights. I work with the Girl Scouts, which probably doesn't talk about abortion a lot, but they talk about women's and girls' empowerment. So they would be my 75-percenters. I would not spend my time trying to persuade them to become a 90-percenter, since there's enough common ground for us to work on."

For an activist who works in coalition, 75-percenters require a further skill beyond what 90-percenters do. You don't merely have to tolerate others focusing on different things, attacking a broadly similar vision of the problem in their own, distinct way. You have to accept large islands of disagreement in a sea of assent. With your 75-percenters, there is still so much you can get done together. But Ross observed an excessive interest in that nonoverlapping 25 percent. It was a scab people wanted to keep picking instead of doing the things they could do. Or, just as often, a couple of 75-percenters, like, say, Ross and the Girl Scouts, would do something together, successfully bracketing their differences, only to have one of Ross's 90-percenters call her out for collaborating with a group that wasn't properly vocal on abortion rights. In other words, two people almost in perfect lockstep with each other would fall into a schism over one of those people finding common cause and getting something done with a near ally.

Next in Ross's schema was one's 50-percenters. The circle of agreement has shrunk drastically. "They're my people who share values with me, but what makes them 50-percenters is that they could use these values to go to the left or the right." Ross hadn't had to look far for her first 50-percenters: they were her parents. They shared core values around hard work, taking care of one another, and how you ought to treat people. But, depending on the issue of the day and the circumstances of their lives and what information sources they were taking in, those values could drive them to Jesse Jackson or Pat Robertson, to libertarianism or a view of health care as a right. You approach such people by first accepting they don't want the world you want. Their vision is different. But if you can understand their values and needs and look for openings, as when Ross's father fell into dread about his health care, you can, in addition to helping them, pry open a closed mind.

Then, in Ross's schema, came your 25-percenters. In the realm

of electoral politics, these are people on the diametrically opposite side from you. They don't share a vision with you, nor even a basic worldview, nor even necessarily fundamental values or language. They may use the exact same words and mean completely different things by them. "When I talk about patriotism and wearing a mask to keep my neighbors safe, they talk about liberty or their freedom to go get a haircut," Ross said. "We don't have enough common ground."

You may or may not need your 25-percenters; it depends on the situation at hand. If you do, there is, in Ross's schema, one valuable thing you have to work with: your 25-percenters still want to be seen as, and see themselves as, good people. "One of the things I learned in working against hate groups," Ross told me, "is that most of them start off every conversation with a Black person saying, 'I'm not a racist, but...' Internally, they actually do think they're good people, even though they're standing there in Klan robes. Part of my calling-in strategy for them would be to help them lean in to that internal exploration of themselves and show them how to bolster that self-perception of them being good people by walking them through examples: 'Well, if you saw a Black person that needed a kidney donation and you were a match, would you do it?' That kind of thing. Make them really question that interior set of values that they think they have and see if they're willing to actually go down that path of exploring those values. I find you don't make a lot of headway trying to convince them that they're racist, because they're just not willing to accept that about themselves at that time. But you can convince them, 'Well, if you want to be a good person, you've got to do good things.'"

For this group, there was one further prerequisite for success, Ross said. You had to take the fears of your 25-percenters seriously, even if you were appalled by those fears. "You have to spend a lot of time on the concept of fear, because a lot of people, particularly in that 25-percent category, operate from platforms of fear," she told me. "Fear of immigrants, fear of queers, fear of this, fear of that. And so you can have really productive conversations talking about their fears, but you have to take their fears seriously for them to even be able to listen to you. If you dismiss their fears, they don't listen. They don't think you're taking the fact that they're afraid seriously enough."

Technically, there was one other group in Ross's analysis: the

0-percenters. "I don't think I have any common ground with them and do my best to overpower and overwhelm them," she said. She had a simple term of art for them: "fascists."

The kind of outreach and engagement Ross was calling for could feel like a lot to ask. And she wanted to be clear: it wasn't for everyone. But she worried about an ever-more influential view of movement work as therapeutic, which set unrealistic expectations about the slog of it.

"The movement is not therapy," she told me. "It is not going to be your healing space. The job of social justice activism is to end oppression, not to make you feel safe, comfortable, and loved. You need to get that somewhere else, preferably in a therapy session."

She partly blamed herself and her peers. "I think as part of the movement to end violence against women, we made some over-promises. We told people, particularly rape survivors, that we could create safe spaces, when in fact all we can do is create spaces to be brave together." To call people into a brave space was to summon everyone to try something together. To promise people a safe space was to make everyone a promise about everyone else that was impossible to keep. Somehow, Ross felt, the idea of the safe space, the worthy idea of it, grew out of hand into the idea "that social justice work by definition should be safe spaces."

A similar evolution and distortion of a term had occurred, in Ross's view, with the notion of "identity politics." It was coined in a statement by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, a Boston-based collective of Black women who identified as lesbians, feminists, and socialists and who said that "no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression." The group wrote that many of its members had been part of, and been shaped by, the civil rights and Black nationalist and Black Panthers movements. However, the statement said, "it was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those