For the past two-days, I’ve marched in the streets of Oakland with the Justice for Trayvon Martin movement.  And for two-days, I’ve felt conflicted about it.  Let me be clear: I stand in 100% solidarity with the broader movement for justice for Trayvon, and for anyone who has lost their life to violence.  But I’ve felt conflicted about some of the things that are specific to Oakland, as well as the lack of a broader strategy in the movement.

A friend of mine wrote that she was marching because she felt a need to find a communal space to grieve, and to show society that business simply can’t go on as usual after such a gross injustice.  And I think those are the reasons why I ultimately joined the marches.  But I have issues with how both of those things are carried out, and I also believe that the process for grieving and the process for political action should be two separate spaces, especially in Oakland.

**Grieving**

The night that the verdict came down, I found myself in community with some folks at the Eastside Cultural Center.  There, we sat in circle.  We burnt sage.  We talked. We shared our frustrations.  We shed tears.  The folks that opened up that space didn’t have any particular goals or expected outcomes.  They just wanted to create a safe space for people to come together and grieve.

People are right to be outraged.  And in particular, young men of color who look like Trayvon, who grew up in communities like East Oakland, who get harassed by the police daily, have every right to be outraged.  I said during the Oscar Grant movement that if we don’t create safe spaces like the one at Eastside, that outrage is going to get poured out into the streets. Whether through street violence or violent protests, that pressure has to be released somewhere.

Protests and marches in Oakland are not a safe space to grieve.  Perhaps if we organized a march where that was the stated goal, we could create that space.  Maybe we would march silently.  Maybe we would light candles.  Maybe we would organize an intentional, intergenerational march.  But that’s not what marches in Oakland look like.

Marches in Oakland look like confrontations with the police, tear gas, property destruction, loud music (often of the ignorant as shit variety), aimlessly walking around with no plan, people wondering where we’re going, walking through clouds of sage/firework/weed/cigarette smoke.  I’m sometimes not clear if I’m at a protest or a party.  That is not a space conducive to healing and grieving.  I’ve never left a march in Oakland feeling like I’ve been able to let go of my anger. It’s a very different feeling than when I left Eastside.

So if our goal is to find communal spaces to grieve, let’s do it through culture, art, ceremony, music and dialogue.

**Protests: What is OurGoal?**

I’ve said this a million times: PROTESTING IS NOT A GOAL IN AND OF ITSELF.  It’s a means to an end.  You protest to give your self leverage so you can make demands/achieve a goal.

And I get it.  These last two marches came together quickly in response to the verdict. But that doesn’t mean you completely ignore the importance of strategy.  On Sunday we marched to the port.  The port. THE PORT!!!  1, it was Sunday night and there was no one there.  2,it’s the port!  What does that have to do with Trayvon?  Why can’t we think to pick a strategic target that helps to frame our message?  How, specifically, does marching around town aimlessly help us get justice?  What does justice even look like?  Without defining that, how do we even talk about strategy?

And there are inherent benefits to having these marches.  I heard a 66-year-old woman on the radio talking today about how she’s never been to a march or a protest in her life, but she felt compelled to speak out against this tragedy.  Big marches and demonstrations serve as entry points for new participants.  And that’s critical.

But if our goal was to mobilize more people, maybe we should walk down International Blvd handing out fliers with information about an organizing meeting?  If our goal is to simply show numbers, maybe forming a human chain around City Hall would be amore powerful visual?  If our goal was to help the community grieve, maybe a silent march would be more effective?  If our goal was to show solidarity with theMartin family, maybe we could turn down the party music and all wear Trayvon masks?

Not everyone is an organizer and not everyone is going to think about these things.  There are some who will be organizers and others who will be mobilized.  It’s up to the organizers to think of a goal first, so they can develop the right strategy and tactic that get us closer to a goal, and mobilize people around that.  It’s a waste to spend so many resources and get so many committed folks out into the streets without any concrete goals in mind.

And while we’re here, can someone please tell me how property destruction achieves any goal other than to piss people off?  I’m really open to being convinced.  This time it wasn’t just the Wells Fargo, but it was Oaklandish, who promotes Oakland pride and donates part of its proceeds to community based groups.  It was AwakenCafé, locally owned by some progressives who support every movement for justice.  And perhaps most disgustingly,Youth Radio, an organization that works to empower local youth by providing skills in media production.  I can’t get over that last one.

These days, anytime there is a major protest, businesses board up their windows.  What does that say about this town?  That anytime people come together to supposedly speak out for justice, we scare the local independent businesses?  How does this help us?

**Escalating Tactics**

I’m also conflicted about people complaining about having to pay the police overtime and inconveniencing people who get caught up in traffic due to the marches.

Anytime there is a mass movement, it creates havoc for a lot of people.  The Nashville lunch counter sit-ins and ensuing boycotts hurt a lot of businesses, including those owned by progressive whites friendly to the movement. But those inconveniences are small fares to pay on the road to justice.

The issue that I have is that anytime you escalate things and use more militant tactics, things like strategy, discipline and communication become more important than ever. If you’re trying to defeat segregation, then people will be ok being inconvenienced.  People are OK paying cops overtime and dealing with traffic for a ball game or a festival because there is a reason behind it that they can understand.

Help me understand how blockading a highway for 10 minutes,as folks did today in Oakland, achieves any purpose other than pissing people off?  Again, if we had a goal, say we want the City Counsel pass a resolution to demand that the DOJ prosecute Zimmerman.  And if they refused, THEN we block the highway, and we do it everyday until they pass it.  Maybe I could get behind that.  It would open up an opportunity for the City to actually get behind the movement, and we would get something out of it.

But an impromptu blockade that lasts for 10 minutes?  How does that get us closer to justice?

Of course a campaign like the one I described would take a whole new level of training, discipline and commitment.  Way more than a commitment to a one-day march or a 15-minute sit-in.  The MontgomeryBus Boycott lasted 381 days.  What is our level of commitment?

**What is Justice?**

Speaking of goals, saying “we want justice” is not good enough.  We can’t keep thinking that if we get enough people to yell “Justice!” loud enough, all of a sudden justice is gonna come rolling down the hill.  We need to articulate what justice looks like. What exactly is it we are fighting for?

Does justice mean getting Zimmerman prosecuted by the feds?  If he gets locked up forever does that mean we get justice?  Does racism end with Zimmerman?  How about repealing the Stand Your Ground law?  Or reforming gun legislation?  Or mandating undoing oppression workshops in all public schools across Florida?

I think answering this question is perhaps the most important thing that the movement needs to figure out.  A successful movement needs to be able to clearly frame the issue (is this just about Zimmerman?), articulate a concrete goal and vision for change, build strategies and tactics that move us towards that vision, and train our communities so they are ready to fight long-term for that change.  That would be a movement that I could participate in without feeling conflicted.