

Loretta Ross: Calling in as a call-out done with love. So you're trying to help people accountable for the, either the intentional or the inadvertent harm that they've caused, but you're doing so to help keep them in the community versus exiling them from the community.

Sam Fuqua: That's Loretta Ross on Calling in the Calling Out Culture. That's our focus on this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful, and nonviolent communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. I'm Sam Fuqua, joined by my co-host Jes Rau. Jes, we are thrilled to have Loretta Ross speaking with us today.

Jes Rau: Yeah, we're excited! Today, our guest is Loretta Ross, a nationally recognized trainer, educator, organizational leader, and activist. She's an expert on women's issues, hate groups, racism, and intolerance, human rights and violence against women. She's founded and led organizations, been a visiting professor at multiple universities, co-directed the 2004 March for Women's Lives in Washington, D.C., has authored books and articles, and has been recognized with numerous awards and honors. Her work focuses on the intersectionality of social justice issues and how this affects social change and service delivery in all movements.

We've invited Loretta today to talk on the podcast about the idea of calling people in versus calling people out. Welcome Loretta. We are so excited that you're here with us today.

Loretta Ross: Thanks for having me on you all's show.

Jes Rau: Yeah, we're um, we're wondering if you could just start with telling us a little bit more about your work, um, and yourself, and, uh, the ways that that comes together with calling people in versus calling people out.

Loretta Ross: Well, I became a social justice activist, that I now call human rights activists, in my teens. I went to college at 16, but even before I went to college, I was the victim of incest through which I had my son. And so, because I chose to keep him, I ended up co-parenting with my rapist, who was a 27-year-old married cousin. So, I've always had the challenge of how to deal with very uncomfortable emotions and situations with people that I was in relationship with, not the least of which was my baby's father, and the family in which this incest took place.

But when I went to college at 16, I became part of the black power movement. That's where I got my feminist consciousness. I started work at the DC Rape Crisis Center in my early twenties, and that's when I found myself in the uncomfortable position of being a rape survivor, being asked to provide black feminist political education to incarcerated rapists. And I never thought that as a rape survivor, I would ever be even asked to prioritize the education and healing of men convicted of rape, particularly black men convicted of rape.

And then I ended up in the women's movement. And of course, if you're a black feminist in the women's movement, you're constantly dealing with the embedded racism of the women's movement amongst your allies, because you're trying to work with people, but at the same time, they're unconscious of how they are hurting your feelings or oblivious to the white supremacy within. So, that also gave me training.

But the very specific thing that led me to thinking about human rights and the call-out culture was when I had a job at the Center for Democratic Renewal, formerly known as the National Anti-Klan Network, and it became one of my responsibilities to help de-program white supremacists who had repented and left the hate movement and called on the Center for Democratic Renewal for assistance reintegrating in society, into society. And, I never thought that I'd be having civil conversation with ex-Nazis and Klans. This just never occurred to me again. And I found in myself a capacity for holding spaces with people that I wouldn't bring home for coffee.

So, let me fast forward a few more decades. And in 2015, I happened to really discover social media. I was late and I was pushed into it by my grandson who apparently couldn't pick up the telephone, but I can reach through Facebook. And so, once I got on Facebook, I noticed the vitriol and the verbal violence people were using through social media. And so I asked a younger colleague of mine doing reproductive justice work, was this normal, has this always been going on? And she said, oh, you're talking about the call-out culture. And I said, you've named it? They say, yeah, we talk about it all the time. I said, what are y'all doing about it? And she shrugged. And that caused me to think of all the instances that I had used to call-out culture and what could happen if we actually pivoted and started thinking about calling people in.

And so since that conversation, actually starting in 2016, I've been working on a book called 'Calling In the Calling Out Culture', which is a synthesis of my experiences, and being challenged and wanting to call people out and trying to learn techniques of calling people in, which is hard. It's not automatic, it's not easy, but I think it is a more sophisticated form of human rights activism to not see people that you disagree with automatically as enemies. So that's a short preface of how I got here.

Sam Fuqua: I appreciate how you framed it as a human rights activism. What's a, a kind of a common example of calling someone out, and how would you call them in?

Loretta Ross: Well, calling out is publicly shaming and humiliating somebody for something that they've done, that they've said, that they believed are their identity. Calling in is not the reverse, but it's an attempt to hold people accountable, but through the lens of love instead of anger, and the shortest way I can put it is, calling in is a call-out done with love. So you're trying to hold people accountable for the, either the intentional or the inadvertent harm that they've caused, but you're doing so to help keep them in the community versus exiling them from the community.

A very recent example for me is someone lying about me on social media. And since they lied publicly, my first response was to come back and clap back at them in the same forum in which they lied on me. And I put pause on that impulse because I realized that I will be breathing air into the lie instead of picking up the phone and talking to that person and trying first of all, to ascertain why they felt compelled to lie, and if we could do some healing and through mutual conversation, instead of public attack and counter attacks. It's very hard to reign in that impulse to want to hold something, someone accountable for hurting you. And I'm working on it because I'm really quick to flashpoint to anger. So I can't say that I'm, you know, the nonviolent person that just wants everybody to, you know, call on their higher selves. But I'm finding that our call-out culture is really damaging our chance to respond to this neo-fascist, political moment that we're in, and it certainly is not going to be capable of responding to this crisis around white supremacy and police violence that we're in. And so I'm really desperate for us to seek other ways of building community rather than the binary of punishment and exile, which is basically a law-and-order response to injustice.

Jes Rau: That's fascinating and interesting, especially right now in today's context, because it feels like there are so many people right now who are disagreeing on the strategies that people are taking and the choices that people are making within the protests, um, including internally within the group itself who are working for, um, justice and, uh, the reform of the justice system, and reform of the police system. Um, how do people, and how do you increase, how are you increasing your capacity to do that? You said it's hard to do and that you're working on it. How does somebody increase their capacity to not just reactively, um, strike back when they feel hurt?

Loretta Ross: I'm doing an internal audit of my triggers. What are the things, the sore points, the sore teeth of my life's experiences that when they're pressed, they want me to flash? And I'm trying not to give in to my emotions, but prioritize thinking through why I'm feeling like that and what response I want to be seen as giving. Because, calling in is not about healing or fixing someone else, it's about healing and fixing yourself so that you're not controlled by your emotions, but your emotions become fuel for you to seek justice. And so, it begins with the internal audit. Where you really see, okay, first of all, why am I reacting to this situation or this person this way? What do I want the outcome of my reaction or response to them be? And, what does it say about me how I respond and react to them 'cause I'm really serious about protecting my own integrity because I don't have a lot of control over what other people say and do, but I do have control over what I say and do.

And so an example would be, okay, somebody says something that I think is racially tone deaf. Oh, I just did that with the reporter this morning, where she was asking me to write an article about unfair accusations against a black man. And I called her out, and with love I said, well, you're the reporter. Why aren't you writing the article about, as a white woman, about unfair accusations against black men? Why are you calling on a black woman to do it? And I offered that in love because I do love and respect this reporter, but she was white women, white women, which is asking a person of color to be braver in public than she was willing to be. It was a necessary conversation. I hope that she heard me with the love that I intended it to have. I'm not sure if it makes a difference, whether she's going to call on another person of color to be more publicly brave than she feels, like me. But I felt that as her friend, I could offer her that feedback privately, or I could go on the Internet and talk about how insensitive she was to call on a black woman to, to say something that she was afraid to say. You see the choices I have? And I chose calling in strategy than a public shaming strategy.

Sam Fuqua: For people listening who are, who are white and trying to be allies, if that's the best word to use, and what we should keep in mind in terms of power dynamics and white privilege if we are going to try calling in rather than calling out.

Loretta Ross: Well right now, I would say that white allies should think twice before asking anything of a black person at this particular moment, because we're fragile, we're running on fumes. And this just is not the time. But that doesn't mean that you can't ever make the effort. And actually you can still ask, it's kind of like saying, this may not be the time to have this conversation with you, but I've got a question to ask and I'm okay with whatever answer you give. And that way you leave the decision-making upon the person that you're requesting the service from, rather than assuming that they're going to drop everything to serve you. So there's a way to ask even in the midst of the crisis, but how you frame it displays who has the power to make the decision versus withholding the power to make the decision within yourself.

Jes Rau: That kind of leads to something that you had mentioned in a, a YouTube talk that I watched of yours, where you talked about the 90 percenters, the 75 percenters, and the 10 percenters. Um, and it's

feeling like to me, maybe, uh, maybe it's different for you, but I'm feeling like, um, the call-out culture is really focusing on those 10 percenters right now, as well as like kind of diving in on the folks who are aligned at least at 75 and 90 percent. Um, can you just talk about that philosophy a little bit and how that relates to calling in and calling out?

Loretta Ross: Well, I like to do popular education in my community because that's what I'm best known for and best at doing. And so I call it my circles of influence. Most of us who do social justice and human rights work, I call us the 90 percenters because we share a worldview with each other. We can recognize our buzzwords of racism, capitalism, sexism, transphobia, disability rights, on and on and on. We have an insiders jargon with each other and insiders shorthand where we actually agree on 90 percent of what we are saying about the world and ourselves.

I find though, that we argue a lot over the remaining 10 percent, where as I might focus on reproductive justice as my priority, and someone else may focus on environmental justice as their priority, we spend entirely too much time trying to turn the 90 percenters into 100 percenters, which will never happen because human beings are not intended to be clones of each other. And I think that's a waste of time and it's misdirected anger, and so we become a circular firing squad firing our best bullets at each other over that lack of 10 percent overlap.

Outside of us are what I call the 75 percenters. People who generally share some of our worldview, but they use different language. And in fact, they find our insiders language, quite repellent. I was put in this category, someone representing the Girl Scouts, who may never focus explicitly on abortion rights, but they believe in girls and women's empowerment. And so I need to change the words and the tone with which I speak to a 75 percenter, not trying to make, make them a 90 percenter, but letting them stay where they are at 75 percent and being an effective ally where they are.

Outside of the 75 percenters, I tend to see 50 percenters and the best way to describe them would be people like my conservative parents. My father was a military lifer, he was in the army for 26 years. He was an immigrant. My mother was a conservative Christian Southern Baptist black woman. Both, I would see on the political scale as very much in the center. That's why they're 50 percenters. And so listening to my mother's church preachers, she edges towards the right. When my father listens to the National Rifle Association, he edges towards the right. But at the same time, they gave me the values that I work with around hard work and family and faith and taking care of each other. That, for me, edges him towards the left.

And so I'm not going to use tactics that would so alienate my late parents, that I'm going to push them into the arms of the enemy. I'm going to try to use tactics and language and affirmation of where they are so that they remain on the side that I prefer them to be on, which is in the pursuit of social justice and doing the humanitarian work. For example, my mother was very much into service, so she started our girl scout troop because black girls weren't allowed into the white girl scout troops in the fifties, when I was coming up. My, they constantly did humanitarian work - church feeding of the homeless and stuff like that. At the same time, they didn't understand, while I didn't get drawn to the humanitarian side, I wanted to ask why people were hungry in the first place. So, that's how their training of me and their values in me manifested differently. But I'm not going to call them out because they didn't have the same manifestation that I did.

Outside of the 50 percenters, I called the 25 percenters. These are the people that the shorthand would be to call to Trump supporters, for example. People who embrace white supremacy and, and intolerance and

anger and hate, even as they think of themselves as good people, they still manifest behaviors that say something quite different. I have a different strategy for them. I'm not so willing to call them in until I explore what are their motivations, what pains are they carrying that manifest themselves in this kind of way. And then outside of the 25 percenters or the zero percenters, those are the openly evolved fascists. The people who are white supremacy proud, uh, the ones with whom I'm not even wasting time on trying to call them in. What I see, that I think is a mistake, is too many 90 percenters think that they can persuade the 25 and the zero percenters when they don't even know how to talk to other people in the 90 percent bubble.

Sam Fuqua: As I was listening to you, what crossed my mind is a comment you made in a webinar I watched, uh, about some members of the movement getting into what you said is a woke competition. And I was wondering, well, if these 90 percenters calling out the 75 percenters for not being quote unquote, woke enough, am I making the right connection there?

Loretta Ross: Well, you are. And we just had a very recent example of that when the whole blackout movement, blackout Tuesday happened, where a lot of people were posting on their, or blacking out their social media pages as a way of standing in solidarity with the protest and the rebellion that's taking place. And that, of course, started out as a misinterpretation because how does it help the movement to go silent? I'm not quite sure how that works. Secondly, it occupied so many social spaces, social justice air space that the necessary messages that we needed to get out were obliterated. Yet, I think it took on a life of its own and a woke competition as people were trying to prove that they stood in solidarity by participating in the screening blackout. But it actually had the other consequence of interfering with the communications of people in resistance. And so, like you said, things can go sideways all the time.

And so now the question becomes whether we should call out the people who did the blackout or not. And I would say, let's pause calling them out. They were trying to do the right thing and they did it badly. That doesn't make them wrong. It just makes them, um, the beginning of a learning curve. And we need to have patience for people who are learning how to stand up against white supremacy, particularly if they're white, but black people are also learning how to stand up against white supremacy, because we are not all actively engaged in the fight against it, and get over ourselves for passing judgment on people who do it badly the first time around.

I mean, you, you wouldn't laugh at your child because they fell off the bike the first time they tried to ride. So, why would you laugh at somebody who's trying to do the right thing and they do it badly? You just work with them if you choose to, to help them do it better the next time. And here I've been doing it for 50 years and I mess up all the time because there's no blueprint. There's no perfect way to be a human being or a perfect way to be an activist. The cause is perfect. We don't have to be perfect and we shouldn't expect perfection from others. And that's what also drives the woke competition in my mind. Like we think we have pure politics that people should execute perfectly, and we reserve for our right ourselves, the right to call them out when they don't get it right according to our likes.

Jes Rau: One of the things that I was wondering is, are there boundaries for calling in? So for example, does somebody run out of chances that you've tried and you've tried and you've tried. What are the strategies for working with somebody that, that calling in with love in those ways, it doesn't seem to be working and the mistakes seem to be continuing?

Loretta Ross: Calling in and calling out exist on a continuum. And so, you have to do patient work to decide where the person lands on that continuum so that you can choose the appropriate response out of the toolkit for them. So, if someone makes a mistake and I candidly with love, and privately try to help them learn from their mistake and they choose to be unwilling to learn, there's only so many times I'm going to give them that opportunity. I invest my time in trying, because, you know, what did they say? You can cure ignorance but stupidity is forever. And so, you have to decide what the investment of your time could be, should be, and calling in by the way, always has to be voluntary. You have no obligation to help someone else learn. It's a choice that you make, and that's why I insist on its voluntary nature, because it means putting aside your own feelings so that you can help someone else grow. And if you're not in a sufficiently healed space, where you can put aside your own feelings, then you're probably not going to be calling in very effectively because your own feelings may sabotage your calling in tips.

So that's why it's not for everybody, and it's certainly not for every situation. Sometimes I want to say, talk to the hand and sometimes I want to say let's have a cup of coffee later on so we can talk about it. It is not a binary. You either call them out or you call them in. It is very situationally dependent, but the first situation you have to consider is what space you're in, in terms of your emotional fragility or confidence. Are you in a space to set aside your own feelings so that you can give loving attention to someone else's growth? If you're not in that space, back off and take care of yourself 'cause you're not obliged to make other people grow or to help them, help them grow because you can't make someone grow, but you can help them see other information that they can attend to their own growth and development with.

The other thing that I'd like to emphasize is that calling in is a practice that can take place in the workplace, around the dinner table, in our political movements, in our churches, in our community gatherings, it's not reserved for just political spaces. It's how we have to have difficult conversations in the relationships that we're in. And that's why it's an evolving art form. We will never get it right the first time, but like riding a bicycle, we'll become better with practice. And even if we fail it at the first time, that should just be encouragement to try again, not giving up in cynicism and defeat, as if the theory is wrong and not the implementation was a little rocky.

Sam Fuqua: Well, Loretta Ross, it's been a pleasure to talk with you. We're so grateful for your time. And I hope we can talk to you again sometime.

Loretta Ross: Alright. Thanks for having me on your show.

Sam Fuqua: That's Loretta Ross, teacher, author, feminist, and activist. You can connect with her and with her work at lorettaross.com. Our podcast is called Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website, that's sidewayspod.org.

Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau and me, Sam Fuqua, in partnership with the Conflict Center, a Denver based non-profit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.