

**Love Letter to Common Ground Clinic**  
**Catherine Jones**  
**Winter 2005**

Hi Common Ground folks,

I hope all of you are doing really well. I would love to be at this discussion with all of you, but I can't. I decided to write y'all a note instead, so you could know what I'd say if I was around. (When I started this I thought it would be a paragraph or two, but I guess I had a lot on my mind J. I know it's a lot to read, but I really do hope you find the time.)

First, I hope you know that I'm saying what I'm saying out of respect and love, and from a place of complete amazement at what all of you have accomplished in the past few months. Common Ground has done some incredible work since the storm, and I think its potential is boundless. I continue to be awed by all the passion and energy and creativity and love I've seen from so many of you, and I can honestly say that my life is better from having had each one of you in it.

Some of you might not even know me, since I've been around so little in the past few weeks. I feel sad that I'm so disconnected to this space these days, and I feel like it's important for me to let y'all know why it's been happening. About a week before Thanksgiving I left Louisiana for the first time since the storm. I knew leaving would be a really intense experience for me, but I wasn't prepared for the major disability I would feel upon returning here. There were days when I got back where I could barely meet my minimum obligations, days when I would drive through so many neighborhoods I used to live in, or play in, or work in, and just cry. I had finally hit that wall of sadness so many of my friends and neighbors and family went through when the storm came, when I had been too busy working to let myself feel anything. I feel like this is still happening for me, and since so much of my usual support network has been scattered to the winds, I am dealing with this intense loss largely alone.

I'm not saying this so that people can feel sorry for me; I'm saying it because it's real, and not just for me but for most of us who are from New Orleans. We are still shell-shocked. I think sometimes people forget that we are still experiencing such deep sadness, that it cuts into our lives and that none of us is quite whole, yet.

The reason I'm saying this to y'all, though, is because some of the most severe culture shock I experienced upon returning to New Orleans was around coming back to this clinic. I feel like it's my responsibility to communicate this to you, not because how I think or feel really matters that much in the long run, but because if it's happening for me, and I share at least some aspects of culture and identity with many of you, I can only imagine what must be going on for people from this community who are trying to become more involved in the clinic. And, perhaps most importantly, because I believe in this work, and I believe in all of our ability to do it, and I want it to be as effective and as accountable as it can be.

When I came back to New Orleans, I was coming back from DC, where I'd been meeting with national leaders from the American Medical Student Association, and where the majority of my weekend was spent discussing how we can build a concrete strategy to end institutionalized racism in the healthcare system. Medical students, y'all! This is a group of extremely educated, primarily white people not only willing to give up a lot of the power they have, but actually totally invested in that process because they know how damaging racism can be to any attempt at providing competent healthcare. To come from a

meeting of medical students where so many folks were passionately talking about working against racism, to this clinic, another primarily white grouping of progressive healthcare providers, which barely has any significant collective consciousness of race or of its own privilege, was jarring. It compounded the sadness I already felt about returning to my destroyed city, and made it that much harder to come back.

I began working more with primarily local groups, like the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee, which is consciously multiracial and African-American-led, and also spending more time working with the Latino Health Outreach Project, because I felt like a big part of our work in LHOP centered around building relationships with local Latino organizations in the city, which was really important to me. Working more with local folks helped me move toward balance in my own life, since everyone else was also dealing with how to grieve and work at the same time and I didn't feel like a slacker for not being able to put in 18-hour days like so many folks working at Common Ground. At the same time, I also became even more conscious than before of the disempowerment that can happen when a group of outsiders with power and resources enters into a community and begins implementing its vision without a whole lot of input from that community. In the end, it doesn't really matter if that group is "progressive:" disempowerment is still disempowerment.

I think this dynamic plays itself out in a number of ways at Common Ground. I want to focus on the ways we interact with the community, the ways we interact with local social justice organizers, and what we do with our resources. There are also some aspects to our internal structure that can have drastic effects on the larger New Orleans community and the effectiveness of our work. I could point to a whole lot of things and explain why I am concerned about them, but I think sometimes it's better to pose a series of questions and trust that a good conversation will come out of it. I hope that you take the following questions seriously and hold any answers you may find, even the uncomfortable ones. I hope that if any of these questions makes you feel uncomfortable, that you don't dismiss the question itself, but that you are able to sit with it, breathe, listen, pay attention.

How are community volunteers integrating into the clinic? Do community volunteers have a dedicated space where they can voice opinions and concerns about how things are going? Do they know about this space, come regularly, and speak out? If not, why not? If there is such a space, how (concretely) does the rest of the clinic take its suggestions into account? Do most of the community volunteers come regularly? How many are "one-timers" who don't come back? Do we follow up with people who don't come back to find out why they aren't coming back? What do we do with this information? How many out-of-town volunteers interact regularly with the community volunteers, besides saying Hi or Thank You? If not many, why not? How many out-of-town volunteers actively support the participation of community volunteers, by giving people rides, taking care of kids, telling folks about when meetings happen, encouraging them to take leadership in the running of the clinic, and helping them figure out concrete ways to do so? Do we trust community volunteers with money? If not, what does that say to them about us? How many community volunteers are members of the steering committee, or any workgroup?

How many local social justice organizations do we have good working relationships with? How much about the history and context of local social justice organizing do we know? How do we learn about local organizing, and how much energy do we put into finding out about locally-led efforts? Who are the groups we do know about and why do we know about those groups in particular? Do we include local organizers in projects they express interest in, or on which they have done significant amounts of work already? Do we communicate with local organizers about our work? Do we share resources with

local organizers, if we have resources and they need them? How might the following statements, uttered by Common Ground activists to or about local organizers, be interpreted by the local organizers?

“I’d love to work with New Orleans people, but they’re all so slow.”

“Nothing was going on in New Orleans before Common Ground.”

“They’re just jealous because we’re the only ones doing anything.”

(The following statement was said by a Common Ground person to a local African-American organizer who has a deep, strong history of organizing both locally and in national organizations) “If you join our project, you’ll be empowered.”

What does it mean that Common Ground activists can be assured of the truth of these statements, without a complete understanding of the pre-and post-hurricane political context in which their work is occurring? How might a grieving community member interpret a sign in front of the clinic that says, “Less tears more action?” What assumptions have Common Ground people made about local organizers and the work they are, or are not, doing? Can we point to any projects where we’ve supported the leadership of local people, on their own terms? If not, why not? When we say things like, “nothing else is going on” or “the community isn’t ready,” what evidence are we using to back up those statements? What concrete ways do we have of making sure we listen to local leaders who are also fighting for justice here, in their home?

Do you know how we are spending our money? If so, why? If not, why not? How much of our money goes directly into the community itself (not to Common Ground projects or to Common Ground volunteers who didn’t live in the community before the storm)? What does it mean that the clinic is paying rent for out-of-town volunteers and not reimbursing people for the cost of gas if they drive from their residence to work at the clinic? How did we choose which of these things to prioritize? Which clinic volunteers benefit from this arrangement? Under this arrangement, who may face barriers to being able to work here? What does this say about who we invest in and why?

Remember when I said I felt like a slacker because I suddenly became less capable of working the insane hours so many folks at the clinic put in? What do you think about that? What does it mean that the people who spend the most time at the clinic are also the ones who hold the most power? And that almost all of those very same people do not have significant roots in New Orleans? Do we accept that things have to be this way? What does it mean that the culture of the clinic celebrates intense work, almost to the point of burnout? Who benefits from this culture? Can we ever expect that level of work from people who have roots, and lives, and family here; who are still grieving a vast tragedy, and who don’t have an intact home to go back to one day? What does this say about where power will eventually lie in the clinic, and what does that say about the eventual purpose of the clinic? Do all of us understand how decisions are made in the clinic, and where power lies within the clinic? If not, why not? How do we arrive at a collective sense of what we are accountable to, as a group of people working together?

Ok.

That was a lot of questions. I hope they start some kind of conversation, or at least some process of internal, or within-the-clinic, reflection. I also hope that if these questions have brought up uncomfortable feelings, or anger, or defensiveness, for people, that people are able to hold those feelings and not dismiss the questions because of their reactions. I know for me sometimes that can be really hard to do, especially when I feel really invested in something. I guess that investment itself, more than anything else, is what I’m questioning. Because ultimately this work is not about you, or me, or any one of us. It’s about building a world where all of the structures that keep people down don’t exist anymore, and where any human being among us has the power to decide, for real, how they will live their own

life. Right? And for that to even begin happen in a legitimate way, we need to own up to our role in that whole process. How we help it along, and how we stand in its way. And that really, until that happens, all the work and the time and the busy-ness and the bustling around and feeling burned-out and going to meetings and being important, all of that doesn't make a difference ultimately, because it isn't honest.

I want to stress again that I'm not saying all of this because I'm dying to point out a billion negative things about what I still think is a completely incredible spot of brightness in this sad, sad world. I'm not saying it because I really want to type four pages (!) in the middle of the night that I'm not sure anyone will ever even read. I'm saying it because even after everything I am not even close to writing off Common Ground. Even after everything, I am also learning that after two weeks of not being around, I miss you all. I miss your energy, and the five thousand projects all going on at one time, and the ways I've learned to think about health and healing from so many of you. I miss the food and the neighbors and the levee and everyone's random attempts to implement a system for us to start cleaning up after ourselves. More even than that, though, I'm saying this because I know not only that we have work to do, but that each one of us has the potential to do it. And to shine! From what I've seen of each of your hearts, and all of your passion, and all the incredible beauty every single one of you has put into the world, I know this. Above anything else, see, this is a love letter.

And so all I ask of you is this: Please, for the sake of this work, just take a deep breath and look around. Please just start there. I think our future might depend on this one small step.

With solidarity and my whole entire heart,

Catherine