

Village Fire Groundwork and Actions around Anti-Racism, 2013-present

"The true focus of revolutionary change is never the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us." ~Audre Lorde

"Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I've seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I've felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I'm careful about what I give voice to." ~Toni Cade Bambara

'My goal isn't to be a great ally. My goal is the abolition of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and the building up of multiracial democracy, economic, gender, and racial justice for all and a world where the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interconnection of life are at the heart of our cultures, institutions, and policies....Strive to be a comrade with a political framework committed to building up other people's leadership, building up collective power, being able to read situations and act for the best of our goals, rather than feeling like there is a formula to follow...' ~Chris Crass, racial justice community organizer

Village Fire began in 2013. In the beginning, the intention of Village Fire was to create a space where people could bring their true needs, big questions, and best gifts: to use song, beauty, and nature to empower voices that might need a space to feel welcomed, free, and safe. Village Fire intended that we might experience the fullness of community and bring its gifts and tools back to our home communities. The organizers were (and still are) white Midwestern cisgender women, and the people who came were mostly white folks from the Midwest who learned about it through emails and posters in their communal networks. Over the years, we've seen that Village Fire offers a chance to see what we can create together as an alternative to all forms of patriarchy and supremacy. It is a place to imagine and walk toward community outside of capitalism, experiment with circular forms of leadership, practice letting go of linear thinking and deepen our relationships. Each year we return with new awarenesses and a new opportunity to build on the last using the new tools and connections we've discovered. We step forward each year, listening for what is asked and for what is possible to teach and model in our few days together. We know that even our small and short annual gathering has the responsibility and capacity to contribute to the essential work of this time in history.

We know that Village Fire, like all that happens in the United States, is a site where the painful and imperative national conversation about racism and reparations needs to be engaged. Some of our questions around that are: What can we put in place to create a more inclusive culture that welcomes a more diverse group of people, and welcomes participants' wholeness? What can we put in place to acknowledge the wholeness of the picture we stand in at Village Fire, in so-called Iowa, in the so-called United States, and to activate ourselves as a community to play our part in changing the oppressive patterns that we live in as a society?

As part of modeling circular leadership, we want to invite the entire Village Fire community to these opportunities for connection, grief, and deepened community. We also seek to honor all of the people in the Village Fire community who have been impacted by the dynamics of white supremacy and racial injustice. To that end, we've begun to compile an (incomplete) list of our actions in pursuit of inclusivity up to this point. We then started compiling an (again incomplete) list to describe what we are doing so far this year to support ourselves as a community to grow in awareness of the systems of power and oppression that we operate within and become a more inclusive, welcoming place for a more diverse group of people. We're making these lists as a map to orient us, to name where we have been in relationship to the work of anti-racism and liberation, and to see where we are going. We say they are incomplete because we know that, as a community, countless conversations and interactions happen below collective consciousness.

In the work of racial justice, we know we are both always late, and always on time to do the right work, now. We commit to the continuation of this engagement at Village Fire 2019 and beyond.

Actions toward inclusivity, 2013-2018

What have we done in the past in pursuit of creating an inclusive culture that welcomes participants' wholeness, and acknowledges the wholeness of the picture we stand in at Village Fire?

- We offer a sliding scale fee with the bottom end less than 1/3 the cost of an average gathering, to provide access for people at most circumstances of the economic scale and to show that we truly value people more than their money.
- We focus on creating a physically beautiful doorway to camp that puts forward a welcome to all, strives to show them that they matter, and invites each to become part of the welcome team for everyone else.
- Collaborative, circular organizing model, focusing on relationship, conversation, respect.
- Community Offerings session each day, to provide space for learning about practices for strengthening community: Non-Violent Communication, Theatre of the Oppressed, conflict engagement, restorative justice, council practice, Restorative Circles---right alongside juggling, dancing, nature connection, death doulas, empowered birth, thereby modeling the interwovenness of all of these and providing access points for a variety of people even as everyone is exposed to named practices that they might explore at another time
- Restorative Practices Team, naming and describing their offer to support folks' engagement in difficult conversations or conflict.
- Gender awareness, respect, and safe spaces: gender non-binary bathroom facilities; gender non-binary song circle for sharing and singing, queer lunch table, ongoing listening for other ways to support this part of our community. Shifting the Moon Lodge to be an inclusive space not only for all who menstruate but also for all who identify as women.
- Naming and learning about the first-nations People of the land we inhabit. As a leadership team, seeking ways to acknowledge the history of colonization that we are still playing out and learn about our part in changing the story. Two visitors and educators have joined us to help the community learn more: Albert LeBeau, archaeologist at Effigy Mounds National Monument and member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, and Michael Douglass, European-American retired historian from Effigy Mounds National Monument, who shared stories of pre-colonization Ho-Chunk traditions.
- Land connection: naming and learning about the other-than-humans whose homes we inhabit during the gathering, inviting awareness and engagement through activities for all ages, creating ways to begin to step out of human supremacy. Village Naturalists to support in building connections with the natural world and build awareness, bird and plant walks, naturalist table, nourishing food that's lovingly prepared and blessed with gratitude by the group.
- Inviting Global Majority songleaders: Sam Simataa, Melanie DeMore.
- Visible centering of valuable parts of community who are often made invisible: elders, children, teens, Queer, differently-abled, introverted people
- Grief work: Grief ritual 2015 (lineage of Malidoma Somé), and grief circles each year since, Joanna Macy Work that Reconnects circles, open Ancestor Altar throughout gathering
- Asking the designated songleaders to model awareness around cultural appropriation, knowing song sources and choosing carefully which songs to share.
- Choosing leaders who walk in awareness of 'othering,' who are practiced at noticing the ways in which words can make people feel excluded
- Organizers working to educate themselves about systems of power and oppression through workshops, reading, and conversation. Ida attended a 3-day intensive with Robin DiAngelo about white

supremacy and how it functions within and around white people. Liz engaged in learning with other local community leaders from a UCC curriculum in preparation for holding group space with other white people to explore white privilege. Both continue to seek ways to learn about privilege, colonization, white supremacy, allyship, and reparations, and learn how to bring this work into Village Fire.

2019: Current Conversations Toward this Year's Gathering

What are we doing this year to support ourselves as a community to grow in awareness of the systems of power and oppression that we operate within and become a more inclusive, welcoming place for a more diverse group of people?

- Conversation with [Indigenous Iowa](#) about education at Village Fire in support of the work of decolonization, exploring the possibility that someone from their organization could join us.
- Exploring idea of making a monetary contribution as an organization to a local indigenous-led project or organization. May invite campers to add to this, as one way for our time together to support indigenous-led decolonization work.
- We have reached out to others from the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Ho Chunk tribes to begin conversations and invite suggestions for ways that our gathering might support local indigenous needs and work. Conversations are in process.
- We are planning a time during the gathering for giving back to the land and the camp through stewardship projects, to be in the practice of reciprocity with the land that sustains us and to help ourselves become a gathering that does more than put out our money and consider our debt paid.
- We will be joined by [Lydia Violet](#), an Iranian-American multi-instrumentalist who has trained for 9 years with Buddhist scholar and activist [Joanna Macy](#). She leads The Work that Reconnects, using music to support teachings around grief, loss, and activism, and works to inform a deeper understanding about the relationship between cultural appreciation, exchange, and appropriation in her work supporting people to build relationship to their own ancestral music.
- We are in conversations within the leadership team to envision more ways to embody, teach and model anti-racism, and a group of thinkers and leaders are working to address this conversation together. Guiding questions in these conversations are: Where does white supremacy show up at Village Fire? What are more ways we can build awareness around racism and educate ourselves in our community and become a more inclusive space?
- Joanna Laws Landis, who is currently studying in the lineage of the late Grief-Tender [Sobonfu Some](#) of Burkina Faso, is helping us create more intentional spaces for the expression and tending of our grief.
- All bathrooms will be gender-inclusive and education about gender inclusivity will be offered. Pronouns will be encouraged on nametags!
- A team of individuals with both lived experience and professional credentials are offering "Mutual Emotional First Aid" for any villagers finding themselves in emotional distress or inner turmoil. We're leveraging some of the tried and true resources of The Icarus Project to provide humanistic, non-judgmental peer-led support for people who may identify with a particular psychiatric label as well as those who do not. We honor that these experiences of "breakdown" can lead to "breakthrough" if tended with compassion and patience.
- Alyson Ewald, Lore Baur, and Lyndsey Scott are working with us to envision how we can further the teaching, modeling, and engagement of community restorative practices, with the intention to support our community in a growing capacity to engage in difficult conversations and conflict and build resilience.

We encourage and welcome the experiences, reflections, and requests of others to help us look backward and forward along this road we're building toward a gathering that reflects the values we seek to embody.