

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Eric Ward

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Eric Ward, executive director of [Western States Center](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

To return to the website, go to [Social Justice Leaders on What Matters](#)—and scroll down to access more videos in the series.

Please note: This interview was filmed and edited before the insurrection at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Transcript begins.

[Eric Ward, a Black man wearing a plaid shirt and black blazer, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a blue button-down shirt and silver hoop earrings.]

[on-screen text: Eric Ward, Executive Director, Western States Center]

ERIC WARD: I love that term, Hilary, “exhausted middle.” I think that’s exactly right.

HILARY PENNINGTON: How do you think about this moment, Eric?

ERIC: We are actually at the top of the mountain, and we are looking over into the promised land right now. But the deal is this. We don’t get into that promised land unless we all go together. And I think that’s the next big hurdle.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Eric Ward]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY: Eric, welcome. It is so great to be with you. Eric Ward is the leader of the Western States Center. And, Eric, here you are, a racial justice activist who studies organized white supremacist movements. We’re seeing these two movements and forces collide in our society. How do you think about this moment, Eric? And how do you contextualize and analyze what’s happening now?

ERIC: We are really in a unique moment, where this demographic anxiety that is occurring in our society has driven people to almost a form of organized violence. We

are dealing with this social movement, and this social movement is like other social movements, right—the civil rights or environmental or Me Too—in the sense that they organize, they try to educate, and they try to build power. The difference is, is that our social movements are grounded in inclusion, right, and trying to strengthen democracy. White nationalism is grounded in exclusion and has used violence in an attempt to build their power.

HILARY: And do you think that they are overreaching? Like, when you think about the shift in public attitudes towards Black Lives Matter and the real battle in our society for hearts and minds, tell me how you think about the violence.

ERIC: More white Americans are supportive of Black Lives Matter, right, in this country right now, than ever supported Martin Luther King Jr. in his lifetime, right, while he was alive, or supported SNCC in the nonviolent sit-ins. We have to acknowledge, right, that white Americans are embracing the idea of a multiracial democracy, of an inclusive America, significantly. And there are some who are retrenching, right, into values of division, are frightened by the changes.

One of the things that I try to hold in mind in this moment is they are not the majority, right? But the honest truth is we are not the majority either. The majority are mostly ordinary Americans who don't spend their days swimming in politics, right? They're focused on their children. They're focused on their jobs. They're focused on what's going on around their home. How do they pay their bills. This is not the stuff that excites them. But they are listening. And we have to give those folks—whether white or not, right—the spaces to come together in community. And I think that's the next big hurdle.

HILARY: That's such an important insight, Eric. And you know, there's that research that was done by More in Common, about the hidden tribes in America and that the biggest majority, as you say, is what they call the exhausted middle.

ERIC: I love that term, Hilary, “exhausted middle.” I think that's exactly right. This exhausted middle, right, it feels so alienated right now. And I'm not passing a judgment on that alienation. I'm just acknowledging. They feel alienated. They don't feel connected or anchored. And, ultimately, at the end of the day, people will choose anchoring over their values. And that's why there's actually a responsibility on all of us who believe in rights, to open up space immediately. When this becomes their home too, that's when we win.

We believe at the end of the day most people actually want to be good and do good things, and we want to believe that and we want to count on that. So we are creating leadership cohorts. We are supporting small group interaction, right? We are telling everyone, not everything has to be the equivalent of 20,000 people marching on the streets. It can actually be your five friends in the backyard, having a guided discussion while you're barbecuing.

There are things we can do concretely that allow people to move forward. We have provided over 10,000 toolkits to educators, nearly in every state in the country, around

how to confront white nationalism in school. What happens when your student asks a question, right, that promotes genocide? You have to open up conversations to offload that, to provide an alternative view. And teachers and educators need help. We constantly are trying to develop tools that are DIY, do it yourself. You don't have to wait for leaders to tell you what to do in this moment.

HILARY: That's huge. If you were to construct, like, your most hopeful headline, looking back, let's say, from five years from now at this time, what would the headline say about the moment we're in?

ERIC: The headline's going to say, "We preserved the paper upon which the next generation will write their own song."

HILARY: That's beautiful.

ERIC: That's the gift that we give in this moment. Some folks get to be the Ella Bakers and the Martin Luther King. But there are some of us who are just the Bayard Rustin generation, and we don't get those big marches. What we get to do is the day-to-day care-tending, right, of movements and infrastructures that make inclusive democracy possible, that allow the oxygen for social movements to take root and to do what they do. Ours is a thankless job. It's a hard job, and it's going to be a long job.

HILARY: It's generational.

ERIC: It's generational. For 75 years, people laid down their lives, right? They struggled, even under harder conditions than we struggled under, to get us to this point, right? And we owe them. We owe them a due.

We are actually at the top of the mountain, and we are looking over into the promised land right now. We are there, right? But the deal is this. We don't get into that promised land unless we all go together. And so, you know, we have to find ways for folks to stop fighting so hard with one another as we get to the top of this mountain and into the promised land. We can't go into the promised land exhausted. We have to go in unified and aligned, right, around our humanity. The idea that all of us are human and we all have the right to live, love, and work free from fear and bigotry.

HILARY: I cannot thank you enough for the work you do, the leadership you bring. I appreciate it so much. Thank you.

ERIC: Such a pleasure, Hilary. Thank you so much.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

End of transcript.