

THE IMPACT OF RACE AND RACISM ON HEALTH: A CALL TO ACTION

# **Racism is a Public Health Crisis**

## **(We Said It! Now What?)**

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**Keynote Speaker**  
**Seventh Annual MBHP Integration Forum**  
Massachusetts Behavioral Health Partnership

*November 18, 2020*

# **Disclosure**

**I have NO actual or potential  
conflict of interest  
in relation to this program/presentation**

# National Campaign Against Racism

Name racism

Ask “How is racism operating here?”

Organize and strategize to act

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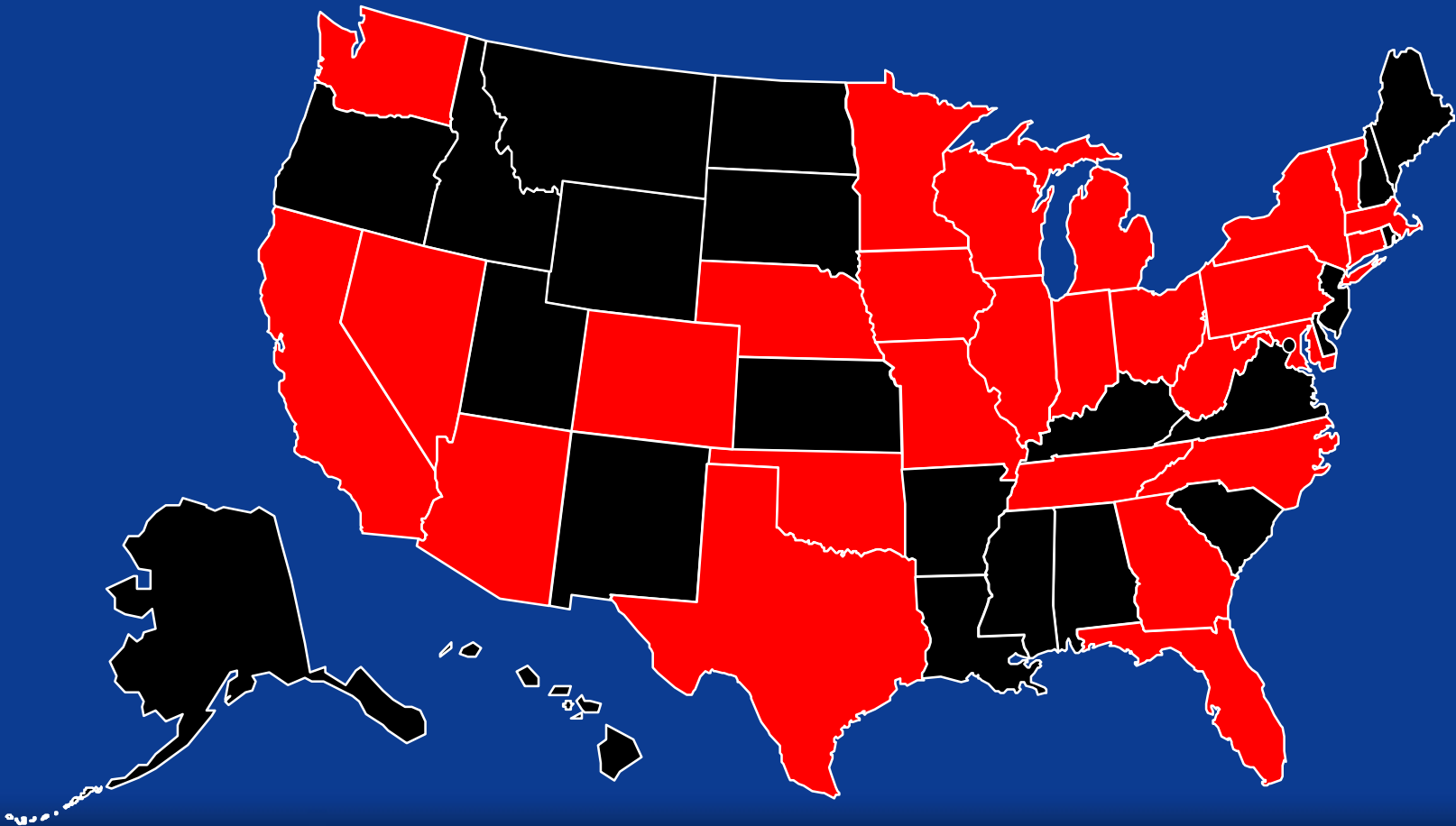
# National Campaign Against Racism

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Ask “How is racism operating here?”

Organize and strategize to act

# States with jurisdictions declaring “Racism is a public health crisis”



**ARIZONA 1, California 21, Colorado 3, Connecticut 16, Florida 2, Georgia 1, Illinois 3, Indiana 2, Iowa 1, Maryland 2, Massachusetts 11, MICHIGAN 13, MINNESOTA 4, Missouri 2, Nebraska 2, NEVADA 3, New York 2, North Carolina 6, Ohio 22, Oklahoma 1, Pennsylvania 4, Tennessee 3, Texas 3, Vermont 1, Washington 4, West Virginia 1, WISCONSIN 9**

Data source: <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations> (11/17/20).

# House of Delegates American Medical Association

## Policies passed November 16, 2020

- ❑ Recognizing racism as a threat to public health
- ❑ Recognizing “race” as a social construct
- ❑ Ending racial essentialism

See <https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/health-equity/ama-racism-threat-public-health>



# Key messages when naming racism

Racism exists

Racism is a system

Racism saps the strength of the whole society

We can act to dismantle racism

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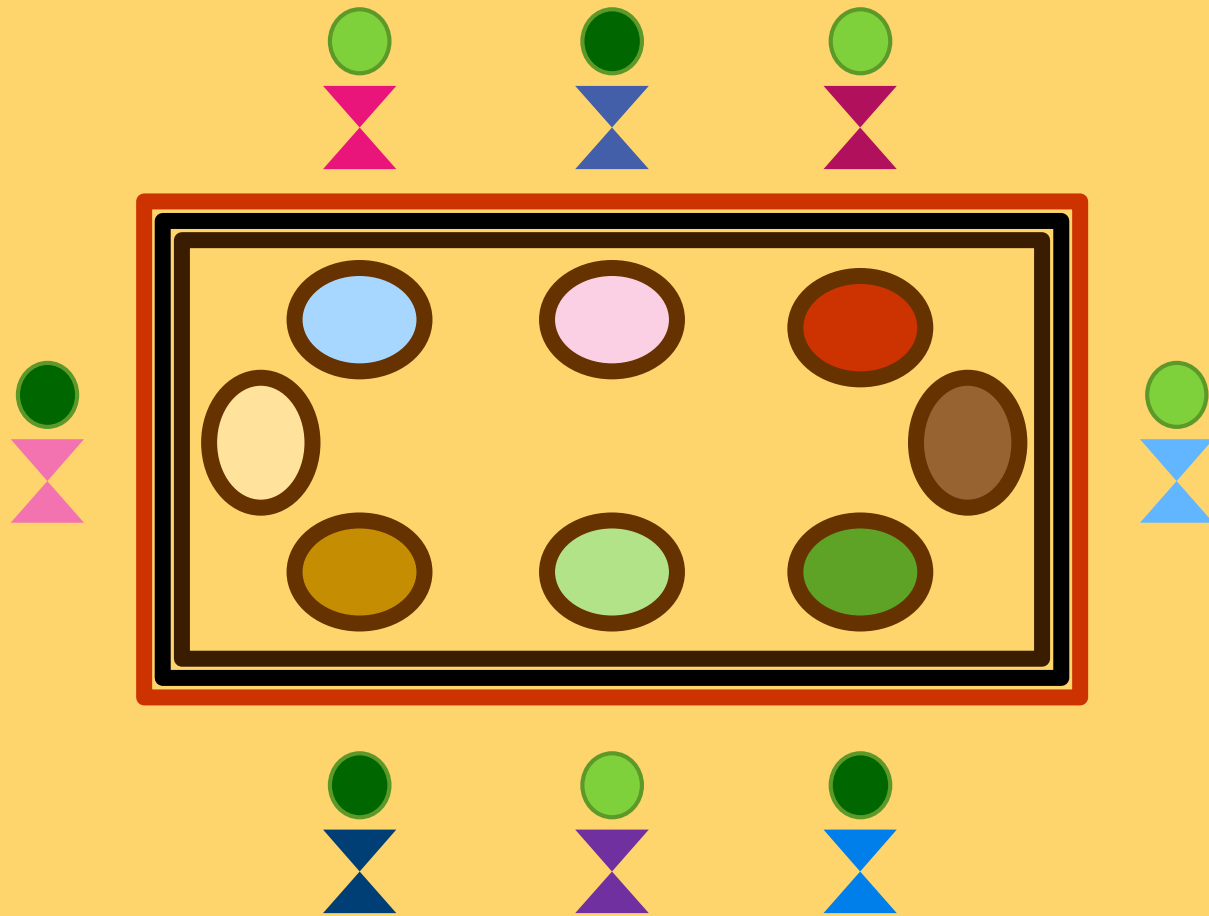
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# Dual Reality: A restaurant saga





I looked up and noticed a sign . . .

**OPEN**



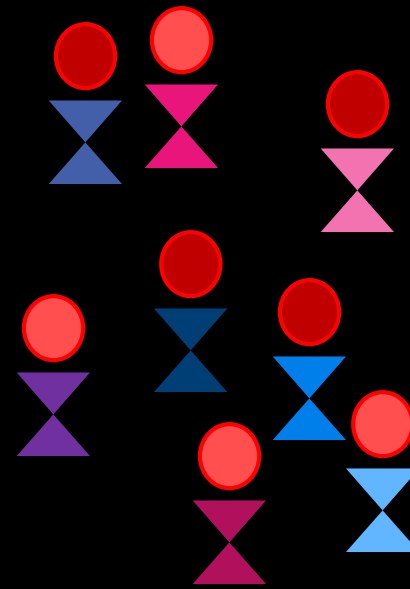
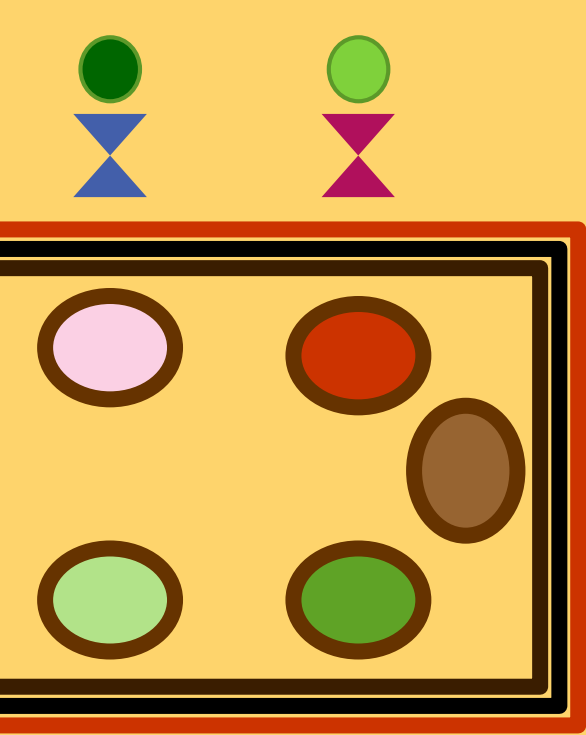




**CLOSED**

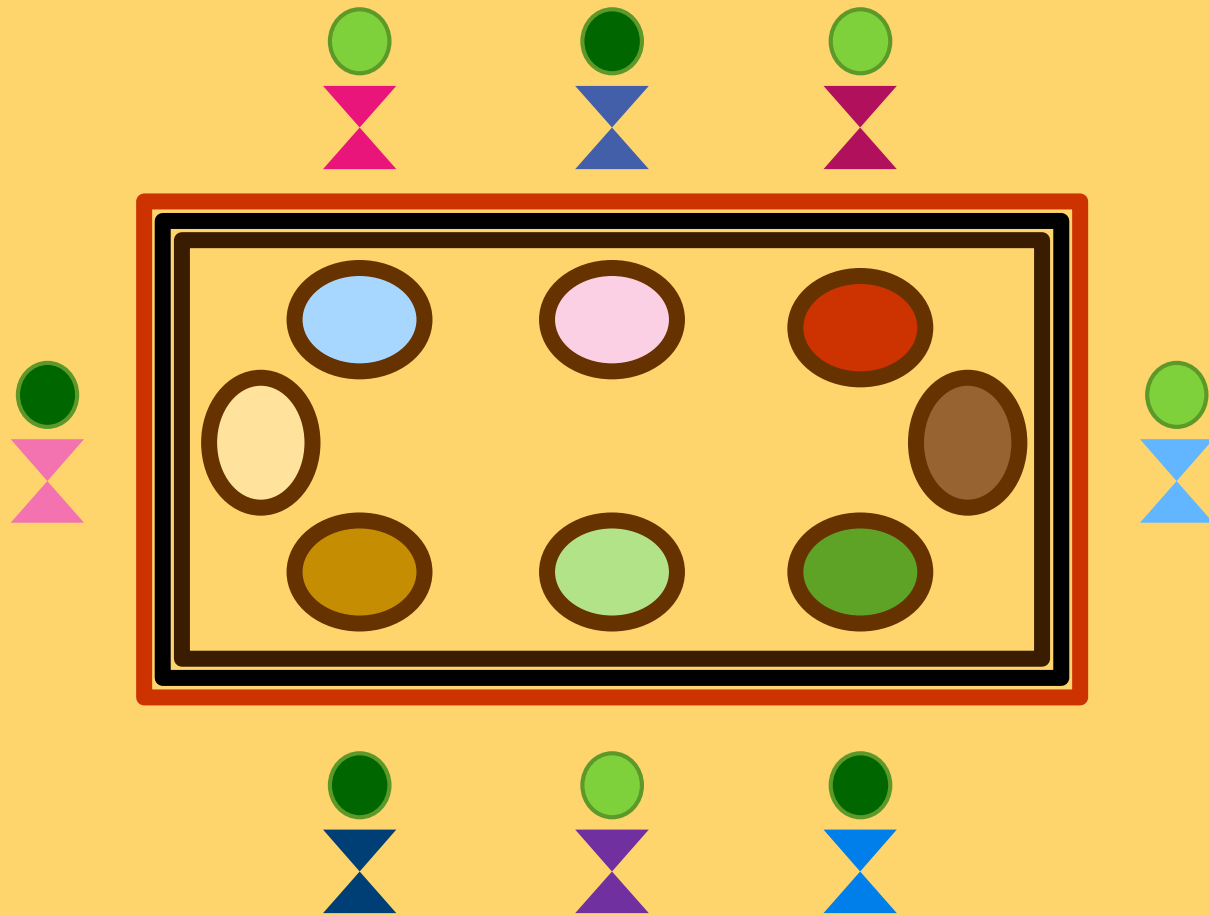


Racism structures “Open/Closed”  
signs in our society.



It is difficult to recognize a system of inequity that privileges us.

Those on the outside are very aware of the two-sided nature of the sign.



Is there really a two-sided sign?

Hard to know, when only see “Open”.  
A privilege not to HAVE to know.  
Once DO know, can choose to act.

# What is racism?

**A system**

# What is racism?

**A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value**

## **What is racism?**

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- Unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities
- Unfairly advantages other individuals and communities
- Saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources

# Levels of Racism

- ❑ Institutionalized
- ❑ Personally-mediated
- ❑ Internalized

## **Institutionalized racism**

- ❑ **Differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society, by “race”**
  
- ❑ **Examples**
  - Housing, education, employment, income
  - Medical facilities
  - Clean environment
  - Information, resources, voice
  
- ❑ **Explains the association between social class and “race”**

## Personally-mediated racism

- ❑ Differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of others, by “race”
- ❑ Differential actions based on those assumptions
  
- ❑ Prejudice and discrimination
- ❑ Examples
  - Police brutality
  - Physician disrespect
  - Shopkeeper vigilance
  - Waiter indifference
  - Teacher devaluation

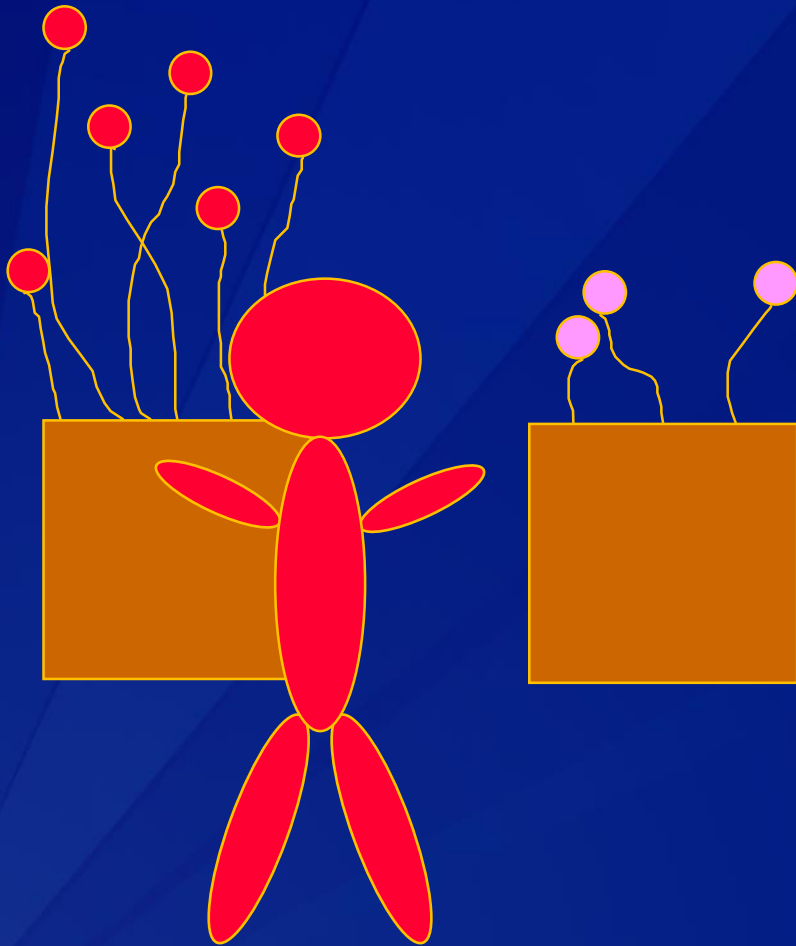
## Internalized racism

- ❑ **Acceptance by the stigmatized “races” of negative messages about our own abilities and intrinsic worth**
  
- ❑ **Examples**
  - Self-devaluation
  - “White man’s ice is colder” syndrome
  - Resignation, helplessness, hopelessness
  
- ❑ **Accepting limitations to our full humanity**

# Levels of Racism: A Gardener's Tale

Jones CP. Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener's Tale. *Am J Public Health* 2000;90(8):1212-1215.

# Who is the gardener?



- Power to decide
- Power to act
- Control of resources

## ■ Dangerous when

- Allied with one group
- Not concerned with equity

# “How is racism operating here?”

## □ Identify mechanisms

- **Structures:** the *who?, what?, when?, and where?* of decision-making
- **Policies:** the written *how?*
- **Practices and norms:** the unwritten *how?*
- **Values:** the *why?*



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Police killings of unarmed Black men  
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- **Norms:** Blue Code of Silence
- **Values:** View of Black men as inherently threatening; dehumanization of people of color

## What is health equity?

- ❑ **“Health equity” is assurance of the conditions for optimal health for all people**
  
- ❑ **Achieving health equity requires**
  - Valuing all individuals and populations equally
  - Recognizing and rectifying historical injustices
  - Providing resources according to need
  
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# Barriers to achieving health equity

# Values targets for anti-racism action

## ❑ **Narrow focus on the individual**

- Self-interest narrowly defined
- Limited sense of interdependence
- Limited sense of collective efficacy
- Systems and structures as invisible or irrelevant

## ❑ **A-historical stance**

- The present as disconnected from the past
- Current distribution of advantage/disadvantage as happenstance
- Systems and structures as givens and immutable

## ❑ **Myth of meritocracy**

- “If you work hard you will make it”
- Denial of racism
- Two babies: Equal potential or equal opportunity?

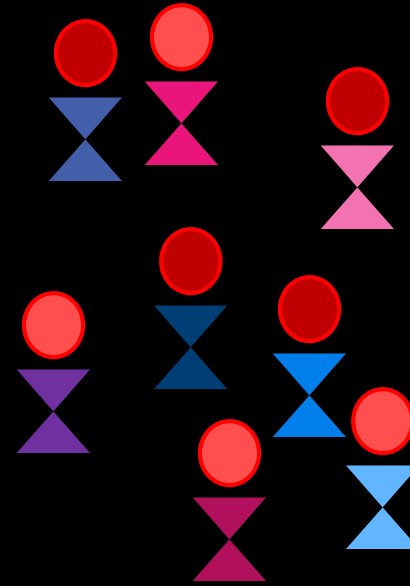
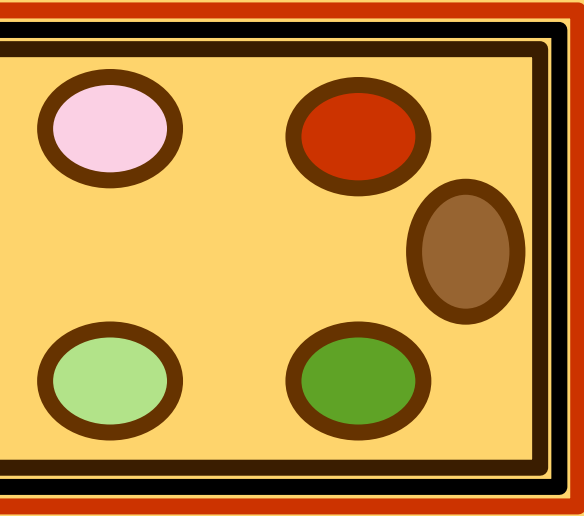
# Values targets for anti-racism action

- ❑ **Myth of zero-sum game**
  - “If you gain, I lose”
  - Fosters competition over cooperation
  - Masks the costs of inequity
  - Hinders efforts to grow the pie
- ❑ **Limited future orientation**
  - Disregard for the children  
No “*Seven generations*” perspective  
No “*How are the children?*” focus
  - Usurious relationship with the planet
- ❑ **Myth of American exceptionalism**
  - Disinterest in learning from others
  - Sense of US entitlement

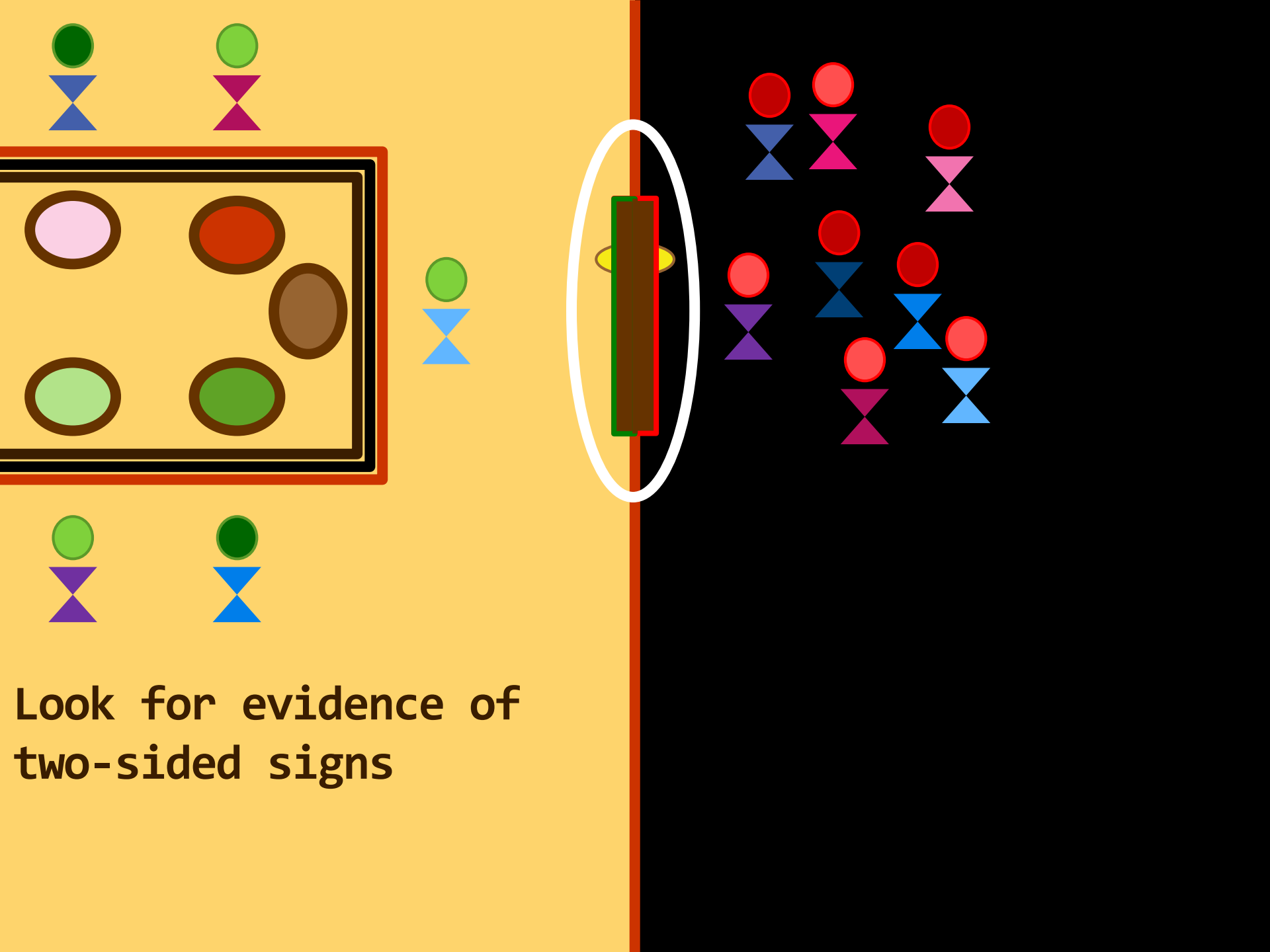
# Values targets for anti-racism action

- ❑ **White supremacist ideology**
  - Hierarchy in human valuation
  - “White” as the ideal and the norm
  - Sense of “White” entitlement
  - Dehumanization of people of color
  - Fear at the “browning” of America

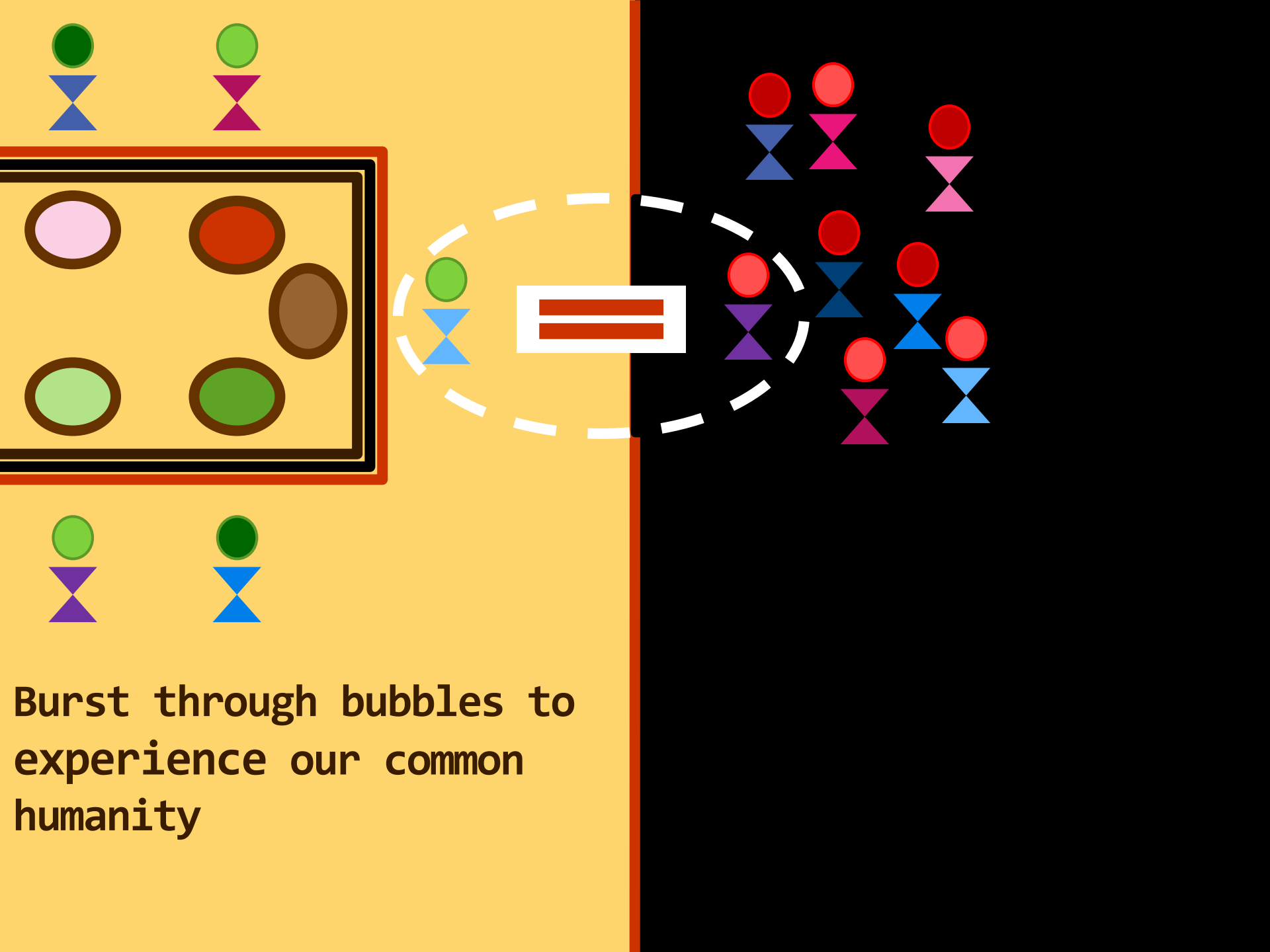




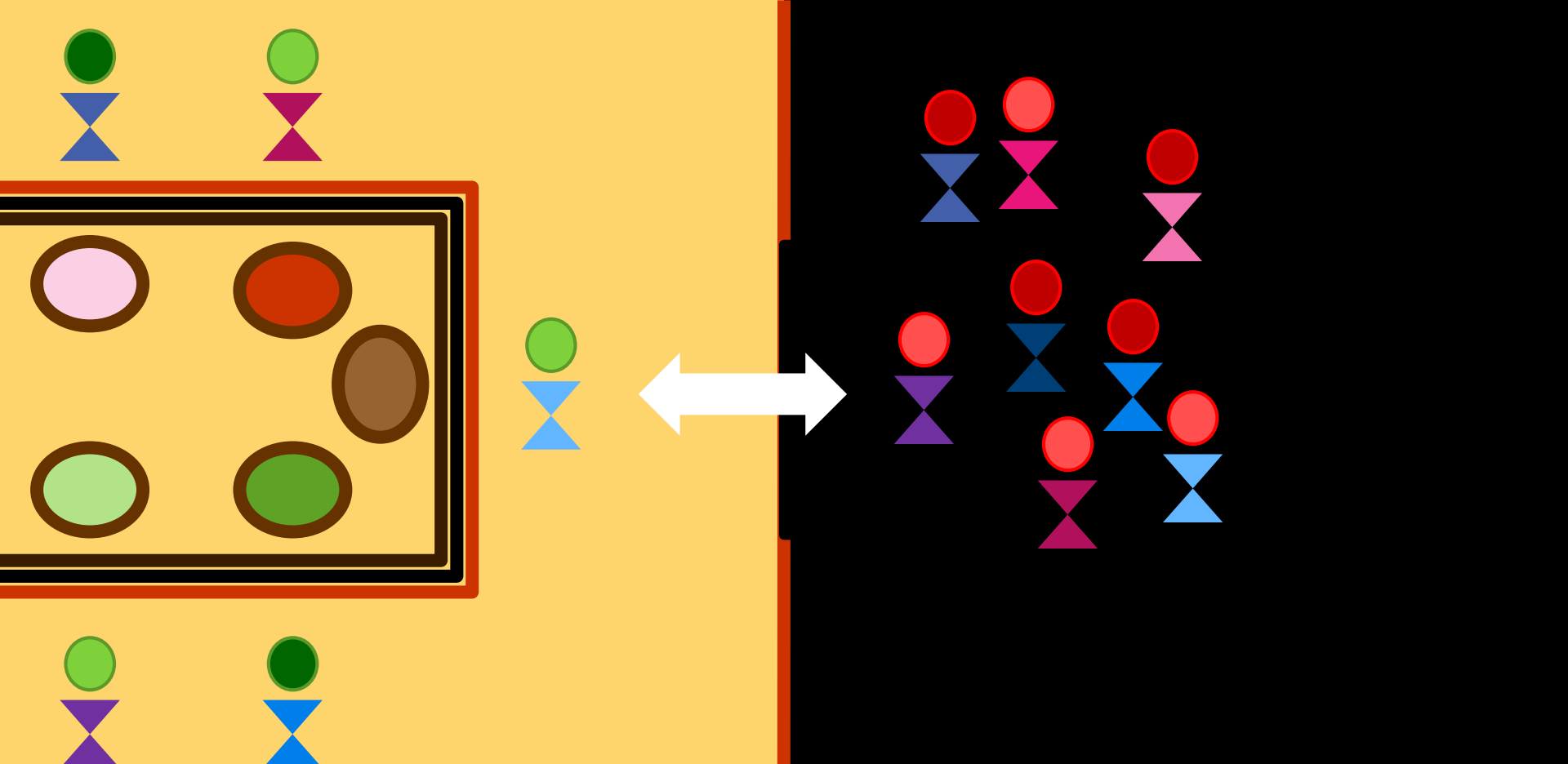
What can we do today?



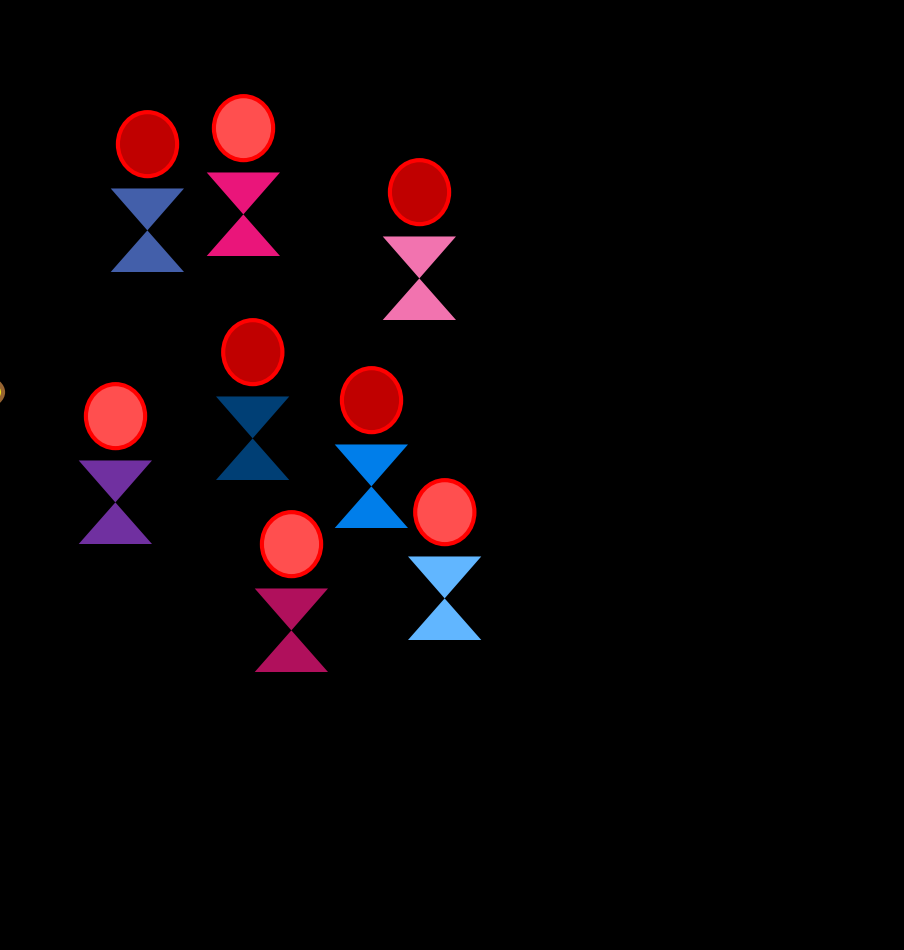
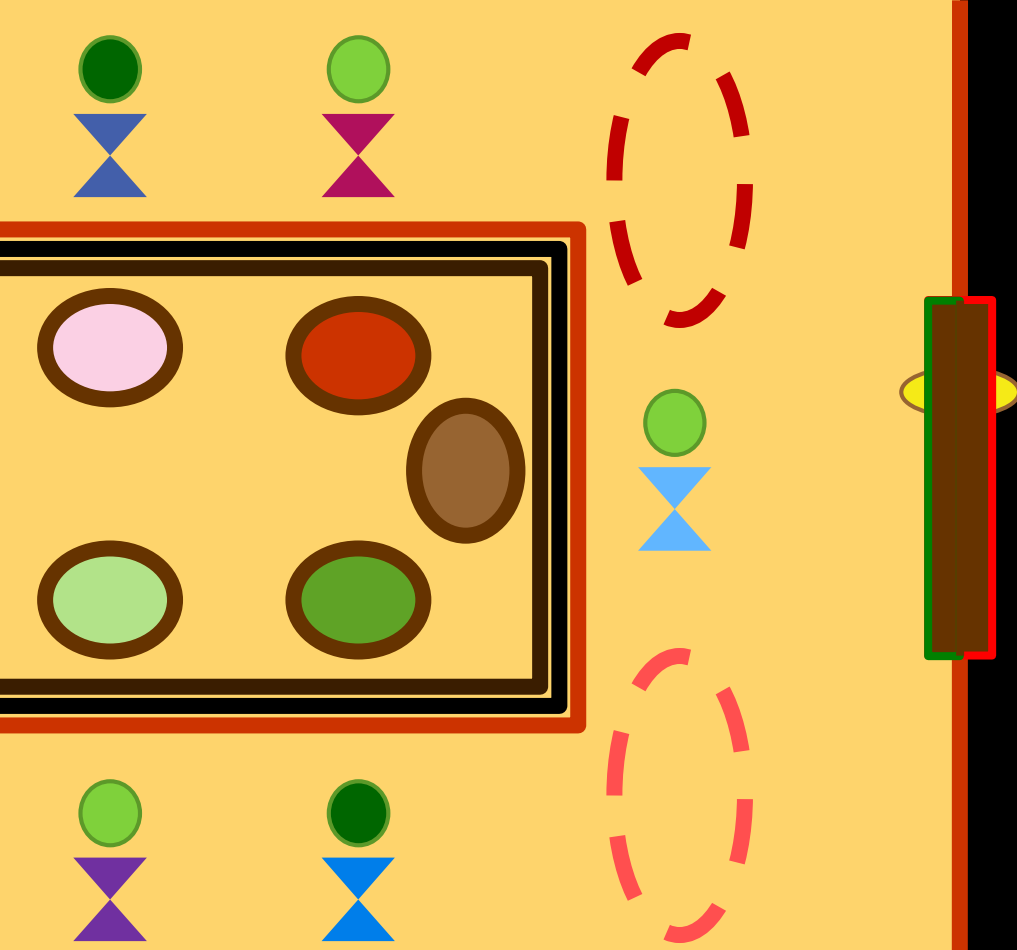
Look for evidence of two-sided signs



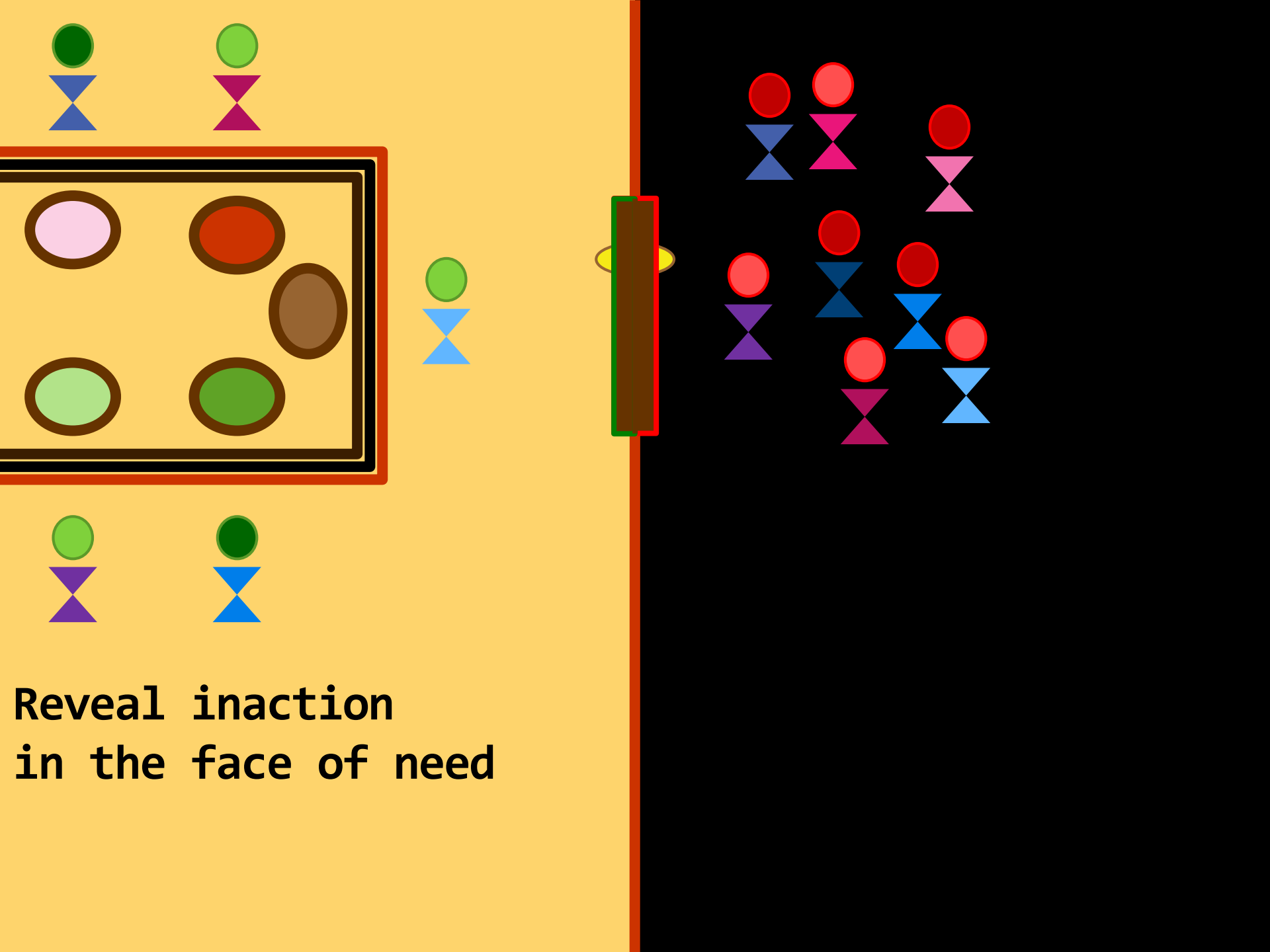
Burst through bubbles to  
experience our common  
humanity



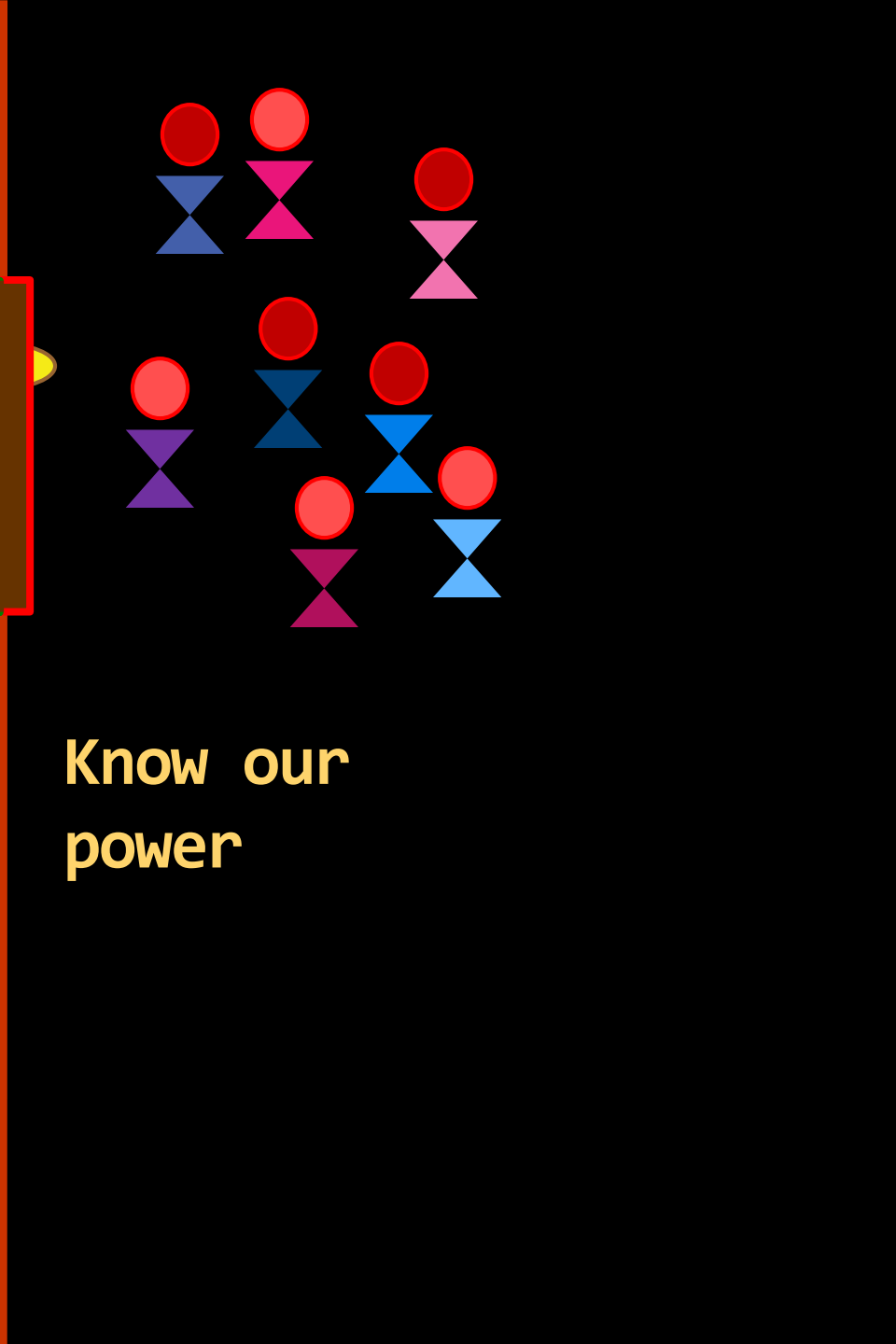
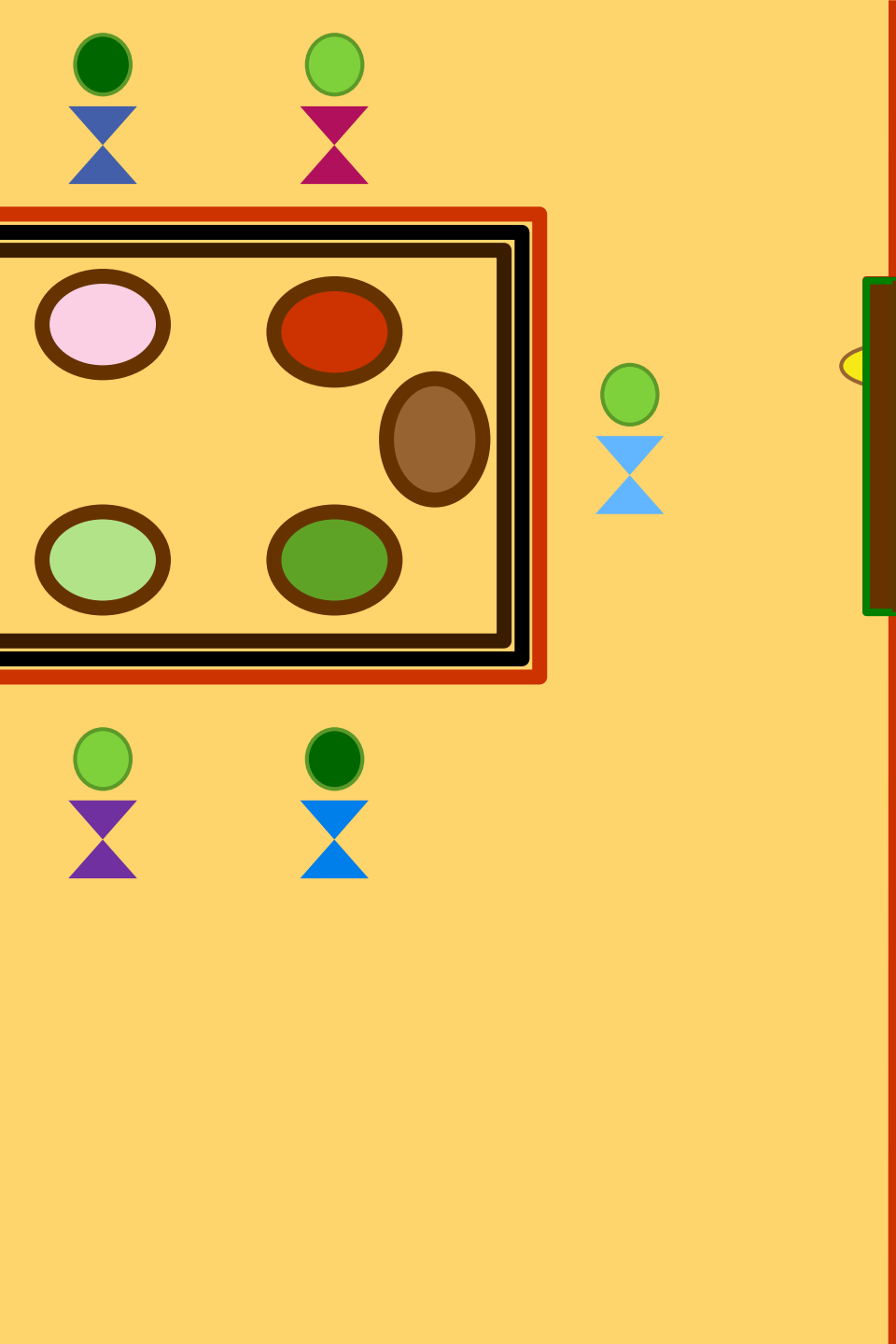
Be interested  
Believe  
Join in  
The stories of others



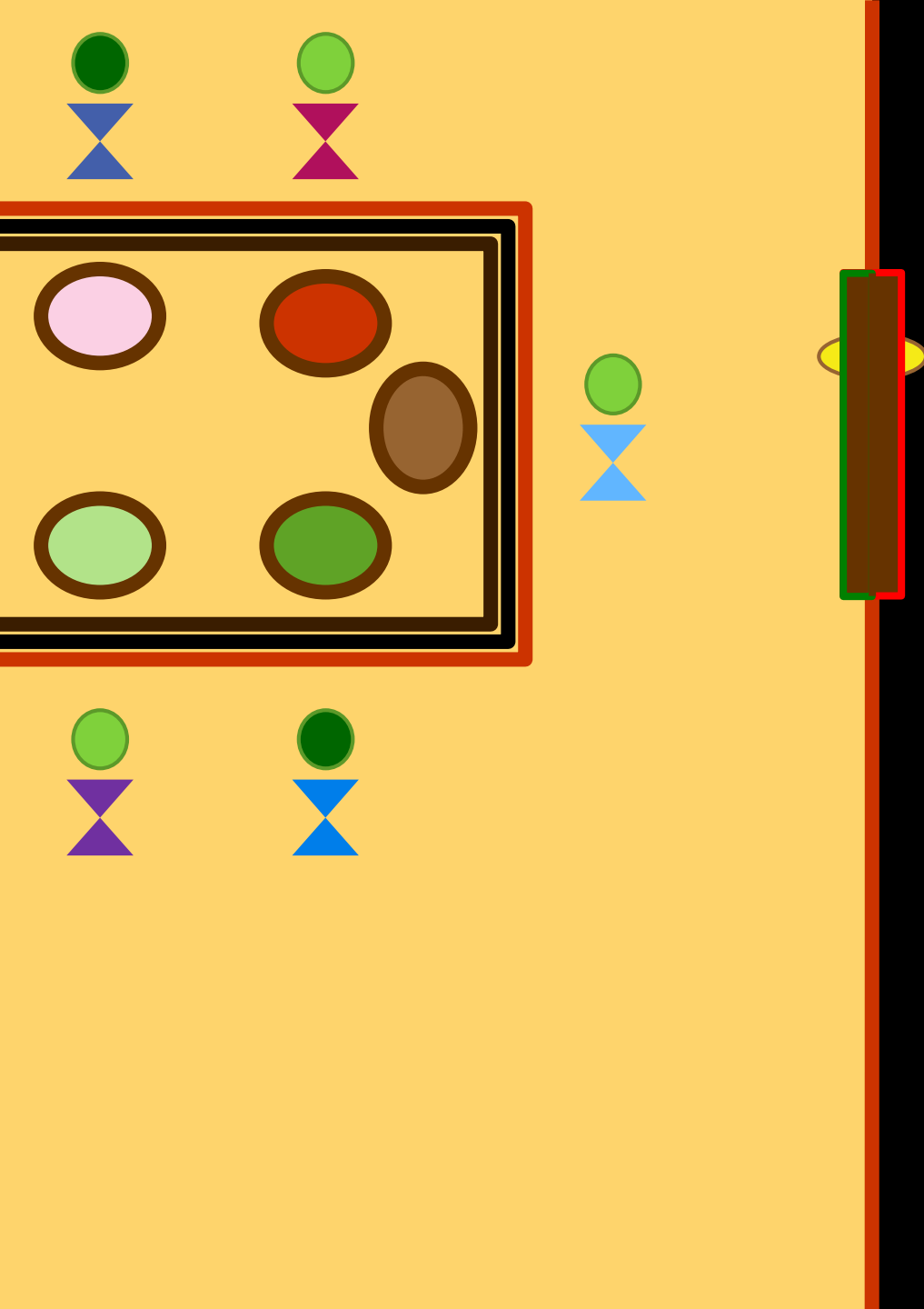
See “the absence of”



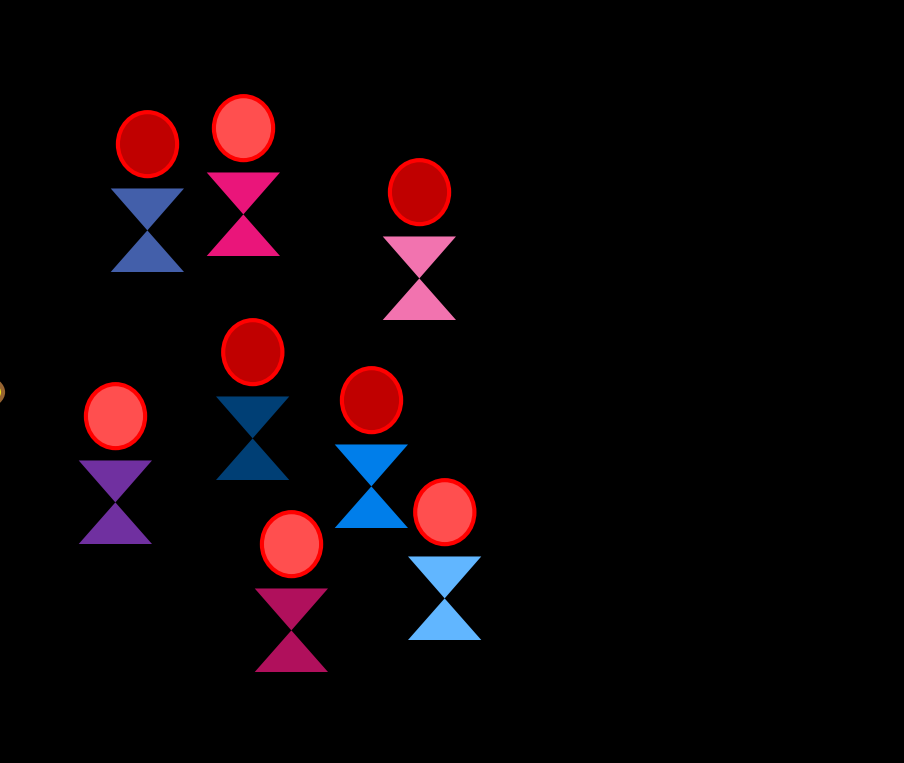
Reveal inaction  
in the face of need



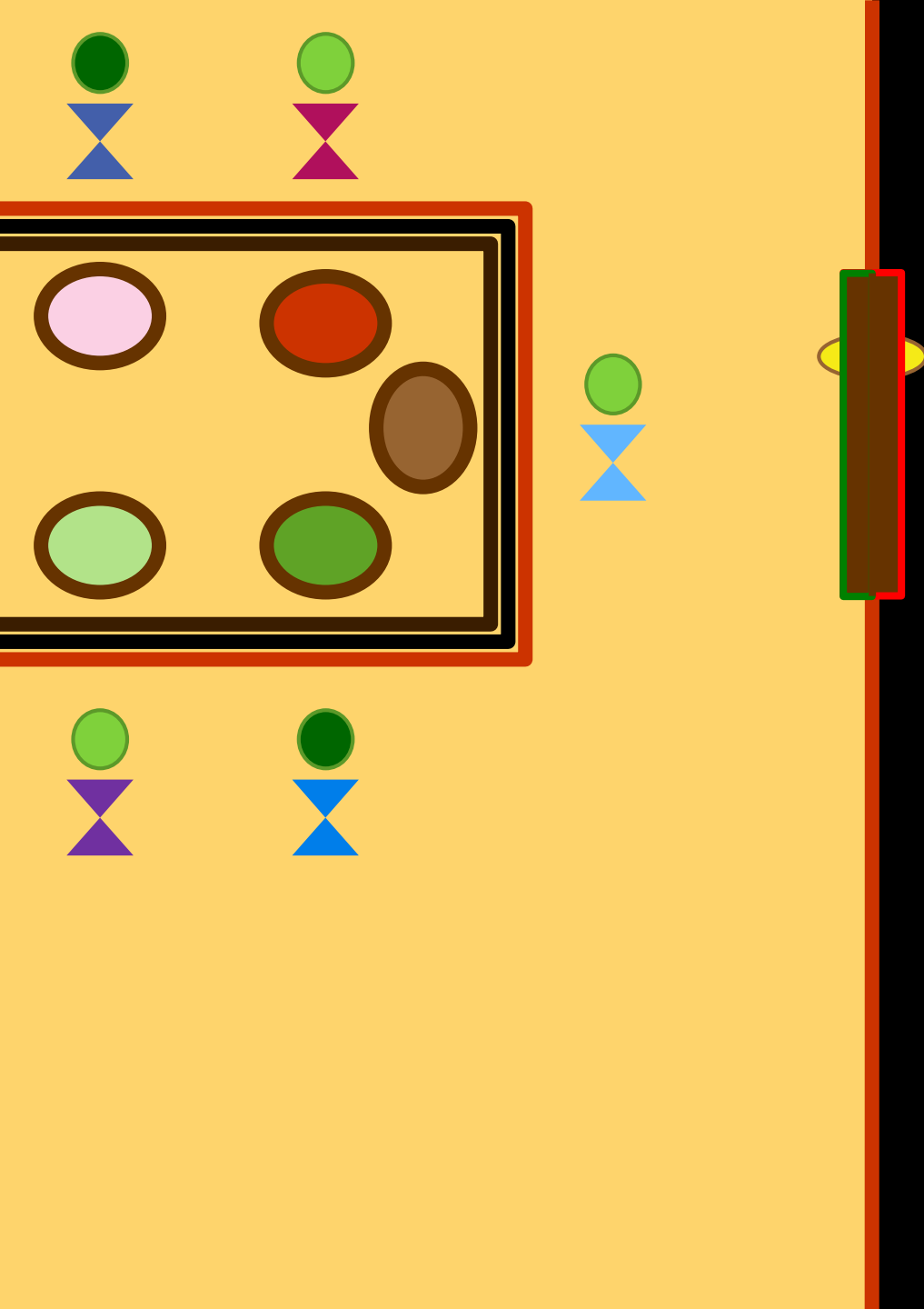
Know our  
power



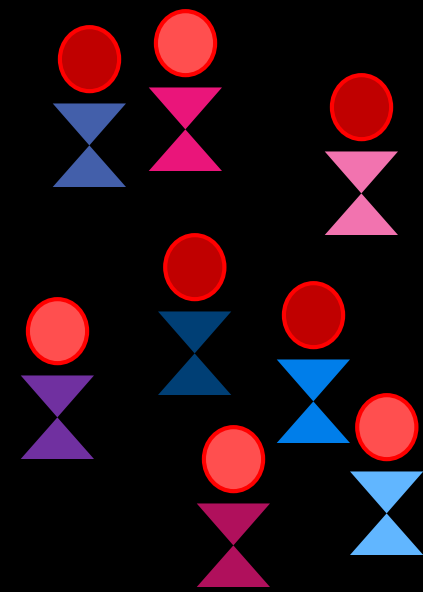
Action is power







Collective action is power



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*Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University*

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**Senior Fellow and Adjunct Associate Professor**

*Morehouse School of Medicine*

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