



Reflections

on Now

Activism

Table of Contents

Welcome – p. 4-6

Quote from Vaclav Havel – p.7

“No Boundary” – Juanita Brown – p. 8-10

“India Is Colonizing Itself” (excerpt) – Arundhati Roy – p.11-13

Manish Jain – p.14-15

Shikshantar Jeevan Andolan – p.16-17

“Healing the Split” – Naveen Kumar – p.18-19

Ken Homer – p. 20-24

“Learning to Be Activated” – Gustavo Esteva – p.25-27

Quote from Paul Goodman – p.28

“Spiritual Activism and Liberation Spirituality: Pathways to Collective Liberation” – Claudia Horowitz and Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey – p.29-34

“Thoughts Before and Beyond Activism” – Motaz Atalla – p.35-39

Buy Nothing Day – p.40

Jackie – p.41-42

“Not So Fast” – Donella Meadows – p.43-44

Challenging Time Poverty – Take Back Your Time – p.45

“Dadagiri or Gandhigiri?” – Shilpa Jain – p.46-49

Quote from Julia Butterfly Hill – p.50

“Am I an Activist?” – Alicia Pace – p.51-53

“Awakening the Artist and Activist Within” – Nitin Paranjape – p.54-56

Outsider Artist: Nek Chand – p.57-58

Shammi Nanda – p.59-61

Zero Waste Activism – p.61

Quote from Ayi Kwei Armah – p.62

“Then and Now” – Bob Stilger – p.63-69

‘Social Work’ – Krishnamurti – p.70

“In Light of My Experience in Palestine” – Munir Fasheh – p.71-76

“To Hell With Good Intentions” – Ivan Illich – p.77-83

Free Hugs Campaign – p.83

Quote from Masanobu Fukuoka – p.84
“The Price of Limitlessness” – Aaron Falbel – p.85-89
World Car-free Day – p.89
“Living without Oil” – George Monbiot – p.90-92
Slow Food Manifesto – p.93
“The Return to Stewardship” – Rachel Schattman – p.94-96
“Pleasures of Eating” (excerpt) – Wendell Berry – p.97-98

Quote from Jules Dervaes – p.99
“Globalizing Localization” – Helena Norberg-Hodge – p.100-103
Earth Democracy – Navdanya – p.104-105
“Reflecting on Growing Without Schooling” (excerpt) – p.106
“In Search of Sovereign Selves” – Vivek Bhandari – p.107-110
“rough draft of a never-ending process” – Siena Mayers – p.111-112

Sufi Proverb and Pay It Forward – p.113
“Drawing Inspiration from Resistance in Ireland and Beyond” – Rosie Meade – p.114-120
“Days of War, Nights of Love” (excerpt) – Crimethinc – p.121-123
“Citizen Activism Now: Beyond Neo-Conservative Liberalism” – Lisa Aubrey – p.124-129
The Art of Slow Protest – p.130-131
“The Case of Oaxacan Society Uprising” – Sergio Beltran – p.132-136
A Yogic Phenomenon: Baba Ramdev – p.137

Quote from Elisabeth Sahtouris – p.138
Debbie Frieze – p.139-141
“76 Reasonable Questions to Ask about any Technology” –
Jacques Ellul – p.142-144
TV Turnoff Week – p.144
“700 Years to Go” – Meg Wheatley – p.145-148
Walkout Challenge Day – p.149

welcome

We have published this booklet to begin the celebration of the 100th anniversary of *Hind Swaraj*, written by M.K Gandhi in 1909. At its release — and still today — *Hind Swaraj* represented a very significant effort to re-orient the fundamental direction of the Indian freedom struggle. It offered to Indians (and to the world) a unique analysis of the crisis as **a civilizational crisis**, and it also suggested the deeper purpose behind the struggle to be free of British rule/institutionalization. For the various actors and actresses in the movement, *Hind Swaraj* also set forth questions, processes and actions, which Gandhiji later expounded upon in subsequent writings.

Several people have called Gandhiji an ‘epochal man’: that is, someone who was deeply concerned with linking his own life to the specific challenges of the age he lived in. His assumption was that each age has its own peculiar problems and opportunities. Gandhiji dedicated himself to constantly engaging in personal experiments to deepen his understanding of truth. Indeed, Gandhiji’s activism pushes us to think in terms of both the Self and the System, as well as to make connections between our means and ends. A good example of this was *Khadi* (homespun cloth). It served as a political-economic symbol, as well as a direct form of personal action/meditation. *Khadi* dynamically integrated elements of both resistance and regeneration

The idea for this dialogue on Now Activism emerged almost two years ago during a conference held in Halifax, Canada. Observing the failure of Americans and other concerned citizens from around the world to stop the Iraq war and to remove Mr. Bush from office, many friends from different parts of the planet were asking: *What do we do if the System isn’t listening to the voices of people? How are we ourselves hypocrites in the Game? What kinds of new activism are required to face the crisis that threatens us today? What is at the roots of this crisis? What gives each of us hope?*

Many of us felt a need to start a discussion on activism in a deeper way, to go beyond visions of elect-our-own-president, send-letters-to-your-politicians, go-to-protest-rallies, fight-court-cases, get-our-piece-of-the-pie,

join-the-system-to-reform-it-from-inside, etc. Today, there is a profound mismatch between these institutionalized responses and the magnitude of the crisis before us. Many of these conventional activist responses further strengthen the System and therefore deepen the crisis. Oftentimes, the activism has been framed in such a way that only a small cadre of technocratic elite can manage or run it. Not only have these forms of activism, for the most part, proved ineffective in changing the Game, they oftentimes have undermined the regenerative power and courage that lies within individuals and communities.

So, rather than ‘mainstreaming’ everyone and everything into the frames of the dominant System, we believe that it might be more inspiring to understand what is happening at the MARGINS around the world. And instead of ‘scaling up’, ‘standardizing’, or ‘replicating’, maybe together we might explore how to strengthen and connect the diversity that bubbles at the MARGINS.

It is worth saying something about the cover of this booklet, which was inspired from a painting by Salvador Dali. Many friends today feel that in order to fight the Machine, one must either join the System, or create their own huge, expensive Machine. Sometimes they drift into despair because of the seemingly giganticness of the System. How can a few individuals and communities stand up to such a massive challenge? The problem is, we are usually conditioned to only see the top half of the picture – the fat elephant stampeding over everything (including us). Rarely, do we see how fragile that elephant is – that he is indeed standing on stilts.

Understanding this frailty can liberate us in several ways. First, we can unlearn that we do not have to be part of producing more huge elephants to fight this one (a trap that many socialists fell into). Once we understand this, our strategies can be completely different. Second, we can remember that we already have many simple forms of power, tools, relationships and local knowledge systems at our disposal, which are capable of tripping up the elephant or by-passing it altogether. Are we the termites who will slowly eat away at the stilts? Are we the bicyclists who will maneuver underneath the stilts and find new paths? *How do you want to engage with (or disengage with) the elephant?*

In pursuit of ideas and experiences, we offered these questions to circles of friends around the world:

- What are the kinds of activism that are needed **now**?
- What kinds of inspiring examples of such **now activism** are emerging around the world? What are some of the key principles/symbols that are underlying these efforts?
- In what ways should we **now** rethink 'activism' and who is an 'activist'?
- What should we learn **now** from activist movements and freedom struggles of the past?
- How do we need to **now** understand terms like 'power', 'freedom', 'justice' and 'social change' in new ways?
- What do we need to unlearn for **now activism**s to continue to grow?
- What important questions do current activists need to ask themselves today to open up more possibilities for **now activism**s to emerge?
- What important questions can be used to invite/engage people who do not currently think of themselves as 'activists' into exploring their roles in **now activism**?
- How do you see yourself as a **now activist**?

Many people shared their own responses, while other shared stories, essays and quotes that they found meaningful for this dialogue.

As with most of our previous booklets, this one should also be seen as invitation to join with us in an unfolding dialogue. We hope to hear your experiences and thoughts on Now Activism.

April 2007

*I prefer to take the company of
those seeking truth,
rather than
those who think
they have found it.*

- Vaclav Havel

former president of the Czech Republic

Juanita Brown (The World Café - www.theworldcafe.org)

No Boundary

A boundary line, as any military expert will tell you, is also a potential battle line.... Here is the human predicament: the firmer ones' boundaries, the more entrenched are ones' battles....As an individual draws up the boundaries of his soul, he establishes, at the same time, the battles of his soul.

- Ken Wilber

I come from a long line of activists. My adopted grandmother was a resistance fighter in World War II; my parents helped to found the American Civil Liberties union in Florida, amidst cross-burnings on our lawn by the Ku Klux Klan for hosting blacks at our home during the early civil rights period; and I was an organizer for Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers movement, coordinating the international grape boycott against the agribusiness industry in California. I was active in anti-war protests, marched on Washington, and picketed the San Francisco stock exchange. As a child of the sixties it was clear who the “enemy” was. Activism meant fighting against injustice, mobilizing against the military industrial complex, stopping abuses by the government against the constitutional rights of citizens in a “free” country.

Against was a big word in my vocabulary and in my soul...in fact, I would say it was the defining energy of my life. The Spanish phrase “hasta alli y no mas” (to that point and no further) guided my thinking and action. My adopted grandmother, who I revered, always told me in her thick European accent: “ I want to die fighting the bastards!”

There was a tremendous sense of solidarity in knowing who the enemy was — a feeling of “noble certainty” that infused my life and spirit. I knew who was on “our side” and there was a sense of safety and security in being with people who shared my values around democracy, justice and civil rights. While I was always willing to come to the bargaining table — it was from having somehow forced the opponent with non-violent, but dramatic and effective means, (mass marches, boycotts) to unwillingly yield power to the people. And, I was convinced that the only way that the power structure would yield its wealth or influence was to force that to happen with an equally powerful force — albeit nonviolent, since we were trained in disciplined non-violent tactics by Saul Alinsky and other great American organizers of that period.

Now, 40 years later, I am living more in the “both/and.” While I see that it is important, as a citizen, to bear witness and stand with and stand for, and stand up, I am also discovering that it is critical to stand in — to stand in the questions themselves, to stand in the center of my own deeper knowing that there is no “them”, there — there’s only “us”— and that the us is everyone. I’m trying not to

see enemies but rather people whose life histories and stories have led them to different conclusions, capable of exploration and mutual transformation into something new that we can't yet imagine. And, from having worked with the "enemy" close up in corporate life, I recognize that the complex institutional interrelationships that create systemic inequity and injustice will not be resolved by picketing my local stock exchange. The doorways lie elsewhere.

My sense of the relationship between the local and the global, the micro and the macro has also shifted into a "both/and". In my earlier years as an activist, I used to think that only "large-scale change" mattered and that my job was to do massive organizing to help that happen (sometimes single handedly, I might add!). Now my own theories of change have changed, and I see the large scale spread of small local grassroots experiments as being critical to the changes that at least I want to see in the world, while still supporting larger-scale global efforts where it seems appropriate.

So, I guess I would say that for me the Now Activism has a different face and spirit than the one I grew up with and the legacy of my adopted grandmother — the Woman Warrior, Gertrude Blom. It is a compassionate activism — an activism who's ideals focus on co-creating what I am for rather than solely fighting against those who I perceive as enemies of the people's legitimate rights. It is an evolutionary activism in contrast to revolutionary activism. It sees human beings as one living face of a much larger evolutionary process on this earth. The Now Activism for me today is embodied as "process activism" — advocating for processes that enable the collective intelligence and wisdom of the whole — across traditional boundaries to be discovered. It is grounded in spirituality — a faith in a larger intelligence than mine, that provides some measure of perspective when I fall into despair at the state of the world and of our prospects for survival as a species.

For me, the Now Activism is grounded in the willingness to reach cross the traditional boundaries of age, race, gender, nationality, and political persuasion. At some level, it is more pragmatic, less doctrinaire — looking for, as Gandhi said, the "part of the adversary who knows what is right and fair."

It is grounded in the belief that we can never know what will turn the tide, since systems are so complex and interdependent. And it is grounded in the belief that when the conversation changes, the world can change — with conversation as a core process that deserves reverence and love since it's all we've got as a human community to find new meanings together and new paths forward.

Therefore, I believe I can only live the future I believe in today, with those who surround me and with whom my life is interwoven (both near and far). It means my standing up and bearing witness, when needed (I still attend marches and

demonstrations to make visible my voice as a citizen of an only partially democratic nation) — but I place more of my organizing attention on stewardship of the small place on earth that we call “home,” and on nurturing the global community of the World Café and allied approaches to accessing collective intelligence as my act of large scale “process activism” for the 21st century.

- What will enable us to access the collective wisdom that can move our organizations, communities and societies toward more life affirming futures?
- In an interdependent world, where no single stakeholder can “win” alone on any truly challenging issue, how can we work together across traditional boundaries to transcend “us/them” thinking as we search for co-intelligent paths forward? What tough personal dilemmas and paradoxes lie on that path?
- What will allow each of us to act with personal authenticity and integrity, especially when confronted with those we might normally consider “the other”? What can leaders across generations and sectors with quite different life experiences in this regard learn from one another’s personal stories and discoveries?
- How can we access and generate new forms of creative power beyond our traditional political and economic interpretations? What does it mean to reconnect the personal and the political? The spiritual and the societal?
- What are our ‘theories in use’ of how constructive change occurs – within systems, within communities and within ourselves?
- What is your own heartfelt call to courageous action in relation to at least one key life or work challenge—inspiring you in ways that embody your own deepest values, express your authentic leadership, and fulfill your desire to make a difference?
- Where do you see possibilities for our discoveries together to take root and spread?
- What are your own deepest questions and dilemmas which, if explored, could make the most difference to our mutual inquiry?

India Is Colonising Itself

An Interview with Arundhati Roy by Shoma Chaudhuri (excerpt)

26 March 2007, Tehelka

There is an atmosphere of growing violence across the country. How do you read the signs? Do you think it will grow more in the days to come? What are its causes? In what context should all this be read?

You don't have to be a genius to read the signs. We have a growing middle class, being reared on a diet of radical consumerism and aggressive greed. Unlike industrializing western countries which had colonies from which to plunder resources and generate slave labour to feed this process, we have to colonize ourselves, our own nether parts. We've begun to eat our own limbs. The greed that is being generated (and marketed as a value interchangeable with nationalism) can only be sated by grabbing land, water and resources from the vulnerable. What we're witnessing is the most successful secessionist struggle ever waged in Independent India. The secession of the middle and upper classes from the rest of the country. It's a vertical secession, not a lateral one. They're fighting for the right to merge with the world's elite somewhere up there in the stratosphere. They've managed to commandeer the resources, the coal, the minerals, the bauxite, the water and electricity. Now they want the land to make more cars, more bombs, more mines – super toys for the new super citizens of the new superpower. So it's outright war, and people on both sides are choosing their weapons. The government and the corporations reach for Structural Adjustment, the World Bank, the ADB, FDI, friendly court orders, friendly policy makers, help from the 'friendly' corporate media and a police force that will ram all this down peoples' throats. Those who want to resist this process have, until now, reached for dharnas, hunger-strikes, satyagraha, the courts, and what they thought was friendly media. But now, more and more are reaching for guns. Will the violence grow? If the 'growth rate' and the sensex are going to be the only barometres the government uses to measure progress and the well-being of people, then of course it will. How do I read the signs? It isn't hard to read sky-writing. What it says up there, in big letters is this: The shit has hit the fan, folks.

You once remarked that though you may not resort to violence yourself, you think it has become immoral to condemn it, given the circumstances in the country. Can you elaborate on this view?

I'd be a liability as a guerilla! I doubt I used the word 'immoral'-morality is an elusive business, as changeable as the weather. What I feel is this: Non-violent

movements have, for decades knocked on the door of every democratic institution in this country and have been spurned and humiliated. Look at the Bhopal Gas victims, the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The NBA for example, had a lot going for it, high profile leadership, media coverage, more resources than any other mass movement. What went wrong? People are bound to want to re-think strategy.

When Sonia Gandhi begins to promote Satyagraha at the World Economic Forum in Davos it's time for us to sit up and think. For example, is mass civil disobedience possible within the structure of a democratic nation-state? Is it possible in the age of disinformation and corporate-controlled mass media? Are hunger-strikes umbilically linked to celebrity politics? Would anybody care if the people of Nangla Machhi or Bhatti mines went on a hunger-strike? Sharmila Irom has been on a hunger strike for six years. That should be a salutary lesson to many of us. I've always felt that it's ironic that hunger-strikes are used as a political weapon in a land where most people go hungry anyway. We are in a different time and place now. Up against a different, more complex adversary.

We've entered the era of NGOs – or should I say the era of *paltbu sbers* – in which mass action can be a treacherous business. We have demonstrations which are funded, we have sponsored dharnas and social forums which posture militantly but never follow up on what they preach. We have all kinds of 'virtual' resistance. Meetings against SEZs sponsored by the biggest promoters of SEZs. Awards and grants for environmental activism and community action given by corporations responsible for devastating whole ecosystems. Vedanta, a company mining bauxite in the forests of Orissa wants to start a university. The Tatas have two charitable trusts that directly and indirectly, fund activists and mass movements across the country. Could that be why Singur has drawn so much less flak than Nandigram, and why they have not targeted, boycotted, gheraoed? Of course, the Tatas and Birlas funded Gandhi too – maybe he was our first NGO. But now we have NGOs who make a lot of noise, write a lot of reports, but who the sarkar is more than comfortable with. How do we make sense of all this? The place is crawling with professional diffusers of real political action. 'Virtual resistance' has become something of a liability.

There was a time when mass movements looked to the courts for justice. The courts have rained down a series of judgments that are so unjust, so insulting to the poor in the language they use, they take your breath away. A recent Supreme Court judgment allowing the Vasant Kunj Mall to resume construction though it didn't have the requisite clearances said in so many words, that the question of

Corporations indulging in malpractice does not arise! In the era of corporate globalization, corporate land-grab, in the era of Enron and Monsanto, Halliburton and Bechtel, that's a loaded thing to say. It exposes the ideological heart of the most powerful institution in this country. The judiciary along with the corporate press, is now seen as the lynchpin of the neo-liberal project.

In a climate like this when people feel that they are being worn down, exhausted by these interminable 'democratic' processes, only to be humiliated eventually, what are they supposed to do? ...



Manish Jain (Shikshantar)

I first became involved in activism when I was in college in the late 1980s. At that time, I focused on campus issues related to personal and institutional racism against Asian Americans. I helped organize protest rallies, sit-ins, petitions, letter-writing campaigns, and even special commissions. I also tried to build bridges first with the African American, Native American and Latino populations then with groups focusing on class, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc. I thought that my 'politics' was becoming more inclusive as I angrily fought for the human rights of all oppressed peoples. We could make the System work for all by reforming it so that it gave equal rights to everyone – everyone could have a piece of the pie. But inside something did not feel quite right.

I grew up being told that you needed to have mainstream institutional power if you want to change the world. This meant either lots of money, political influence, academic expertise or military arms. So I spent the next 8 years venturing into the big power structures of the world – Wall Street, Harvard and the United Nations systems, Ministry of Education, NGOs – jumping from one belly of the beast to another, exploring how I could change them from within. As I moved around, I started to discover that there were deeper linkages and assumptions which connected and served to keep in place these power structures. The Game was bigger than just a few 'bad apples'. I started to have deeper questions about the labels which we used to describe diverse people/lifestyles from around the world (such as 'under-developed' or 'illiterate'), about the framing of peoples' problems around the world (from a deficit perspective within a larger worldview of scarcity), and around the nature of the experts, technocratic solutions and institutions.

It was during this period that I came across a little booklet by Mahatma Gandhi that was written in 1908 called Hind Swaraj. In that often-neglected piece, he seeks to explore the real purpose of the freedom struggle. He clarifies, "It is not about getting rid of the tiger [i.e. the British] and keeping the tiger's nature [tools, systems, worldview, etc]." He calls for swaraj (rule over the individual and collective Self) and for the need to look beyond the logic of "modern" colonizing systems of health, justice and technology. I was deeply inspired by his challenge to look at both the 'ends' and the 'means' in the context of both the personal and the systemic dimensions of our lives. (This had already been a part of my upbringing with Jain philosophy which encouraged me to interrogate the premise that one could create non-violent worlds using violence methods). Gandhi's insights also gave me space to transcend false polarizing and deterministic TINA (There Is No Alternative) debates of capitalism vs. communism, Left vs. Right, East vs. West, etc. At the same time, swaraj opened up new opportunities to ask more fundamental questions about the nature of progress, freedom, faith, etc. in generative ways rather than through the cynical mindgames that I had been academically trained in. I also felt the courage to try to move beyond playing

'big' power games to fix the State and Market systems. I realized that no matter how clever I was, these only served to further fuel the monster. I started to re-orient myself to a place of asking honest questions about my own complicity and insecurity as well as searching for my own real sources of organic power. Are there forms of power that are not dependent on the growth of the State, NGOs or Market? Could I re-generate these in my own life?

For the past 9 years, I have been trying to explore what swaraj means today in the context of my life and my community in Udaipur, India. I have been trying to understand dignity, wisdom and imagination in new ways that stem from the mundane, the small, the slow, the inefficient, the invisible. How can I live my values today rather than waiting for the System to change? For this, I have been trying to experiment with creating various hands-on alternatives -- ranging from self-healing to community media to organic farming -- which reduce my family's dependency on large institutions and re-value physical bodily labour. Much of my own real learning started with our family's decision to not send our child to school.

During the process, I have met people from all over the world who are making similar efforts in honestly regenerating their own communities -- many of whom have never called themselves activists and would never think of doing so. One of these people is my 'illetterate' grandmother who is one of the greatest environmentalists that I have ever been around. She is not a member of Greenpeace, nor does she have a PhD in environmental sciences. But she is an amazing upcycler. I now feel we are missing out on a lot of possibilities because of our conditioning as 'Left' activists. I remember a friend recently telling me that she was lucky to escape her local community because the people there, including her family, were so conservative. I challenged her to re-explore her assumptions of 'liberal' and 'conservative' -- there might be things that she didn't like that were taking place in her community but had she taken the time to deeply look at what were the positive things (practices, stories, possibilities) that were happening. I think the main struggle in front of us lies in reclaiming control not only over what we choose to see and value in our life, but also how we see and value things.

For me, the most exciting examples of Now Activism in India are those which are seeking to re-legitimize and re-connect to the local knowledge, imagination and wisdom that exists within traditional communities. Giving top priority to regenerating local languages, ways of seeing, expressions and dialogical spaces -- on their own cultural terms rather than through institutionalized and commodified lenses -- is urgent, if we are to find our own ways out of the massive crises that overwhelm us today. As I meet with friends, there are some questions which seem relevant to explore:

- *What else do I need to unlearn to see/tap into new forms of power, identity and relationships?*
- *What are the diverse ways in which people are self-organizing outside the purview of dominant authority and institutions?*

Why We Call Shikshantar a *Jeevan Andolan* ('Life Movement')

Shikshantar is a movement that starts with bringing movement (rhythm, color, energy, etc.) into our own lives. We seek to link our personal lives with our social, cultural and political work. We believe in the philosophy that we must “be the change we wish to see in the world.”

- We start with a deep faith in human goodness, wisdom, intuition and the sacredness and abundance of Life.
- We have no demands from the State or the Global Market as we believe that these institutions have been built and sustained on illegitimate forms of power.
- We are open to dialogue with any and every one who is searching for a better world. We continually try to transcend categories of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ and various labels which dehumanize ‘the Other’. We engage with individuals and communities using appreciative approaches rather than deficit frameworks.
- We see each person as uniquely and completely qualified to share their insights, experiences, strengths and dreams about deep learning and honest living. We don’t believe in institutionalized ‘experts’ or ‘professionals’.
- We believe in the power of the informal, intimate and spontaneous. No one needs any qualifications to be a co-creator of this movement. There are no formalized procedures, bureaucracy or hierarchy for connecting with or interacting with any of us.
- We are exploring new ways of collaboration, conviviality and co-learning. We challenge competition, compulsion and ‘survival of the fittest’ narratives.
- Unlike most professionals and institutions, we do not fragment our work, our roles or our lives into separate compartments. We see concepts and practices, thought and action, as inter-linked and seek to transcend various

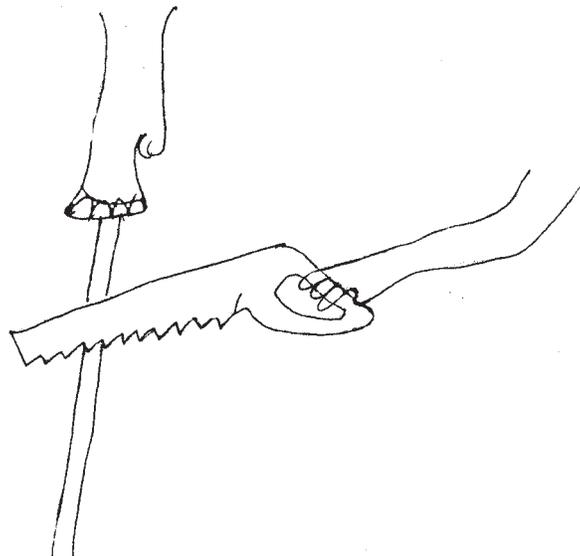
institutional boundaries (of disciplines, of degrees, of nations, etc.). We are actively in the struggle to bring consistency among our means and our ends. We initiate change with our own homes, families, communities.

- We believe in multiple paths, multiple ideas, multiple possibilities, and resist monoculture in all its forms. We don't have a master plan to implement or a 'grand utopian narrative' to force into diverse peoples' lives and realities. We firmly believe in and encourage the right to make mistakes.

- In contrast to NGOs or didactic campaigns, we are not here to teach, convince or provide ready-made answers or solutions, but more to question, experiment and learn together. Our interactions are based on mutually exploring and deepening one another's questions and life journeys.

- We find our resources from individuals, in the form of time, commitment, energy, love, support, in-kind materials, money, and their passion for co-creation. We do not take any core funding from governments, multinational corporations, international agencies or any other institutions. We are committed to finding ways of doing meaningful things in our lives and in growing this movement without dependence on money.

- www.swaraj.org/shikshantar



Naveen Kumar
Healing the Split

This question of 'activism' and 'right action' is becoming increasingly important for me these days, as I stand at life's cross roads and contemplate what path to take forward. I've been volunteering for many 'social change' activities since college days, like 'educating' poor children, spending time at old age homes, being a part youth collectives, awareness spreading and information dissemination, corporate environmentalism, etc. Apart from these direct involvements, I've also had the opportunity to interact closely with many activist friends from diverse backgrounds, philosophies, and approaches to social change. Needless to say, these experiences have been quite enriching and have thrown up many further questions and insights which have guided my path so far. However, I now am losing the inner meaning these activities had held for me and am revisiting some of the root questions again.

One of the issues I think about often is that of 'social change'. A lot of people I get to meet or hear about in the media, from the president of the country, to corporate bosses, to NGO do-gooders, to the young school children in our classes everybody want to change the world, 'develop' the country etc. As I said earlier, there are many philosophies and approaches regarding this, and I am trying to see where I fit in amidst all this. *What is my understanding of social change? Why change at all? How is it interrelated with the individual? What is 'right action' in an increasingly reactionary society?*

While I don't have too many answers yet, I feel they are closely linked to the understanding of what the "problem" is? Do I merely hold our problems to be as Environmental Degradation, Economic Globalization, Business Corporations, Schools, George Bush (and Dick Cheney), Limitless Growth, Farmer Suicides, Riots and Wars, Corruption, The Oil Crash, Loss of Bio-Diversity, 'Development', etc.? Or are these reflections of a deeper rot, within us and our inter-relationships? Can these issues be "solved" or even genuinely addressed without understanding their real roots? I think any response (including whatever 'activism' is held to be) that doesn't go deep enough and address the real roots of the crisis will only end up becoming superficial reactions that spawn further reactions.

Initially, I perceived these to be disjointed issues that had to be 'fixed'. If the numerous such 'problems' are to be 'solved', there would be peace and happiness in the world. Then as I dabbled more with philosophy and spirituality to deal with some unpleasant happenings in life, I found my perception of these problems also changed over time. I no longer feel that these are disconnected issues but are the manifestations of the growing chaos and fragmentation inside us individuals

and communities. And these external manifestations cannot be genuinely dealt with, without an inwardly pilgrimage towards spontaneous order and wholeness.

That said, I also feel it's very vital to understand how deeply entrenched we are inside the "machine"¹, as much as it is rooted inside us. It is like a well grown tree that goes as deep below the ground, as tall as it grows above it. We share a vicious and dynamic relationship with it, we mould the "machine" and it shapes us in return. I feel most of activism today fails to address this dynamic duality.

I've seen friends who hold very powerful critiques on the system, its institutions, and the destruction they wreak on our lives and environments, then (unintentionally) mirroring the very values they critique in their own organizations, ways of being and relating to each other and the earth. On the other hand, there are also friends who are involved very intently in looking at personal change and spiritual transformation, then with perfectly good intentions go about spreading 'education' or starting new schools and companies! Some have even shied away from all things 'political' and turn their attention only to matters of 'self-change'.

Today, as much as we need a revolution in our states of being, we also require an intimate knowledge of how this oppressive, violent system works at all levels. Apart from learning to look at each other with new eyes, we also need to evolve fresh ways of organizing human activity (economic, social and political) to facilitate the flowering of life, rather than stifle it. I see no way out of our individual and collective crises until this dichotomy is bridged, the split between Radical Critique and Radical Spirituality. I feel the 'activism' we need today is the living of our lives as embodiments of both these at the same time. Lives of Resistance and Regeneration as two sides of the same coin.

So coming back to my situation, where do I stand now? I have all these opinions and so what do I do with them? It has taken many months for this understanding to emerge. Along the way, seeing things inside and around me I've felt confused, paralysed, angry, frustrated, fear-filled, tongue tied, unsure, depressed etc at various points. During this time I have also pretty much withdrawn from any form of social action. But of late, I can feel the clouds lifting and I am becoming more articulate and confident to venture out of the shell. The road ahead looks exciting and bumpy. Hope I develop enough love and wisdom to keep going.

1. Considering the times we live in, its values and its prime metaphors, I find the label "machine" more convenient to use than other labels like the "problem", "society" etc.

Ken Homer (World Café)

I guess my first thought is that I am not really sure what Now Activism means. I don't know that I have ever heard a satisfactory definition... So, for the purposes of creating an entry point into this conversation where now activism can be the background against which my thoughts unfold, I would like to hold it as the field of thoughts, ideas, insights, conversations and actions of those people who are working towards making the world a safe, healthy and habitable place for all living beings now and in the future.

I suspect that one reason you asked me to put some thoughts down on this topic was to explore more deeply the implications of a question I posed a few months ago when you and I were in a World Café conversation, the theme of which was: How do we create a better future for our children?

I have spent the past few years engaged with a small group of friends around an inquiry into how we bring forth our worlds through language. One aspect of that inquiry is the question of: By what skill in language do we construct the social platforms of awareness that will allow us to be mindful collectively of what we tend to be blind to individually? And likewise, how do we construct the individual platforms in awareness that allow us to be mindful individually of what we are blind to collectively? And then, how do we communicate effectively about these murky domains?

As I listened to the majority of the questions being generated in that Café, it struck me that most of them were being framed from inside a context of knowledge, and as such they encouraged the type of rational-linear thinking that springs from the ground of knowledge, i.e., how do we apply what we know now in the service of a better future? As a result there were a lot of questions that dealt with how to do specific things like teaching children how to think in business contexts, balanced with teaching more about ecoliteracy and the like. Although the questions almost all began with the word 'we', they struck me as self-centered, in that the languaging of the 'we' who were in the room was not connected to, or reflective of, our relationship with the 'they' who will be following after us in time.

So, as I listened to the questions being put forth as possible fruitful areas of inquiry that might lead to a world where our descendants would sing our praises instead of lamenting our stupidity, I was aware of a four-fold tension bounding the domains between individual and collective, as well as between now and future. And it was the sort of tension that did not lend itself to resolution by way of rational linear thinking... Something else was trying to emerge in my thinking, something non-rational yet not nonsensical... Suddenly I was seized by a powerful impulse or insight that took hold of me in the form of a burning question. The next thing out of my mouth was: How can we learn from the children yet to be born?

In hindsight I have come to realize that I did not ‘think’ this question. It was not arrived at from a process of directing my attention toward generating questions related to applying my current knowledge to achieve an abstract future state. Instead this question arose out of my inner process of imagining what it would be like to be alive 50, 100, 1000, 10,000, 1,000,000 or more years from now.

I did my best to stand outside of time and then asked myself: What is my responsibility to those who have come before me and to those will follow after me? What is the responsibility of those of us alive now to each other and to our ancestors and our descendants? I found myself searching for the eternal truths of what will be true for our descendants that was true for our ancestors and that is true for our relations—those of us alive now? How might remembering those truths lead us to activating some sort of “immune response” in the larger body of humanity that can awaken the collective intelligence and cooperation needed to secure a safe, healthy, fulfilling and compelling common future?

Turning back from the imaginal realm of eternity in my mind, I tuned my ears to the questions being posed to the room. I mostly heard the voices of those present now. I was not hearing the voices of past or future generations—voices that I believe are vital to the continued unfolding of human existence on Earth. I wanted to find a way to bring the voices of those yet to be born into the room, so that they could begin to influence our thinking and provide some direction and guidance to our common inquiry. And my question about learning from the yet to be born was my best attempt, in that moment, to tune our ears in that direction.

While operating out of a context of rationality and working with our immense collective body of knowledge is very much in vogue these days—having proved itself to be very useful in certain domains—I believe there are inherent, and mostly unconscious, limitations to such a narrow frame of reference when thinking about future creation.

When it comes to collaborating with other people around creating a positive future, we greatly diminish our chances of success if we rely primarily on approaches that are problem-solution oriented. Approaches that are circumscribed by, and emphasize, the kind of thinking that seeks to apply the body of our collective knowledge to the unknown can be useful and necessary in the larger context of collective future creation, but alone, they are woefully insufficient to the task, and probably not the most fruitful place from which to begin. Although, given the dominant culture’s focus on approaching the future as a problem to be solved by ingenuity rather than a sacred mystery to be lived into, it is naturally the “logical” place to begin and so it is quite understandable why so much attention gets focused there...

This is my best interpretation of the famous levels of thinking issue that Einstein pointed to when he said problems can not be solved by thinking about them from inside the same perspectival constellations in which they arise. A longer view with a larger perspective is needed. Our centuries long emphasis on the cognitive, the rational, the linear, and logical left-brain dominated perspectives of thinking has created the mess we are in, and while it can't be abandoned—that would be throwing the baby out with the bath water—we need to look elsewhere for our salvation.

Barring Divine intervention, it will be up to those of us alive now to collectively and successfully bring forth a world of life nourishing futures in which those yet to be born can flourish and thrive as we have been gifted to do. To collectively create such a world, we'll need access to more intelligence than the rational linear body of knowledge can muster forth. We'll also need access to, and the ability to integrate, the type of thinking, ways of knowing and intelligence that arises from our connection with three other bodies, each well known to the ancients but mostly forgotten by the moderns: The body of emotion, the body of imagination and the physical body, which of course is the most tangible and “real” of the four. Each of these bodies represents a specific way of knowing and is an aspect of a larger more integrated intelligence that we might call “life.” But the dominant culture's current overvaluing of the “objective” has overshadowed and seriously atrophied the ability of most people to access and express the intelligence of all four of these bodies. Each of these four bodies indwells with the others and informs our individual and collective expressions of action in the world, and to a large degree determines how those actions either create or destroy options for the unfolding life in the future. Sustained focus on one of these bodies/ways of knowing to the exclusion of the other three produces a great imbalance that threatens to derail the continued unfolding of the whole.

At this point several questions arise that perhaps might bear fruit in a conversation among now activists around such things as: By what practices do we individually and collectively access the intelligence in each of these bodies? What are the helpful and problematic ways that each of these bodies show up for us as individuals? How do we recognize and reconcile the conflicts that often arise as a result of the different ways of knowing that each of these bodies represents within ourselves? How do we recognize and skillfully work with the collective analogues to these bodies? We know something about how shared mental models shape the body of knowledge at the collective level, but what do we know about working with the equivalent of collective imaginal, physical and emotional bodies? If such bodies exist as fields of potential that are aspected and constellated in groups where people are cultivating collective consciousness/intelligence, how do we learn to work skillfully with these bodies without succumbing to the pathologies of group-think or mob mentality? And, amplifying one of my earlier questions: By what skill in language do we construct the social platforms of

agreement that allow us to be aware collectively of what we are blind to individually so that a larger intelligence becomes embodied and expressed in the world?

Obviously these are questions that, as Rilke says, are meant to be lived into rather than answered. Dance, movement, art, music, story, myth, poetry and ritual all beckon to us as entry points and possible paths for living into those inquiries. Any of these seriously undertaken will demand a fuller engagement of the body and a stretching of the mind to include the non-rational which seems to be crucial to the presencing of the imaginal process. Poets, philosophers and shamans have taught that these are doorways into the generative fields of the human psyche to which we have always returned when we have faced times of great change and the need to reinvent ourselves.

I have always loved Thomas Berry's quote about the profound human need for a new story. We need a story large enough to inspire a deep remembering and prophetic re-imagining of what it means to be human. A story that can help us make sense out of our experience of being a unique individual while still being meaningfully threaded onto the Great Strand of Life that connects all Humanity across time and cultures. A story to call forth the best of what our ancestors bequeathed to us in service to creating a world that will ensure the health and safety of our descendants and the world in which they live for millions of years to come.

Parts of that story are evident today—carried by individuals steeped in both indigenous and modern traditions—and it is emerging in some unlikely groupings around the world. But until it emerges more fully as a shaping power in humanity's collective awareness, it seems that we are fated to living in a bardo state—a place where things are coming into and out of existence very quickly. The successful navigation of such states requires the knowledge of where to place our collective attention in order to take actions that lead to the continued unfolding of life. Our world is dying because our old stories are insufficient to keep it alive... It seems the Opus or the Great Work of our time, is to learn how to work together to personally connect with and bring forth The Great Story that can make the world anew. And it would seem to me that this is the heart of the now activism. How do we embody this new story and bring it alive in our lives, so that it in turn will bring the world back to life?

I realize I have covered a lot of territory here. These thoughts are all in flux as part of my current grappling process, so I have no final resolution or answer to offer. It is possible that given my passion for the subject matter, I may have projected a certainty that I do not actually embody. Let me be the first to admit that I do not have it all figured out, I struggle with my life the same as most folks I know. There are days when I find myself filled with unreasonable hope and a surety that we will create of a safe and healthy world, and there are days when I

am on the edge of despair, fighting with visions of civilization's collapse. It is the latter that urges me to apologize if I have come across as preachy, for I know that when fear shows up I can lose the thread of reason. I am very grateful to you for urging me to put my thoughts down. It has been challenging to do so, but at the same time it has allowed me to clarify my thinking in many ways, so thank you for the invitation to share my thinking with you. I can only hope that what I have shared sparks some soul-level grappling on your part.

I'd like to close these musings with a poem. The wonderful German poet Rilke seems to have written exactly about the need to connect with imagination when faced with an abyss that can only be bridged by miracle. In it he suggests that god learns through the experience of the human heart, and I find that to be a wonderfully evocative reminder that God-the Goddess-the Gods are evolving along with us.

Just as the winged energy of delight
~ Rainer Maria Rilke

Just as the winged energy of delight
Carried you over many chasms early on
Now raise high the daringly imagined arch
Holding up the astounding bridges.

Miracle does not lie only in the
Amazing living through and defeat of danger
Miracle becomes miracle
In the clear light of achievement
That is earned in the world.

Working with things is not hubris
When building associations beyond words
For denser and denser the pattern becomes
And being carried along is no longer enough.

So take your well disciplined strengths
And stretch them between two opposing poles
Because inside the human heart is where god learns.

Gustavo Esteva (Universidad de la Tierra)

Learning to Be Activated

In my view, Zapatismo is nowadays “the most radical, and perhaps the most important, political initiative in the world...No contemporary political or social movement has attracted public attention as Zapatismo has, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. None. The Zapatista rebellion, Wallerstein wrote, “has been the most important social movement in the world, the barometer and alarm clock for other anti-system movements around the world” (*La Jornada*, 19-07-05).

“But the Zapatistas continue to be a mystery and a paradox. Can there be such a thing as a revolutionary group with no interest in seizing power? Revolutionary leaders who refuse to hold any public post, now or in the future? An *army* that fires words and civil disobedience, championing non-violence? An organization profoundly rooted in its local culture with a global scope? A group that is strongly affiliated with democratic principles, and yet is democracy’s most radical critic? People profoundly rooted in ancient Mayan traditions and yet immersed in contemporary ideas, problems, and technologies? “Everything for everyone, nothing for us”, a principle daily applied in their initiatives, includes power: they don’t want power, even within their own communities, where the powers that be don’t dare to interfere. What kind of movement is this? Is it possible to apply to them, to their ideas and practices, conventional or alternative notions of Power or power? Do they fit in the archetypal model of the Prince? How to deal with their ideas and practices expressing their radical freedom, their fascinating notion of liberty and liberation?

“One of the reasons why so many seem to want to forget Zapatism...is the depth of their radicalism. The Zapatistas challenge in words and deeds every aspect of the contemporary society. In revealing the root cause of the current predicaments, they tear to tatters the framework of the economic society (capitalism), the nation-state, formal democracy and all modern institutions. They also render obsolete conventional ways and practices of social and political movements and initiatives. In reconstructing the world from the bottom up, they reveal the illusory or counterproductive nature of changes conceived or implemented from the top down. Their path encourages everywhere resistance to globalization and neoliberalism, and inspires struggles for liberation. They also contribute to articulate those struggles.

“In my view, however, there is nothing about the Zapatistas more important than their contribution to hope and imagination. For the Mahabharata, “when hope is destroyed, great grief follows which, forsooth, is almost equal to life itself” (Vol. XII, 186). For Iván Illich, “the Promethean ethos has now eclipsed hope. Survival of the human race depends on its rediscovery as a social force”. (*Deschooling*

Society, London: Marion Boyars, 1972, 105). This is exactly what the Zapatistas have done: to rediscover hope. In liberating hope from their intellectual and political prison, the Zapatistas created the possibility of a renaissance.” (*Celebration of Zapatismo*, Penang: Citizens International, 2004).

This is what I have been writing about the Zapatistas. Some of their ways are clearly pertinent for all contemporary activists: **Listening while you walk** and **Walking at the pace of the slowest** are in my view the two most important lessons to learn with them. They timely revealed that the Emperor had no clothes...and dared to derive from this awareness the pertinent consequence: *¡Basta! Enough!* To fully assume this statement, and transform it into a political attitude, requires a lot of courage and dignity.

Courage and dignity are the stuff defining APPO, the *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca). It is a social movement that comes from afar, from very Oaxacan traditions of social struggle, but it is strictly contemporary in its nature and perspectives and its views of the world. It owes its radical character to its natural condition: it is at the level of the earth, close to the roots. It's acquired an insurrectional tint after trying all the legal and institutional ways and finding the political routes that it traveled to be blocked. But it does not dance to the songs played by the powers that be. It composes its own music. It invents its path when there are no indications.

APPO is a political initiative of the Oaxacan people themselves (not any leader or group), which established itself as the main player in the political life of Oaxaca, and has expressed itself organizationally as an assembly. The initiative started out in the form of a revolt and rebellion, until it crystallized into a social and political movement of a radically new kind. Born at the grassroots, from the deepest entrails of Oaxacan society, it expressed a discontent as old as it was generalized, which found in Ulises Ruiz (the corrupt, authoritarian, psychopathic governor) an apt emblem of all that it wanted to change. Guided by a vigorous transformative impulse, it is oriented toward the creation of a new society and brings to the world, in the midst of a rarified political environment, a fresh and joyful wind of radical change.

Both the Zapatistas and APPO have been for me, as for millions of people, a continual source of inspiration. Fifty years ago I started my activism. In the time of Che Guevara it naturally took the shape of a Latin American would-be *guerrillero*. Once I learned non violence and thus abandoned such path, I tried almost every form of activism, in very different settings. In the 80s I learned to abandon the attitude of **promotion** (moving the people in a certain direction), and replaced it with **commotion/contagion**: moving one-self with the other and with the whole being, not only the mind. This new attitude is an expression of **radical hospitality** – opening heart and mind to the otherness of the other, opening

one-self to an authentic intercultural dialogue (even with the people of your own culture!).

Both the Zapatistas and APPO have confirmed and enriched my conviction about non violence and the value of horizontality, of carefully avoiding vertical and formal structures. They have been very important in the final, radical renunciation to any form of social engineering. With them, I am returning from the future, trying to avoid all attempts to hang our activities for social transformation from any intellectual or ideological construction about the future or the society as a whole, thus packing our images of both the past and the future into a present of transformation.

Apparently, what the people may appreciate at this point, given the current combination of their deep discontent, increasing awareness and great courage, is the participation of activists ready to be activated by the people themselves, activists humble enough as to surrender their own truths (the statements through which they govern their own lives and attempt to govern others) to the new truths emerging from the people themselves. At the same time, they should be ready to fulfill a very important function: **to articulate people's truths**, giving to them the shape that can elicit in them the pertinent Aha! effect and also become a source of hope.

The dominant meanings of terms like 'power', 'freedom', 'justice', 'non-violence' and 'social change' require a complete overhaul. They were conceived for another era. The paradigms of the XX century are now bankrupt. We cannot rule our lives with the ideological inventions of the XIX century.

We need to fully recognize that our era is dying. Evidences of the new era are appearing everywhere, but they are perceived as anomalies of the old one, which looks stronger than ever. We need to resist such images and refuse to fool ourselves with them. Our role is perhaps to clearly articulate the options, in all their diversity, and be ready to follow the social majorities in their courageous path.

How can we change our daily lives today, in creating a whole new world?

What can we do by ourselves without the political parties or the government?

How can we organize our struggle and our resistance in the mold of the society we want to create?

*“Suppose you had the
revolution you are talking and
dreaming about. Suppose your
side had won, and you had the
kind of society that you
wanted. How would you live,
you personally, in that society?
Start living that way now!
Whatever you would do then,
do it now.”*

— Paul Goodman

Claudia Horwitz and Jesse Maceo Vega-Frey (stone circles)

Spiritual Activism and Liberation Spirituality: Pathways To Collective Liberation

There is a new culture of activism taking form in the world – a new paradigm for how we work, how we define success, how we integrate the fullness of who we are and what we know into the struggle for justice. Activists are being asked to examine our current historical moment with real intimacy, with fresh eyes, fire, and compassion. Many of the once-groundbreaking methods we know and use have now begun to rot. Many of our tactics are now more than simply ineffective—they are dangerous.

For agents of change, and all those who we work with, the detriment is twofold. We are killing ourselves and we are not winning. A life of constant conflict and isolation from the mainstream can be exhausting and demoralizing. Many of our work habits are unhealthy and unsustainable over the long haul. The structures of power have become largely resistant to our tactics. Given the intensity of our current historical circumstance it would be easy for us to rely on what we know, to fall back upon our conditioning and our historical tendencies, in our efforts to create change under pressure. Many lessons of the past carry wisdom; others are products and proponents of dysfunctional systems and ways of being in the world. A new paradigm requires a complex relationship with history; we must remember and learn from the past, but we cannot romanticize it.

Neither do we presume that the answer lies only in the new, the innovative, and the experimental. We carry the hearts and minds of the ancient ones of many traditions, across time and continents, while also connecting to the resources that surround us. Our intention is to survive and flourish in the landscape that we find ourselves living in. A new philosophy and practice of social change is emerging, one that grows out of an ethic of sustainability, spirituality, and a broader understanding of freedom. We are weaving old threads together in new forms and new ways of being.

spiritual activism and liberation spirituality

At its best, this new paradigm, which some of us are calling “spiritual activism” or “liberation spirituality” is revolutionary. It provides us with deepened competencies and tools to go forward in this tangle of conditions history has prepared for us and to assume the roles we’re being asked to play. While the field growing up around this new paradigm is varied and vast, we are beginning to see each other and understand what we share:

- a deep commitment to spiritual life and practice;
- a framework of applied liberation;
- an orientation towards movement-building; and
- a desire for fundamental change in the world based on equity and justice.

We are moving toward a *doing* that grows more deliberately out of *being*; an understanding that freedom from *external* systems of oppression is dynamically related to liberation from our *internal* mechanisms of suffering. It provides us with a way to release the construct of “us versus them” and live into the web of relationship that links all. Instead of being limited by the reactions of fight or flight, we encounter a path that finds fullness in presence. The humility of not-knowing allows truth to appear where fear once trapped us. We recognize the pervasive beauty of paradox, the dynamic tension between two simultaneous truths that seem contradictory. We enlarge our capacity to hold contradictions and to be informed by them. And our movements for change are transformed as a result.

swimming in the dominant culture

The culture of activism in the United State is like a fish swimming in murky waters. It lives and breathes in the dominant culture and it is greatly impacted by its nature. Even as we are attempting to change this culture, we easily overlook how it has impacted us and how we recreate it. As we begin to understand and reckon with these attributes, we start to unravel their influence. Like anything, the more we invite and allow ourselves to notice and name what is, the more space, opportunity and permission conditions have to change.

All too often we are limited in our capacity to connect deeply with ourselves, with each other, and with reality because of deep instability in our being. We are knocked around by the tumult of our daily lives, battered by the constant barrage of bad news, of over-work and despair. We work more hours than our bodies and psyches can stand. We may deceive ourselves about the very nature of possibility and the openings for change, get stuck in postures of despair and cynicism or find ourselves caught up in a rigid relationship to time, task, and relationship. More is more, more is better. Long-term vision is sacrificed for immediate and inadequate gains. Opportunities for collaboration become mired in competition. Our anxiety around scarcity and the sense of a world on the verge of collapse disables us and disconnects us from our own internal sources of wisdom, vision, and spaciousness. None of these tendencies are inherently wrong but they are limiting if not balanced with a more holistic and revolutionary approach.

from suffering to liberation

Because the ups and downs can be unbearable, many of us learn to intuitively disconnect from our bodies, our environments, our emotional worlds, and other people around us. We feel incapable of functioning in a world of deep intimacy and so we protect ourselves with the armor of anger, denial, self-neglect, and abuse – all in an effort to shield us from the depression, disenchantment, and discouragement we fear would overwhelm us if we gave it space. Our strategies often emanate from this place of suffering, forged of anguish and a polarized understanding of the forces at work in the world. It's vital that we learn how to see

our own suffering, to have some ongoing relationship with the internal pain that has immeasurable impact on the people around us, the work we do, and our own happiness. If we're not healthy, we can't think as clearly. If we're only working out of anger, we reproduce the energy and momentum of destruction. If our visions for the world tend toward the fantastical or the apocalyptic, they cannot act as good guides for action.

We can look around the globe today and see how individual suffering comes to life in collective forms and how society is a manifestation and projection of our own internal turmoil. Individual hatreds lead to violence of all forms – state-sanctioned oppression, violence, war, domestic and sexual abuse. Greed leads to unjust economic system, distrust of others, the construction of individuals as mere factors of production, non-livable wages, exploitation of natural resources and the insatiable desire to consume regardless of cost. Delusion in the news, media, and advertisements promote a sense of individualism and isolation, over-consumption and hubris on an individual and national level. We're familiar with these forms of collective suffering because they are much of the motivating forces behind our quest for justice.

And yet we know it doesn't have to be this way. We know human beings have access to a wellspring of wisdom, good will and compassion. So, how do we begin to change our selves, our organizations and institutions, our society, our world? What are the tactics that lend themselves to the kind of transformation we are seeking in the world?

We desire freedom. We desire a way of being that expresses the best of what we have to offer as human beings – our truth, our joy, our complex intelligence, our kindness. For some, freedom comes when we experience ourselves and the world around us as sacred, when we have a consistent awareness of the divine and our embodiment of it. For some, freedom is paying attention to what is and accepting it, even as we also want space to dream about what could be, without censorship. Freedom thrives in individual wholeness and in strong, flexible relationships with others. We want to see deeply and we want to be seen. We want to remember, over and over again, how our destinies are woven together. We want a spirituality that holds the liberation of all people at the center and an activism that is not void of soul.

A liberated society and person is one that can hold the truth of different ways, perspectives, and mind states at once, where there is a complete acceptance of *the way things are* that also holds a prophetic vision of *how things could be*. We want collective liberation and we get there through spiritual practice, liberatory forms, a liberatory relationship to form, skillful group process, and embracing difference and unity.

collective liberation through spiritual practice

Spiritual practice builds a reservoir of spaciousness and equanimity that can provide us with access to our deepest capacities in the midst of great turmoil and difficulty, tension and conflict. The key is in the ability to deeply and compassionately connect with our experience in any moment without clinging or rejecting, allowing for *what is* to arise and be engaged with wisdom without friction or resistance. Real, meaningful change can only happen in these places of compassionate and powerful acceptance of our own capacities and our personal and societal limitations. When we clearly open to *what is* we gain the ground to imagine what might be possible. And in the places where we cannot be as breezy as we want to be we try to develop compassion for ourselves and each other, gentleness with our learning edges that allows us the space to grow where we can. We can create communities of practice, where ancient and traditional wisdom and practices are made relevant and current; they are shared in community. We can bring a depth of practice and learning to our spiritual path, and a strengthening of our own emotional container. Attaining some level of mastery in our own tradition or practice accelerates our learning and enhances our ability to experience and receive the wisdom and gifts from other traditions.

collective liberation through liberatory forms

How do we embody ways of being and create ways of working that make real freedom possible? We do it by creating forms that lean toward freedom. We live in a world of form. Institutions, buildings, bodies, ideas - all are the forms which we use to negotiate and navigate through our interrelated lives. There are certain forms- institutions and practices- that function to quash, limit, or undermine our freedom. Some of the more obvious, all manifestations of collective suffering, include prisons, slavery, and totalitarian regimes. Some forms tend to promote liberation:

- collective struggle in the form of grassroots movements, unions, and locally-based organizing
- farms, food cooperatives and community supported agriculture models
- religious and spiritual communities that call forth ecstatic expression, nurture contemplative refuge and build strong community
- justice-centered retreat centers that offer an oasis for incubation
- creative protests that convey urgent messages in unexpected forms
- experiential and direct education that values students as experts of their own experience
- artistic venues that capture reality in compelling and unchartered ways
- forms of communication that leave us feeling animated and inspired rather than drained and beat up
- local merchants founded in an ethic of fair economics and community interest
- communal and intentional living experiments

collective liberation through a liberatory relationship to form

New, innovative forms that aim for justice and lean toward freedom do not guarantee true liberation. We know the depths of suffering and oppression that can be found within our so-called revolutionary institutions- from unions to collectives to communist systems of government. This is because *form itself is not freedom*. Our willingness and ability to develop a revolutionary relationship to forms, to institutions, to ideas, to practices, is equally important to our success as the forms themselves.

There are numerous examples of physical, mental, and spiritual liberation occurring within the confines of oppressive forms such as prisons or slavery. Nelson Mandela, Malcom X, Aung San Suu Kyi and Victor Frankel all had profound experiences of awakening while in the confines of prison walls. True freedom is realized when we develop the internal capacity to not be the victim or captive of any form, of any experience, of any condition. This means deeper understandings of who we are and what is needed in a given moment are based on realities beyond the conceptual, the intellectual, the known. This depth comes through contemplative practice, through worship, through communion with the divine, through ceremony. When we act out of *faith* (not necessarily in a divine being or external force) and align fiercely with *what is* we gain power, strength, and presence that enables our actions to be driven by wisdom and compassion rather than craving, aversion, and delusion.

collective liberation through skillful group process

We can practice liberation in our group forms, appreciating the energetic and intellectual dimensions of a group field when real skillfulness is present. We recognize liberation in a group; we see it, we hear it or we feel it. We can sense when a group is operating with a high degree of wellbeing in their culture. Sometimes it is most visible in models of leadership and decision-making which operate with honesty, respect, and cultural relevancy. Privilege, power and rank are acknowledged and engaged. Issues below the surface of daily life are consistently brought to light. When groups are operating with a certain level of internal and external freedom, change is not shunned, but welcomed. Relationships are resilient; people feel supported and challenged in good balance. There is value placed on imagination and intuition, on creativity and story, both a mode of individual expression and as a way of accessing the collective psyche.

Much has been written about skillful group process. In brief, it entails deep listening, moving from a place of faith, the ability to hold space for dissent, understanding the roles and needs of both individuals and the group as a whole, and taking decisive action when appropriate. Skillful group facilitators recognize there is a dance between structure and flexibility, between knowing and not knowing, between cutting each other some slack and prodding each other to be more rigorous. The organizing principles of collective liberation encourage

authenticity and disagreement. We embrace conflict as a powerful tool for learning and growth. We see times of challenge and struggle as an opportunity to go deeper.

collective liberation through embracing difference and unity

One of the fatal flaws of both spiritual and progressive movements is the inability to powerfully embrace both difference and unity. When unity becomes a habit, conformity results and we don't have enough creativity to thrive. When differences dominate, we don't have enough unity to accomplish anything significant. Too easily, we view difference with suspicion and fear, a factionalism disintegrates rather than strengthens. We lose space for varied expressions of our humanity. Or, we get caught in the trap of wanting everyone to agree to one strategy for collective movement. The work of politics disallows dissent or distinction in favor of expediency and the "party line" or it results in rebellion, marginalization and fragmentation. In the spiritual world, an insistence on "the oneness of all life" or submissive faith in God can prevent a healthy attending to meaningful conflict, the realities of oppression, and the internal and external methods of domination and control.

We can create ways of being and acting that are strong enough for both difference and unity. Our ability to work powerfully across multiple lines of difference is dependent upon our ability to connect intimately with our selves, our vision and each other. We believe that the fundamental purpose of connecting around a common experience of humanity, of living and breathing in our oneness, is to be able to healthily engage, explore, and celebrate our very real differences as people. And that engaging in collective and individual spiritual practice is a method that uniquely allows for the skillful development of both of these capacities. We are learning to be inclusive in a way that doesn't disable us, more willing to see that we can be allied without being the same. Unity that is complete connectedness is called "love." But love is more than the expression of deep emotion or the pull to intimacy. It is a love that can become intimate with grief, stand firmly in the fire of conflict, and witness horror without recoiling. It is the kind of love that keeps our senses open and does not shrink from truth. It is relentlessly inclusive.

moving forward...

Spiritual activism and liberation spirituality are ways of being and acting that encourage an intimacy that retains discernment. With ease and with care, we can find ways to link the powerful urges for freedom inside ourselves with the collective urge for freedom that humanity has known since the beginning of time. We can commit to ongoing analysis of and consciousness around our dominant culture, its forces of oppression and how these affect our work. We can develop a nuanced understanding of what it means to live and work across multiple lines of difference. And we can create the conditions that allow us to move from suffering to collective liberation.

Motaz Atalla*Thoughts Before and Beyond Activism*

Most Egyptians of my generation grew up knowing about activism, through stories of both the men and women who helped shape the country's modern history and through the accounts of friends and relatives who'd dabbled in politics. More recently, with the 're-politicization' of Egyptian youth (with the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, the American-led invasion of Iraq and the increasing brutality of the now twenty-six year-old ruling Hosni Mubarak regime), activism has resumed its place in daily conversations. Many of my own friends are card-carrying activists, present at every street protest and sit in, and sometimes I join them. But despite having been invested in social justice issues since I was a teenager, I was never really interested in activism as such, and I'm coming to understand why.

It surprised me recently to hear one very articulate leftist critic of the current regime's privatization schemes coolly respond to criticisms of state-owned industry by saying that he'd never said the state was any better and that the real problem was that there weren't any alternatives in sight. This brought to light what I had sensed for some time, namely, that the vast majority of activists did not have a frame of reference beyond the confines of the modern nation state paradigm, with all its technological and institutional trappings. I had been fortunate over the years to come across enough profound and penetrating critique of this paradigm (Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Heidegger, Ivan Illich, Michel Foucault, Seyyed Hosein Nasr, Paul Virilio, among others) that I easily saw it as one possible framework among others. I believe this was one reason behind my lack of interest in the sort of activism I saw around me.

Another reason behind my ambivalence was the absence of contemporary activists whose personalities really inspired me, however incisive I found many of them to be. Their various partisan frameworks always struck me as too exclusionary and somehow unbalanced. Activists in Egypt can roughly be divided into two groups, secular vs. religious (Islamist). The seculars, while divided into leftist and neo-liberal, share a common contempt for the encroachment of religious fanaticism into public life. They argue capitalism versus communism and while some hold outright that religion is an artifact of humanity's moral and intellectual infancy, many are themselves observant practitioners of a faith – the common general sentiment being that religion and politics should be separate. Given what we have seen of so-called 'political Islam', both in Egypt and worldwide, it is not hard to see why such views have their adherents. That said, I have personally never found these distinctions between secular and religious reflected in my life as I live it. Instead, these distinctions seemed to reflect that same two century-old Eurocentric nation-state discourse.

Religious activists, on the other hand, see society as being ‘too secular’ and their solution has generally been for people to *do* more, promoting the religion (and here I speak of Islam) as a set of rules and actions required for entry into paradise. Like many others, I found this deeds-oriented understanding of faith rather dry, and far less profound than the Islam practiced by regular people like my grandmother, for example, who intuitively understood Islam to be, as Abd al-Hakim Murad puts it, “a package of social, intellectual, and spiritual technology whose purpose is to cleanse the human heart.” This means that being Muslim does not simply entail doing certain things and abstaining from others, but also attaining particular virtues or states of the heart. In his essay “Islamic spirituality: The Forgotten Revolution”, Murad alerts us to the dangers of this reactionary, ‘politicized’ activist interpretation of Islam that has grown over the past century and half. He explains that it is this very distilling of the question of being (of *how* to be) from Islam that allows for such monstrous transgressions as the events of 9/11 and other instances of the taking of innocent life, which he describes ironically as being “the hallmark of the most extreme and secular utilitarian ethic”. I’ve found it very easy to not be inspired by any of the self-titled ‘Islamic activists’ or proponents of ‘Islamism’ I have known.

I understand ‘activism’ to mean resisting injustice and engaging critically with the world, and while I salute and continue to support the myriad micro-struggles against tyranny in Egypt and elsewhere, my gaze seeks to settle somewhere beyond the street protests, blogs, petitions and courtrooms that have become the arena of much contemporary activism. While I can’t imagine how someone could disagree with the claim that everything is political, I can somehow understand that there is a discrete realm we call politics, and that there are those who consciously engage it (activists) and those who don’t. I think this confused state of affairs is partly a crisis of names, names whose very existence helps lend credence to categories that are quasi-fictional. Politics, activism, the religious, the secular — these categories frame one’s reality as much as they reflect it. I believe that looking beneath and beyond them is central to the healing and regeneration processes required in today’s world.

As an Egyptian I try to do this primarily by seeking positive, new understandings of what it might mean to be Egyptian and of what I share with other Egyptians, in an attempt to shake off, for myself at least, some of the constructions with which, over the past century and half, we have been engineered into a very particular sort of nation. I try to tell the stories of an Egypt I find more inspiring than the one we’re often told (by the media, history teachers and even each other).

It is more as a Muslim, though, than as an Egyptian that I speak here of revisiting the notion of activism. I cannot say what activism means to me as a Muslim (my life does not provide the general answers for such general questions) but I can

say that it is as a Muslim that I've been most *inspired* to conceive of critical engagement in new and more meaningful ways. I will refer here one source of inspiration, the life of Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri, who passed away in Damascus, Syria in June 2004.

In Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman's obituary, written by Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, who spent 22 years with him, we read of a man who was both thoroughly engaged with this world and profoundly aloof from it. An orphan, he had come to Damascus when he was very young,

“working as a stableboy, then as an errand boy, then as a weaver, then as a foreman, then as a supervisor of textile mills. When the textile industry was nationalized under socialism, he was but two years away from retiring and receiving his pension, and was now asked to head the industry. He told the government that ‘nationalization is theft’, and he would have nothing to do with it, for which he was fired and forfeited his pension.”

Having never attended school, he taught himself to read and write. Encouraged by a fellow weaver who heard him “sing his own rustic religious compositions to popular tunes, keeping time to the loom he worked at,” he studied Classical Arabic under a sheikh who also taught him Arabic grammar and the jurisprudence of the Shafi'i school. He went on to study other traditional subjects, and in his late twenties joined the Shadhili Sufi order, in which he then became a Murshid (spiritual guide). It is important to note here that Sufism is not a sect, it is the name given to that traditional Islamic science that concerns the states of the heart and the methods with which to cleanse it (TJW).

After leaving his job as supervisor in the textile mills, Sheikh Abd al-Rahman worked as a teacher of tenets of faith at a religious academy, which he continued to do until he was no longer able to walk to work. In keeping with the teachings of Imam Abul Hasan al-Shadhili, to whose order he belonged, the Sheikh would stress the importance of having a craft with which to earn a living by one's hands. He was also a labor activist, serving both on the committee that led the Syrian Textile Workers' Union on a forty-day strike for workmen's compensation, and representing Syria in the United Arab Worker's Union. A gifted vocalist, he was also a lead singer at public *dhikr* (remembrance) ceremonies and throughout his life produced a formidable volume of poetry, for which he received considerable formal recognition throughout the Muslim Umma.

Sheikh Abd al-Rahman was an accomplished mystic, a spiritual guide, a teacher, worker, labor leader, vocalist and poet, a husband and a father of five daughters and five sons. He defended the interests of fellow workers and when matters took a turn with which he disagreed he did not consider changing the system from within, deciding that the best way to deal with the fault at its core was

through renunciation rather than negotiation and compromise. He was scholar who had lived by the work of his hands. He attended no formal learning institutions, his legitimacy was based instead on the unbroken *silsila* (chain) linking him through scholars and spiritual teachers back to the early Muslims and to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). I am most inspired by Sheikh Abd al-Rahman as an exemplar of spiritual refinement and my appreciation for his various other roles proceeds from that. For to me his life, while rich and varied, does not seem to have been a 'busy' one, even though it would seem that doing all the things he did would leave one exhausted and in a constant rush. As Muslims we consider such a life to have been made possible primarily by God's blessings. And in such a life we see the possible fullness and depth with which we can engage all that is of significance in our lives (internally and externally) if freed from the distractions that clutter contemporary life.

I do not conceive of spiritual practice as serving activism or even supporting it (even though I believe it can do so), because that would be missing its point. Instead I look to the life of Sheikh Abd al-Rahman and see the blurring of such a distinction, demonstrating instead the outward manifestations of integrity and engagement as being part of, if not incidental to the deeper forces that move spiritual seekers.

The five short prayers of every day provide us with an opportunity for reviving our connection (the root of the word *salaat*, prayer, is to connect) with Allah who is absolute, and for realigning ourselves and providing a respite from this world which we consider transient and contingent. There is nothing I can say that would do justice to the matter of prayer, but I mention it here because I have found it, as have many of my friends, to provide perspective, in ways that undercut many of the afflictions of this era. Each prayer requires that one drop everything for it, a seeming hassle at first, but really a path to cultivating freedom from fixation on time and one's tasks. Our prayers include supplications, in which we request God's mercy and blessings and assistance in our lives. In our requests we seek sincerity, and the power of this sincerity is partly that it helps clarify the roots of those fears and desires that bind our hearts to this lesser world, many of which are inflamed and construed by the pace of contemporary life and its barrage of distractions like television and advertising. These are horizontal aspects of prayer, meaning they concern this world, and they are incidental to prayer. While it can benefit us in worldly ways, it is not a self-help exercise but an act of worshipping God, in which there is inherent value. And it is only by God's blessings, Muslims believe, that a thing we do may benefit us at all.

I don't really consider myself an activist and I certainly don't feel like I have particularly clear answers, as a Muslim or otherwise, for the crises facing today's world. Rather, learning about the systemic roots of these crises inspires in me questions that I continually share with those in my community locally and

internationally. Here are questions that interest me particularly as a Muslim and an Egyptian:

The traditional Islamic concept of wealth involves the automatic assignment of a portion of one's possessions, belongings or goods to those who might need it. A person's value is also not to be determined by his wealth (indeed, if there is a link then wealth is seen as more of burden than a blessing). Given this framework, along with the traditional institution of endowments, how might Muslims engage the systems by which poverty is manufactured in the contemporary era? Does it suffice to simply redistribute wealth that has been created through systems that concentrate more and more of the resources required for basic sustenance in the hands of the few?

How do we realize our duty towards other created beings in a time of such environmental degradation? Do the questionable practices and systemic implications of meat production in many Muslim societies not require that we rethink our consumption patterns? In what ways did Muslim 'scientists' throughout history conceive of nature and rationality? How do the implications of traditional scientific inquiry differ from those of contemporary science?

What alternatives to factory-schooling can our traditions help us generate? Is it not important to interrogate the co-option of traditional learning systems into modern Eurocentric institutional forms (like the Al-Azhar schools in Egypt)? There was a time when mosques were not only for worship but also dialogue, collective inquiry and the exploration of new ideas. How can we revive such spaces and encourage traditional modes of participation in questions over which various legitimate and illegitimate experts argue?

Sheikh Nuh recounts an anecdote in Sheikh Abd al-Rahman's obituary. May we come to engage our lives he did, with such grace in matters in big and small.

"I watched for a moment as he stopped to buy some apples from a cart in front of the mosque. He took the bag from the seller and filled it with the worst apples he could find—nicked, bruised and worm-holed—which he chose as carefully as most people choose good ones, then paid for them and with a smile shook hands before we went up the hill to the sheikh's home... When I reflected on his strange 'shopping', I realized that it had been to save the apple man from having to throw any out."

References:

"Shaykh 'Abd Al al Rahman al Shaghouri: Light Upon Light in Damascus" by Nuh Ha Mim Keller
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Buy Nothing Day

A number of celebratory events were organized in Manchester, UK, with a strong emphasis on involving shoppers and passersby in the fun of Buy Nothing Day, celebrated on November 24:

— **A FREE MARKET** with lots of books, clothes, tapes, dvds and toys. All for people to take away (free) to promote re-using items rather than binning and re-buying.

— **FLYERS:** Aliens, sambistas, singers and students gave out flyers on Buy Nothing Day and reusing and recycling. Awareness was also raised regarding ethical shopping, asking people to think about the environmental damages that different products may contribute to.

— **A SAMBA BAND**, Rhythms of Resistance Manchester, entertained hundreds of people with samba encouraging them to “Stop Buying Start Dancing.” The band was joined by singers and poets too! The sambistas entered the Triangle Shopping Centre, with a banner and flyers and full samba swing. The acoustics were great and the band sounded excellent – though the security guards soon pushed the sambistas out. The sambistas re-entered through the other door in clowning fluffy loving style. The tough security guards were liberated with samba rhythms, as they smiled to the fun of RORM!

— **GAMES** were played in the shopping centres, reclaiming the space from a mad buying zombie area to a space of friendships, fun and positivity. The games engaged young people and shoppers too!

— **BANNER FLOAT** (the action which was also known in code: “banner drops, they are so last year sweetie darling!”): A banner suspended by 28 helium balloons was released next to the Christmas tree in the Arndale Shopping Centre. The banner which simply stated “Buy Nothing Day” was admired by hundreds turning the shopping centre in a beautiful space! The banner float was accompanied by more flyering.

Read about more great Buy Nothing Day initiatives at <http://www.adbusters.org/metasteco/bnd/> and find fun films about Buy Nothing Day on <http://youtube.com>

Jackie Cahi (Kufunda Village)

Driving from Zimbabwe to South Africa last week made me think about some of the ways in which activism has/might change in the future. The border post between the two countries is like stepping into the edge of a war zone – except that there are no guns hidden behind sandbags, but there might as well be. A pall of dust settles over the whole town. The road to the border is continually under construction and the detour is pitted with craters from the heavy lorries that constantly rumble through the town. People are littered everywhere. Lines of ancient taxis waiting to carry pedestrians and their goods to and from the barbed wire border fence. Where are we going? To the land of freedom? South Africa? From the land of freedom? Zimbabwe? A question of perception.

But although apartheid is no more – the structures in South Africa are still very much in place. As we leave the border and stop in the first town I am overwhelmed by the consumerism. We come from a land of shortages and no choice and these shops are packed with a range of goods and people frantically shopping. We listen to a program on the radio where the Reserve Bank Governor is trying to stop people spending over the Christmas period.

So those activists of old did remove apartheid. South Africa's borders have opened and entrepreneurs can now fly the world to purchase all sorts of goods to bring home to feed the insatiable maw of shoppers. But the underlying power and state structure remains the same. NOW activism aims to shift those structures – not by reaction but by Action – living the life we want/need to lead in order to sustain our planet and its people.

It is quiet activism that are needed now. When people get together in serious and meaningful conversation and focus on what can be achieved positively in families, in small groups in immediate communities – things start to shift. It is time for Action as opposed to Reaction. It is very easy in today's Zimbabwe to remain constantly and impotently angry. Once we start 'acting' even in a small way – we retrieve some of our power. Many things have been taken away from us – shelter, housing, jobs, education, health and it is easy to settle into victim mode and wait for rescue. When we seize the chance ourselves to make an action we begin to reclaim ourselves and our power for transformation.

The examples emerging around the world reflect this 'action' – small everyday actions where people refuse to be victims. I think the key similarities are strengthening of self in relation to communities.

Almost everyone who strives in any way to shift a situation is an 'activist'. In Zimbabwe a lot of us hide – out of fear, out of despair, out of exhaustion. Others throw themselves continually into the firing line. A few weeks ago Trade Unionists

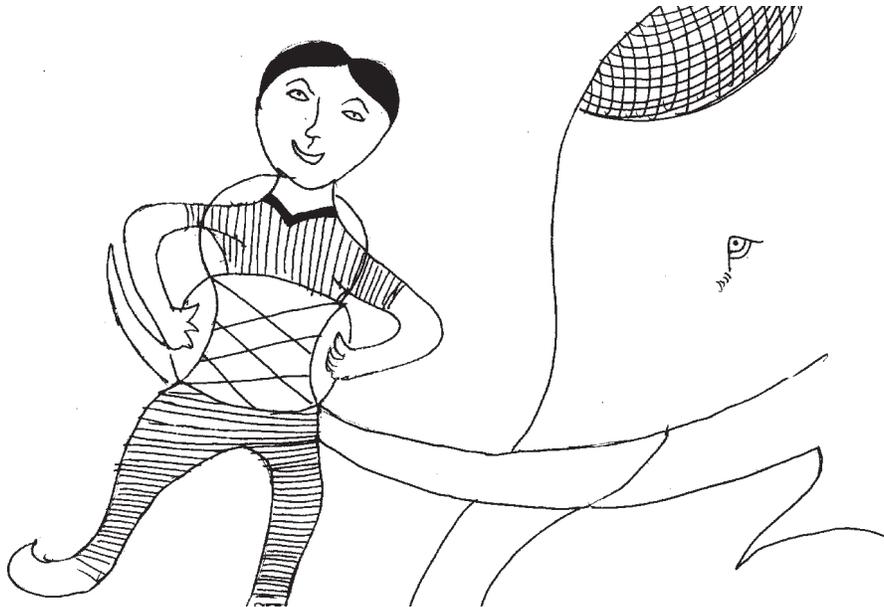
were arrested for demonstrating and badly beaten and tortured. Those activists were prepared to be beaten – the cynical view is that the outside world only takes notice when there is visible violence. The government was openly unapologetic in spite of international condemnation. This seems like an old 'activism' and one no longer useful.

NOW activism is about operating in new ways. It is about living the way of life that we want. It is about ignoring governments and power structures and living change on a daily basis.

Some questions to ask of ourselves:

- *What is the future you want to live?*
- *How do we want to be with our communities?*
- *With our environment?*
- *With our children?*
- *Who do we want our children to be?*

I have spent a lot of my life being a 'reactive' activist. As a NOW activist, I want to live a new life. I want to work concretely on new solutions – working, talking and sharing with people another dream — shifting perceptions through actions...



Not So Fast

Donella Meadows

Those of us who think the world needs saving — from environmental destruction, rapacious greed, decaying morals, drugs, crime, racism, whatever — keep very busy crusading for our favourite remedies. School vouchers. Carbon taxes. Campaign reform. The Endangered Species Act. A lower capital gains tax. Strong regulation. No regulation. You know. That long list of mutually inconsistent Holy Grails with which we like to hit each other over the head.

There's one solution to the world's problems, however, that I never hear the frenzied activists suggest.

Slowing down.

Slowing down could be the single most effective solution to the particular save-the-world struggle I immerse myself in — the struggle for sustainability, for living harmoniously and well within the limits and laws of the Earth.

Suppose we weren't in such a hurry. We could take time to walk instead of drive, to sail instead of fly. To clean up our messes. To discuss our plans throughout the whole community before we send in bulldozers to make irreversible changes. To figure out how many fish the ocean can produce before boats race out to beat other boats to whatever fish are left.

Suppose we went at a slow enough pace not only to smell the flowers, but to feel our bodies, play with children, look openly without agenda or timetable into the faces of loved ones. Suppose we stopped gulping fast food and started savouring slow food, grown, cooked, served and eaten with care. Suppose we took time each day to sit in silence.

I think, if we did those things, the world wouldn't need much saving.

We could cut our energy and material use drastically, because we would get the full good out of what we use. We wouldn't have to buy so many things to save time. (Have you ever wondered, with all our time-saving paraphernalia, what happens to the time we save?) We wouldn't make so many mistakes. We could listen more and hurt each other less. Maybe we could even take time to reason through our favourite solutions, test them, and learn what their actual effects are.

Said Thomas Merton, who spent his time in a Trappist monastery: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist . . . most easily succumbs: activism and over-work . . . To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many people, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

A friend in India tells me that the onslaught of Western advertising in his country is a cultural blow, not so much because of the messages of the ads but because of their pace. The stun-the-senses barrage of all tv programming, especially ads, is antithetical to a thousands-year-old tradition of contemplation. I can imagine that. I have been driven crazy by the somnolent pace at which things get done in India. Don't these people know that time is money?

What they know, actually, is that time is life, and to go zooming through it is to miss living. Slow . . . d o w n. Do that first. Then, quietly, carefully, think about what else might need to be done.

The only problem with this cure is that I can't prescribe it for others, because I have such trouble following it myself. It's so easy to get swept up in the hurtling pace of the world. Like most of the other world-savers I know, I'm way too busy to eat well, sit quietly, take a vacation, or even, some days, think.

Edward Abbey, the great curmudgeon of environmentalism, knew better: "It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it. While you can. While it's still here. So get out there and hunt and fish and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, climb the mountains, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for awhile and contemplate the precious stillness, that lovely, mysterious and awesome space. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much: I promise you this one sweet victory over . . . those desk-bound people with their hearts in a safe deposit box and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this: You will outlive the bastards."

Good advice. Too bad I don't have time to take it. I have to go save the world.

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CHALLENGING TIME POVERTY - TAKE BACK YOUR TIME

Are you, or your friends or relatives, working more now but enjoying it less? Does your family's schedule feel like a road race? If so, you're not alone. Millions of people are overworked, over-scheduled and just plain stressed out.

- **Time stress threatens our health.** It leads to fatigue, accidents and injuries. It reduces time for exercise and encourages consumption of calorie-laden fast foods.
- **Time stress threatens our marriages, families and relationships** as we find less time for each other, less time to care for our children and elders, less time to just hang out.
- **It weakens our communities.** We have less time to know our neighbors, supervise our young people, and volunteer.
- **It reduces employment** as fewer people are hired and then required to work longer hours, or are hired for poor part-time jobs without benefits.
- **It leaves us little time for ourselves,** for self-development, or for spiritual growth.
- **It even contributes to the destruction of our environment.** Studies show that lack of time encourages use of convenience and throwaway items and reduces recycling.

WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT THIS EPIDEMIC OF TIME PRESSURE?

October 24th, 2003 marked the first Take Back Your Time Day. Events were held in as many as 200 communities in the U.S. and Canada, reaching several thousand people.

The main goal of TAKE BACK YOUR TIME DAY is to call attention to the problem and begin the public conversation about what to do about it. Some of the solutions will be personal, each in our own lives. Others will be cultural, as we evolve new norms about life balance. Still others will involve voluntary changes in the workplace and children's activity programs, or changes through collective bargaining agreements. We talk about why work/life balance is good for both employees and employers; about how to create decent part-time jobs and about solutions for low-income workers who can't afford to work less.

The movement for a more balanced life began on TAKE BACK YOUR TIME DAY 2003, but it hasn't stopped there. In every community, Take Back Your Time organizations will develop campaigns to win personal, cultural, workplace, and political solutions to time famine.

Get more ideas for Taking Back Your Time at www.timeday.org

Shilpa Jain (Shikshantar)

Dadagiri or Gandhigiri?

A few months ago, a film was released in India that took the country by storm. *Munna Bhai Laghe Raho* depicted a gangster, Munna bhai, who, following his heart towards the woman he loves, decides to adopt Gandhian values and practices. As the story unfolds, he begins to see Gandhi in visions, asks him questions and receives answers, which he goes on to share with all of Mumbai through a radio program. Principles of speaking the truth, asking for forgiveness and persevering — no matter what one's 'opponent' did — were all shown through multiple examples. Ultimately, the film portrayed the struggle between *dadagiri* (the way of the bully) and *Gandhigiri* (the way of Gandhi).

Besides awakening an entire generation of youth to Gandhi, and generating some good laughs along the way, this film inspires me to consider more deeply where/ what/how is the NOW activism today. Using it as a backdrop, I offer my own understandings and questions.

Dadagiri starts with the belief that you are right and you need to change the other person, generally through bullying or other forms of intellectual, emotional or physical violence. *Gandhigiri*, on the other hand, starts with respect for each other and belief in each other's wholeness and humanity. It seeks to find ways to hold up a mirror to the person, to reveal this humanity, which may be hidden under lies, abstractions, habits or misinformation. Truth is highly valued, but it is not a given and is not in a single person's hands. Rather, truth emerges through a process of being open to diverse perspectives, being willing to engage in real dialogue, and seeking a resolution which strengthens our collective humanity.

Unfortunately, I feel a lot of what constitutes activism today is of the *dadagiri* variety. Though many people seek to address injustice, violence and exploitation, they often make use of the same attitudes, practices and tools that generate these conditions in the first place. Whether it takes the forms of protests, sit-ins, petitions, campaigns or projects, it all starts when we think that we are right and we need to change the other. How can we shift to *Gandhigiri* when this righteousness becomes deeply embedded within us?

The 'rights' craze sweeping India (Right to Food, Right to Work, Right to Education, etc.) is a clear example of this *dadagiri*. At its core, it undermines human dignity. In asking for rights, power is stripped from local people and the local context and is given to the government (and therefore, to the market). Institutions — not people, not nature — are the sources of hope, promise and fulfillment. Government officials and corporate executives decide the policies which, in turn, determine how people will live. People are being sold to forces far beyond their control, and on top of it, being told that this makes them members in a healthy democracy!

To me, here's where the film's lessons come in. *Munna Bhai* exemplifies how each person, with their own power and potential, can make and re-make their own lives, and through their lives, re-shape the larger world around them. This task is not left to experts or professional activists; indeed, there are no NGOs or civil society organizations even mentioned in the film. Nor is it the job of current (so-called) democratic authorities. When institutional State structures appear (in the form of police and lawyers), they are made a mockery of — in line with most peoples' feelings about their (in)ability to dispense justice. Though most of us have been schooled, even in activism, to focus our attention on these mainstream institutions, *Munna Bhai* suggests the opposite. It shows that the power to make a difference lies with individual people and small groups, and this power is strengthened through the relationships they are able to nurture.

But it is important to be nuanced. I am not suggesting that everyone in the whole world should become an activist. We each have our **own unique role** to play; and we can learn from and **connect with one another**. What I understand is the simple truth that regular people — gangsters, a radio personality, a motley crew of retired elderly folks, a teacher seeking pension, an irritated neighbor, a young man in trouble with gambling, a young girl on an arranged marriage date — in every day circumstances have a chance to **change the field**. With their **whole selves** present and engaged, they have the ability to shift the dynamics, to re-set the stage and in fact, create a whole new play. In a moment, they can speak truth and, through this, **hold up a mirror** to those before them, inviting them to revisit their own humanity. And this is not only effective, but also inspiring and even magical. The personal and social fabric is woven — not torn — through *Gandhigiri* kinds of actions, in a way that can never happen through *dadagiri*.

After the film, I started thinking about the way much of activism is framed today: to put it crudely, as owls vs. jobs. On one side is the activists' argument that we need to protect forests because owls will become extinct without them; and on the other side is industry's contention that we need to cut down forests to feed the economy and provide viable livelihoods to many people. Rarely are there opportunities to change the field, to offer a different framing which could invite many more into the conversation and into a more truthful resolution. For example, what if this debate was dropped and instead the question became: how can we collectively create a healthy economy which favors not just human beings but nature as well? Could we imagine a kind of work based on revitalization of the natural world, rather than on exploitation?

It seems to me what the world needs NOW is not just love, sweet love, but also better questions and more imagination to change the field.

A friend of mine, Naveen Kumar, and I were trying to imagine changing the field of other popular struggles and what that would look like. Like the *Narmada Bachao*

Andolan, the movement against the big dam and for saving the Narmada valley. What happened was a division into two camps: the people of Gujarat (mostly industrialists) who were demanding the water on behalf of the people of drought-prone Kutch and Saurashtra, and the people of the Narmada valley, whose homes, lives, cultures and histories would be submerged if the dam was built. What if instead of appealing to courts, lawyers, policymakers, etc., the people of Narmada traveled to Kutch and Saurashtra? What if they offered their body labor to build local rainwater harvesting structures and supported Gujaratis in ways to manage the drought? How would these humble and generous actions hold up a mirror to those pushing for the big dam? How would the emergent loving relationships among people have shifted the course of the entire struggle?

Or what about with the Bhopal tragedy? For the last 22 years, activists have been demanding not just compensation for victims but also the head of Warren Anderson, president of Union Carbide at the time of the gas leak that killed thousands. What if instead, they had appealed to people, including Union Carbide, to come and re-build Bhopal, but this time without chemical or any other toxic industries? There was enough goodwill and global concern at the time, that they could have gathered artists, architects, farmers, healers, etc. from all over the world. And then invited them to dream and create a different kind of city, to embark together on living in a healthy way, with an ecologically balanced and altogether different economy. Who knows what could have been generated then? And the ripple effects it would have had on Union Carbide and industries worldwide?

Gandhigiri is not about shaming or embarrassing people, though the line is easy to cross. Especially when we have good intentions, we can quickly trip and land on the righteousness high horse again. But I think it's our assumptions that make the difference. If we believe that the person or people we are challenging have goodness and humanity within them, then our actions will be based on respect and invitation to dialogue and see deeper. But to do this, I feel we must move beyond right and wrong. What's at stake is all of our well-being, for the society and world we collectively inhabit. To do this, we need to ask better questions of each other, make more space for creativity and imagination, and for listening and learning.

Perhaps most importantly, we have to let go of competition and winning and antagonism, dividing the world into heroes and villains, good guys and enemies. This may be the biggest challenge for the NOW activism. Are we willing to build bridges across seemingly insurmountable boundaries? And have dialogue in the tough places? Another friend of mine, Malika Sanders, puts it beautifully: we have to offer both uncompromised truth and unconditional love in each of our words, thoughts and deeds. Not easy, but it makes possible new relationships and deeper alliances among all of us. After all, when we are angry, oppositional, trying to win and make others' lose, what do we lose of ourselves in that process?

Throughout the film, we see Munna bhai interacting with a fellow gangster, Lucky Singh. Munna keeps asking him to 'get well soon', sending cards and flowers, asking all of Mumbai to send flowers, to encourage Lucky to open his eyes to the sickness he has (in this case, wrongly taking someone's property). Reflecting on this action, I started wondering whether we all need to get well soon. Are we all sick, daily committing violence, exploitations, injustices, and nearly completely blind to it all? Doesn't this inherently make us agents for spreading the disease?

I was recently part of a seminar exploring the present challenges and the future of the voluntary sector. The people present raised a lot of concerns around funding, bureaucracy, management-worker hierarchies, degree qualifications...issues that currently plague the social service sector as a whole. Some even began to ask whether the sector needed to exist at all? But it was difficult for many to consider that perhaps these problems are part and parcel of the way the sector has emerged, as part of an inherently destructive model of Development and civilization. What would it mean to let go of such mainstream structures, especially those that no longer contain any vitality, either internally or outwardly? Part of the NOW activism, to me, means recognizing our own illnesses and the external symptoms — not getting caught up in them but freeing ourselves of them by letting go of the roots.

Or perhaps that's not quite right (not to mention, a little morbid). We're not sick and diseased; we're whole, healthy beings who are trapped in a system designed to make us sick. Perhaps this is another field we need to challenge and re-name. We need to shift the boundaries of what we understand to be healthy. To me, this means knowing that the farther you are from nature, and from your own hands, the less 'civilized' you are. The more fast food you eat, the more gadgets you have, the more concrete and steel you live under, the more the decisions about your life are made by people far away from you, who you never meet and will never have the chance to meet — these are all signs of a civilization on the verge of collapse.

For me, if in my daily life, I can challenge these illusions and get to the heart of real life, NOW. Simple things I try to do daily, like walking and riding my bicycle, growing some food, playing with children, caring for my grandparents, living without a mobile phone, creating instead of purchasing whenever possible, help me get closer to my hands and reduce my dependency on the 'civilized' world. *Aparigraha* (freedom from possessiveness) is vital to the revolution.

I feel Munna bhai's *Gandhigiri* (and the now activism) boils down to a few principles: Embody what you believe. Do it in your own life. Consider what kind of legacy you want to leave. See the connections among self, nature and community. Live in the moment. And moment to moment, try to change the field. Listen to your own inner voice. Reflect that, as much as possible, in each act, word, thought. And, above all, don't forget your sense of humor. You'll need it.

“So often activism is based on what we are against, what we don’t like, what we don’t want. And yet we manifest what we focus on. And so we are manifesting yet ever more of what we don’t want, what we don’t like, what we want to change. So for me, activism is about a spiritual practice as a way of life. And I realized I didn’t climb the tree because I was angry at the corporations and the government; I climbed the tree because when I fell in love with the redwoods, I fell in love with the world. So it is my feeling of ‘connection’ that drives me, instead of my anger and feelings of being disconnected.”

- Julia Butterfly Hill

Alicia Pace (Santropol Roulant)

Am I an Activist?

When considering the questions pertaining to NOW activism, I found myself tripping over the word ‘activism’, despite an awareness that the term is open to new definition and exploration.

I have observed my language over the past months since our gathering in Mexico, and have found that the words ‘activism’ or ‘activist’ are still almost completely absent in my everyday language.

For me the term ‘activist’ implies an exclusion. A with us or against us attitude. In university I protested on the streets with “women take back the night”, the rise in tuition rates, various campus causes. And it was I who mimicked that exclusionary impulse. I didn’t understand those who could not see how important it was to give your voice and feet to such causes. Yet while I felt a certain rush, comradery and even strongly believed in what was being “fought” for, something didn’t feel integrated. There was an emptiness to the method. Perhaps that is how I started to define and then reject “activism”. I realized that what was missing for me was a feeling of deep relationship and integration. That it was more powerful to *be* a feminist, in my actions, thoughts, deliberations than it was to hold up an abstract idea or concept. I wanted to engage with love and thoughtfulness not just intellect and righteousness. I dropped out of the mainstream message and medium and receded into a quiet yet more powerful mode of just living as the woman/feminist that I was. So my “activism” took on a new look. I left the protests and overly intellectualizing my reality and moved into deep conversations with family and friends about what it meant for us to be strong, whole women in today’s world. Looking and finding my own power in daily interactions rather than a book definition of feminism.

I have not revisited my resistances or ideas attached to “activism” since that time. I know that I am deeply inspired and moved by people who are steeped in their own exploration and learning. Reflecting upon it now, I would best describe myself and kindred colleagues as “engaged”. Perhaps that sounds too open, too vague, but the quality of engagement leaves space for each of us to move in the areas of our passion and still meet in a common space of exploration and collaboration. Be it water or education or organizations that we immerse ourselves in... engagement, for me, is our commonality. It is inclusive, infectious and lively. In that light, NOW activism is a movement of people with purpose and passion, who attract and energize others to engage with their own lives and learning in more profound ways.

Recently I had the privilege of being with and 85-year-old Gurwhali man who lives in a village in the lower Himalayas. His name is Saklanaji and he has been

reforesting the mountainside of his village for over 50 years, one tree at a time. Driven by deep conviction that the trees are our salvation in this crazy, polluted, materialistic world, Saklanaji climbs the mountain paths each morning and greets his work a determination and integrity that moved me.

During my time with him, Saklanaji surprised and inspired me. At any given moment he had my companions and I shout from the top of our lungs into the Himalayas asking the world to renounce its destructive ways. He would suddenly sit in the middle of the path we were climbing and create/recite a long poem about the trees, love and loss. He calls himself a madman and wanted us to know that the power of one madman consumed with love and purpose can change the world. At the least it can change the face of a mountainside, the water flow, the ecosystem and in turn the village itself.

He was taken to courts over 23 times in order to have the legal right to plant trees on a mountainside that no one owed. He lost his first wife to TB, his brother to the fight for independence. He has fathered 8 children by his second wife and all the while planted trees without fail. Never losing sight of his mission. When we first arrived at his home he greeted us with a song and said that his poetry made women cry. I thought this was romantic and then found myself two days later crying as he looked into my eyes with such tenderness and emotionality. His dedication and lyrical sense of purpose in turns touching me and challenging me to reflect on what moves me with intensity and love in my own life.

And so, 12 years after I let go of the recognizable activist in me, I find myself in contact with powerful, engaged, loving people like Saklanaji and I cannot help but be drawn into their web of passion and purpose.

I am attracted and energized to work with people who don't advertise their activism... they *are* their activism. There is a lived engagement and commitment to learning and compassion. NOW activism can be reflective and analytical but it must be lived and not in a protest here, or paper there, for me it needs to flow through my daily actions. Saklanaji is what I consider a NOW activist. He is a madman. Full of purpose, flanked by action, driven by love. He doesn't ask me to become an "environmentalist" or to even spread the story of his work. He asks, what I will do with the inspiration garnered from my connection with him?

There are NOW activists, in all corners of this world. From a village in the Himalayas to my neck of the woods in Montreal. I think a movement is brewing in our connections, friendships, and support of one another. Not to become dogmatic or to convince one another to take up this cause or that, but to bring out the best in one another, to hold our contradictions and differences while we each find the courage to live on the margins.

As I take the oak seeds in my hand, Saklanaji, throws down his walking stick and embraces me with strong arms saying, “You are my daughter, you are my sister, you are my mother,” and blesses me as I bury my fingers into the dry, cracked earth. I wonder how this seed will find what it needs to grow into the oak it has the promise to become. And yet there is a forest around me. One madman/poet can change the world. In that sense of the term, I too am an activist NOW.



Nitin Paranjape (Abhivyakti: Media for Development)

Awakening the Artist and Activist Within

“Ten thousand years are too long, Now is the time.” - Mao

While thinking about Now Activism I was struck by the emphasis on ‘Now’. Immediately, the words of Chinese Leader Mao came back long after I had read them many years ago without understanding its significance then. Now, its deeper meaning is becoming apparent. ‘Now’ seems like an urge ready to burst forth with energy for action. Action that is filled with reflection, feelings and human spirit. It’s a conscious act as a response which has increasingly become rare in the present world of globalisation and ever increasing consumerism. The result has been devastating – making us dependent on externally-provided goods and services and ignorant about our natural abilities with which we are endowed to create, feel, think and act. Dumbing us down, said John Gatto about modern Institutions, which have deceived us into accepting their domination, control and false promises. When we let others control our imagination and lives, despite the enormous resources we possess within and in our collective beings, it is a huge cost we are paying. Sadly, the power and the energy that we all have to respond to different challenges remain unutilized and the countless creative possibilities go unexplored.

Those of us who are in Abhivyakti, a community media organization based in Nashik, India, obviously think we are activists simply because our responses are not shaped by external considerations. It is true that the influence of global media through their omnipresent network of channels is vast, leading us to believe that their intervention is timely and right. And our roles as mere observers suit the System just fine. This is exactly what we at Abhivyakti are challenging. Through our collective imagination, we are trying to respond in as many different ways as possible.

Mostly, it’s facilitated by community media. Community media is embedded in the ethos of the community and is generated and used by its members to serve the interest of the community. We look at community media as part of a culture that invites people to consider themselves as artists with their unique expressions and that generates opportunities for dialogue on various issues connected to their lives and community.

This directly contrasts with the ‘message-driven’ obsession of other media forms produced by NGOs to create awareness, as part of some campaign or advocacy efforts. Most of such advocacy is self-invited without any significant dialogue with members of the community, for whom the advocacy is supposed to be devised. Advocacy is loaded with power and hierarchy, as it assumes to promote issues and problems faced by ‘others’, who mostly are members of the marginalized communities, whose own resources are never acknowledged. Community media is not obsessed with messages, simply because it is there to generate and deepen

dialogue in the community and recognize the tremendous resources that exist within the community. The dialogue opens options for listening and formulating thoughts on issues confronting them and, at the same time, offers fresh perspectives and alternatives to reflect on their lives.

To illustrate: International Broadcasting Day for children, which is observed on December 10, has been limited to merely screening children's films on TV. Again, it is assumed that children will be happy watching. For a couple of years, we have been celebrating the day by inviting children in Nashik to make their own media by using local resources. The media is then exhibited in the evening for parents and public to view the creations, and interact on matters related to creativity, actions and how we view children and ourselves in the present world of passive citizenship. Inviting parents and children to look at their own power to create, relate and redefine their engagement with reality is one way to broaden their perspective of the gifts they have in themselves which make their life meaningful.

We believe that each one of us is an artist capable of diverse creative forms, and that in artists, some form of activism is present. The challenge is to activate it. We have been working in communities and working with different individuals with this idea. At first, there is resistance. *How could there be an artist within? Are we capable of any creations?* seem to be the common refrain that we hear. Breaking this wall of resistance is not difficult but requires engagement and raising meaningful questions about our kind of passive existence. Once the arousal to make is stoked, the next steps evolve gradually.

Perhaps what is required is attentive listening to their inner voice, and urging acting upon its path. The inquiry is about what is meaningful to their life and that of the community and how it defines the reality they understand, analyse and articulate. The form here is not important; it usually emerge as they grapple with the content. We have witnessed many different forms: puppets, songs, posters, masks, dance form, theatre, among others, have come from people who hardly believed that they could generate such expressions based on their own knowledge. This birthing process has been immensely empowering. The energy is almost palpable and has contributed in generating actions that have taken the mighty and powerful by surprise. Tribal children in rural Maharashtra living in state-sponsored hostel produced a wallpaper which spoke against the school authorities on the deplorable food quality and corruption. It shook the bureaucracy to look into the matter. For the first time, the voice of the children was able to make its presence relevant.

Becoming the centre of relevance and meaning requires one more layer to manifest. This unfolding too is gradual, but it makes the nexus of artist-activist a potent force. For the artist to reach other members of the community is a natural

progression. That's where the opportunity and space to dialogue with others abound. The connection with others assumes significance, because it is not a meeting for mere get-together sake. The dialogue is as much socio-cultural as it is political. The art is a starting point to engage in matters related to self, community and its development. While the artist creates the 'art' on an important aspect of the community, the activists sees the art as tools of engagement for becoming open to inquiry and action that might result from the dialogue among different members of the community.

For example, the 'TV Turn-Off Week' program emerged after dialogue with nearly 150 families in Nashik, who were willing to stay away from watching TV for a week. They agreed that their time and space was being dictated by entertainment created by others. By saying no to TV, the families were able to regain control in their lives. They spent time doing things they always wanted to like writing letters, meeting friends, eating dinners together, writing, reading and going for walks; little things as per their hearts desire. Their resistance was an act of activism — a strong, collective statement to the domination of media and other forms of external control. The families had walked on the path of their own making. A beginning had been made. Of course, there would be pressures and temptations, but the tension between external influences and the inner voice had become dynamic. By becoming aware of different paths and possibilities, the families had invited activism into their lives. They had also redefined their relationship with the mainstream media which had treated them with scant respect and as mere receivers. Now they understood the power, they had to give charge to their energies instead of sitting idle in front of the TV.

Sometimes the artist is swayed by their own fragmented perspectives, and the art suffers because of lack of connections. By inviting the activist who resides within to surface, the artist opens the window of possibilities. More than anything else, it is an opportunity to become a whole person by listening to others, of checking their notions of truth, assumptions and false sense of power which many times destroys us. By relating to the community and becoming one of them, the artist-activist generates hope and trust that things are going to change. They activate their own life by initiating changes in their own life and walking on the path of their own creation supported by a web of convivial relationship of their communities. This is the core of the Now Activism — unlike the mainstream notion that believes in working/advocating for someone who is vulnerable and marginalized. Most often, there is a wide gap between the self and what is advocated as change. This 'safe' position is the bane that affects most activists today. Creating change in others is not the starting point for the Now Activism. If any advocacy is needed urgently, it is in the direction of the self. Making oneself the centre of the 'change' process would be biggest challenge before all of us. 'Now' is the time to do it.

Outsider Artist - Nek Chand

Of all the visionary environments in the world there is none as spectacular, as vast, as that created by Nek Chand in Chandigarh, northern India. Nek Chand, like so many other Outsider artists, was fascinated with strangely shaped stones. He felt that within them they expressed the personalities of regal figures, of ordinary people, of animals and birds, and he built up a vast collection of thousands of examples. His other raw material was urban and industrial waste.

Nek Chand believes that in Nature everything is used, even fallen leaves go back to enrich the soil, similarly the waste of a city should be recycled back into use once more. He had moved to Chandigarh in 1951, after losing his home and native village in the 1948 partition of India, to work on the vast construction of the new city designed by Le Corbusier. In this process, a mass of waste was created by the demolition of over 20 villages, and numerous other buildings, to clear the ground for the new town.

In 1958, Nek Chand, who was working as a Roads Inspector for the Chandigarh Public Works Department, made for himself a little clearing in the thick undergrowth outside the city and began to collect together the stones and the waste materials that he knew he would be using, storing them in a little hut he had built. He had already had a dream showing him that this location was once the site of a glorious kingdom and he was to create his own kingdom of kings and queens.

He had access to waste dumps in his Department and after his working day he brought materials and stones back to his clearing on the back of a bicycle. So began one of the most momentous achievements of individual human creativity in modern times. By 1965, he was ready to begin his kingdom. The land he was working on was not his own, but a Government area where no development or building of any kind was permitted. Unlike other Indian cities, Chandigarh was carefully planned and only authorised development was permitted.

Nek Chand set his stones around the little clearing and before long had sculpted his first figures, made of cement with an outer skin of broken bangles. Gradually the creation developed and grew; before long the sculptures and stones covered several acres. After his working day as a roads inspector ended, he worked alone in the undergrowth. He cleared the land and built his environment. Day after day, and at night by the light of burning tyres, he worked in total secrecy for fear of being discovered by the authorities. Apart from his wife Kamla and a few trusted friends nobody was aware what Nek Chand was doing.

When in 1972, a Government working party began clearing the jungle they came across acres of stones and statues. Almost two thousand sculptures of various sizes inhabited the undergrowth. Amazed by what they had discovered, local government officials were thrown into turmoil. Nek Chand's creation was completely illegal — a development in a forbidden area which by rights should be demolished. Within a few days of his discovery everyone in Chandigarh knew about the extraordinary creations in the forest. Hundreds flocked to see them and Nek Chand received his first reactions from the world.

Although many city officials were outraged, local business men offered Chand free materials and transport and with this extra assistance he was able to embark on the First Phase of the environment proper. He formed a series of small courtyards to display his natural rocks and sculptures. As his creation developed so did the support and interest of the citizens of Chandigarh.

He was now in a position to start work on the Second Phase, a series of large courtyards, many coated in a mosaic of natural stone or broken ceramic linked by winding paths and low archways. The armatures for much of his sculpture were made from old cycle parts; saddles became animal heads, forks became legs, frames became bodies. For his extensive areas of mosaic, he used not only broken crockery and tiles but whole bathrooms. He has built walls of oil drums, electric plug moulds and of old fluorescent tubes. His figures are clothed in thousands of broken glass bangles, in mosaic, or in foundry slag, even feathers.

In addition to the cement and concrete creations he also produces great quantities of animals and figures out of old rags and discarded clothing. These giant rag dolls are usually full size constructions with strong metal armatures. The interiors consist of hundreds of tightly bound rags, giving a rigidity and strength unusual in this medium. Nek Chand developed complex and extensive methods of waste collection with many different collection points to form one of the largest recycling programmes in Asia. And still he continues to work, now on the Third Phase of the Rock Garden...

Outsider Artists are unique creators in our times. Total outside of professional institutions of art, they have no formal training or degrees. Even more importantly, they choose to make and showcase their work in spaces other than art galleries and museums. Some of the most innovative and powerful creations today are by such 'mad' visionaries. Read more about Outsider Art and Artists at www.ranvision.com

Shammi Nanda (Shikshantar)

I have been associated with film making for some years. Recently, I decided to have a zero waste shoot - at least, to try it. My companions and I decided to use coconut shell cups instead of plastic ones during traveling, cloth bags in place of plastic bags, copper water bottles for plastic ones. We also decided against using disposable batteries and to instead use rechargeable ones. I realized that some of the equipment is made to use only so called 'disposable' batteries, so I put an email out to an e-group of filmmakers, informing them about my intent and seeking info on such equipment.

Some appreciated it, while others were cynical and said that I am still using video tapes which are also an e-waste, so what does it mean to save on the batteries? I didn't really understand this response, which I see as an escapism, i.e., "I will not take any small steps unless I can do it all." I am surprised that filmmakers who would otherwise make films about environmental issues rarely think about the environmental impact of film manufacturing plants and processing labs. For example, in the film institute I studied in, we rarely bothered about the amount of electricity we used while lighting the sets.

For me, Now Activism can be simply understood by what Gandhiji said a long time ago, "Be the change that you want to see in the world." I personally feel that I need to work with myself on so many areas. I feel the need to detoxify from the medicines and vaccines that I have ingested, from the toxins in the processed foods, from the pesticides and chemical fertilizers in the food, from the polluted air of the big cities... I need to detoxify my mind from media programming. I need to let go of the values I got from spending many so years in educational institutions and its visible and not-so-invisible curriculum. I need to rethink my way of looking at the world, nature and my relationship with people, and to rethink my relationship with money and wealth.

Someone once asked me, "Who is going to be the audience for your film?" I replied that I would make a film I would want to see. This question assumes that there is a target group, who needs to be made aware. It is similar to 'development' programs, where they talk of target groups who have to be 'empowered'. People say they are working for children, women, street children, dalits, sex workers, villagers, etc., but rarely do people talk of how they are working on themselves.

The whole assumption behind 'empowerment' is that the other person is weak and you are powerful. But if you ask the so-called 'empowered awareness-raisers' to provide three meals to their family which are free of pesticides, they will quickly realize how empowered they truly are. When they talk of working with community media, it's someone else's community. When playing games and art with kids, it's someone else's kids in someone else's neighborhood. We talk of malnutrition

but can't save our own kids from fast food, TV and sugar rushes — much less make the link between malnutrition and larger systemic forces. In health, whatever poisonous medicines we take, we want to push them down the throats of the 'powerless' too. We want to house everyone in the kind of unhealthy and toxic houses that we live in. Since we have forgotten how to shit in the open, we want the whole world to shit in toilets. Since we have no memories of fun and interaction at common bathing and washing places like ponds and wells, we want the whole world to have bathrooms. Since we have forgotten our mother tongue, we want 'others' too to speak in the dominant languages. Since we have not sung any songs while harvesting and planting seeds, we want the rest of the world to be spared the 'drudgery' of farming. Just because we put ties around our necks and wear uniforms to go to school every morning, we want everyone to be so 'civilised'.

Until some time ago, I was uncomfortable with the word 'activist', because activists were the ones who were doing things for or 'saving' others, i.e., being the 'Saviors'. In Brazil, the first port for the slaves brought from Africa was called Salvador, which means 'the Savior.' In the city square, there are historic places called Pelhorinho (the whipping post) and the Slave Holds, where tourists visit. It's seen as a thing of the past — a 'once-upon-a-time' kind of fiction. We fail to see the slavery in our day-to-day lives.

The Green Revolution came with the idea of saving us from hunger, and then went on to poison our soils and water. My friend Manish once said, "We have been betrayed by the colonizers so many times, and still we don't understand their games." When I say 'colonizer', I don't mean people of any one country, but rather the dominant destructive ideology and its forces which control people and nature. So many of us are colonized — from a worker in Silicon Valley eating the Standard American Diet (SAD) to a villager in India buying pesticides and fertilizers. We need to protect ourselves from the Saviors.

I am now understanding that what is not good for me, is also not good for nature and vice versa. The pesticide is neither good for me nor the soil. As for waste there is no such thing as 'throw away'¹, since there is no such place as 'away' on our planet. If traces of pesticide are being found in polar bears and umbilical chords of newborns, then I cannot get away from them. I might be putting toxins directly into nature, or my lifestyle is indirectly creating toxins, which are being dumped in nature. Eventually, I will get them back. If I expand the definition, to see my self as an integral part of nature, I can see that by poisoning the earth, I poison myself. If I see nature as an adversary, and see my self as outside of it, then I will be disrespectful to it, and my actions will be irresponsible. If I accept money as the prime determinant of wealth, I will not think twice before adopting

¹ William McDonough and Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle, 2002.

lifestyles that pollute rivers, air, the soil and myself. I had once read that we are suffering from Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD)². I know that whenever I have experienced nature closely, it has had deeper meaning for me, and I have become more loving to myself. For example, experiencing the beauty of bathing in rivers and ponds made me stop using soaps, which are also harmful to my body.

As an activist, I feel a great need to heal physically, emotionally and spiritually. In fact, the de-tox and healing have to happen simultaneously. Creating time and space for experiencing natural living and nature is one part. Stopping to examine the poisonous parts of our lives and changing them is another part. It's not a one-time thing but a process, where we can be clear of the direction and take small steps. If I can do it and be happy, maybe my friends and family will also take things up in some ways.

Back to the film shoot. I spent time with Karuna and her family, who do organic/ natural farming, live in a mud house, and are trying to practice natural living. While we were having lunch, she said that 80-90% of what we have been eating is from their farm. That was the most inspiring moment for me during my stay with them. That's when I realized how free they are. That's where she becomes an activist and a friend. And when her life becomes a message for me.

Is Your Activism Zero Waste?

Join the movement for a Zero Waste / Toxic-Free World! Some suggestions:

- Start by segregating your waste into 'bio-degradables', 'recyclables/upcyclables' and 'toxics'. Compost the bio-degradables. Make sure that your recyclables get to actual recyclers (not dumps). Eliminate toxics, especially plastics, in all forms.
- Find or create eco-friendly substitutes for toxic products. Source these locally to support the local economy.
- Conserve water, paper, petrol and electricity.
- Walk or bicycle as much as possible.
- Host 'upcycling' workshops, in order to make beautiful, useful and durable items out of waste.

Check out websites on zero waste at www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/udaipur.html

² Adbusters magazine.



*Vision is the aim of this
vocation: the clearing of
Destruction's pale, thick-lying
pus from eyes too long blinded
to the many possibilities of the
way. This lifework, its fruit
should be the birth of new
seers, other hearers, more
numerous utterers...*

- Ayi Kwei Armah

Two Thousands Seasons, 2000

Bob Stilger (The Berkana Institute)

Then and Now

I came of age in the sixties. Coming from a working class family in the Northwestern part of the US, and going to college in the Midwest, I somehow missed the “drugs, sex and rock and roll” part of the sixties. Well, I didn’t completely miss it, but that’s another story. My activism began in college. It was a time of being *against*. We opposed the war in Vietnam. We were against racial discrimination. We were against rigid systems of academic instruction. We were against male domination.

Of course, there were things that we were for. But mostly, our movements were characterized by what they were against. Beyond that, except for the most radical edge, our movements were about changing the policies and practices of government and major institutions. Even on the radical fringe, the talk was about overthrow of the government with very little sense of what came next.

Some writers have looked back at the movements these times and characterized them as being *ideological, strategical and tactical*. Our thinking informed and directed our action. Frequently our thinking was embedded in a particular ideology. We argued about ideology and about what we thought. Once we found people who thought like us, we developed strategies and tactics in pursuit of the changes we wanted. Usually what we wanted was the end of various current practices. This work of my teens and early twenties was the work of protest. It said **STOP IT**. It accepted the current government and other institutional structures as powerful and as the location of change.

In my mid twenties I co-founded the Community Development Corporation which where I served as Executive Director for 25 years. From time to time Northwest Regional Facilitators, or NRF as we were best known, was able to engage in some transformative work. But for the most part we worked alongside and within the structures of government to help people who lived at the social and economic margins have better lives. We helped them find housing and to fix up the housing they lived in. We helped them conserve energy. We helped them send their kids to school with full stomachs. We helped them find child care that met their needs.

We were deeply committed to working with people in a respectful way that honored their heritage and dignity. After 20 or so years of this work I realized that we had helped many thousand people live better. But the image that came to mind was that much of our work was like putting our fingers in holes in the dike and that we were running out of fingers with a geometric increase in the number of holes. Our work was important for those we helped. And it did nothing to change the underlying conditions...

This work of my late twenties, thirties and forties was about helping the people who were on the margins of the *American Dream* have better lives. We questioned and challenged various aspects of the American Dream from time to time, but we did little that challenged the assumptions of this dream, its impact on people around the world, or its impact on the world itself. It was the work of **SOCIAL CHANGE** to help some of the people excluded from the dream to have better lives.

My latest pilgrimage began in 2000 when I became part of the Berkana Institute. I wandered for a while, finding new friends and colleagues. It was in the summer of 2001 at a global learning village held at Castle Borl in Slovenia that I began to have a sense of direction. I was sitting in a circle of younger activists who had come together in a session called by Marianne Knuth of Zimbabwe. Marianne had a deep sense that she was supposed to go to Zimbabwe and start some sort of learning center. She had lived only part of her life in Zimbabwe and, frankly, wasn't sure what she was supposed to do and why. She called for a circle to help her find her way.

I was just about the only person in the circle over fifty. Just about everyone in the circle wanted to assist Marianne and they were feeling a similar call themselves. No one was sure of what work they wanted to do, but they knew it was local work and they knew that they needed to be in conversation with each other to develop clarity. As I sat with the circle I sensed the same kind of energy that was present when I co-founded NRF some 25 years before, AND, there was something else present.

The people in the circle weren't talking about what government ought to do (or ought not to do). They were talking about work that was calling to them from one local place. They weren't concerned that they had more questions than answers – in fact they seemed to enjoy the questions! They knew that large scale shifts were needed – but they sensed that **TRANSFORMATION** emerges from work on the ground in local systems.

Over the next several years I followed and talked with many of these activists as they created various kinds of learning centers in local systems. In fact, my inquiry with them into the nature of their work became the basis for my doctoral dissertation at the California Institute of Integral Studies. They practice a kind of leadership that comes from mind, heart, hands and spirit and provides a foundation for effective action in the world. I call this approach “enspirited leadership.”

The leaders I've worked with come from places like Santos, Brazil, where the Instituto Elos (www.institutoelosbr.org.br) works in favelas, or slums, where people have few material goods but where the human spirit is still strong. They always begin their work by asking the elders to talk about their lives and to look for

patterns of possibility in their stories. These leaders come from Edcouch-Elsa High School in Texas in the United States, where a school serving migrant workers has gone from having one of the highest dropout rates in Texas to having the highest rate of placement in top U.S. colleges. They come from Johannesburg, South Africa, where the Greenhouse Project (www.greenhouse.org.za) is becoming a base for recycling, urban agriculture and sustainable building.

To support this enspirited work in the world, in 2004 Berkana launched the Berkana Exchange (www.berkanaexchange.net). We work primarily with centers around the world that are helping ordinary people step forward as leaders. Working with urban youth in Dakar, Senegal, with villagers in rural Zimbabwe, across the generations in Udaipur, India, and with indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Mexico, these centers are helping people offer whatever leadership they can in these changing times. I have identified six key landmarks for enspirited leaders and now activists:

- They work from a sense of true calling
- They journey in the company of others
- They live with a spiritual center
- They demand diversity
- Reflective learning guides their lives
- Their work is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty

A Sense of True Calling

Each of these activists has stepped into his or her work because of a strong sense of calling, rather than through a methodical, strategic decision-making process. In many ways, life leads them to their work. And, of course, their work then leads them to their life.

Marianne Knuth from Kufunda Learning Village (www.kufunda.org) in Zimbabwe explained her commitment to her work in this way:

“I had this feeling that I had to do it. If I would have thought someone else was going to be able to do it, I would have let them. Maybe that’s being arrogant, but I just had to do it. There was a real fire that was burning—and it was really exciting.”

Tim Merry, who began a learning centre in Holland and now has started the Shire (www.oftheshire.org) in Nova Scotia, Canada, said it this way:

“It has been a really personal journey, and the reason I am doing this work is because it is making me stronger. And because it is making me happy in what I do. I am beginning to understand the greatest gift we can give to the world is our own happiness, and that’s all we really have to do. We don’t need to do anything more than be content with who we are. We don’t have to change the world.”

What stands out to me from many conversations is that they follow deep gut instincts that tell them where to place their attention and where to create their intentions for action. Their actions are conceived in a place of spirit, not in a place of thought. What gives these young men and women the confidence and courage to respond to that which called them? How were they able to step forward while so many who hear such a calling choose to ignore it?

In the Company of Others

Part of the answer is that they don't do their work alone. Close friends and family who share deep bonds of trust, love and respect are essential for finding the courage to follow the inner voice. Moving into new territory, doing work that seems unconventional and perhaps even foolish to some, requires companions.

Some of the most striking characteristics of the companions who move together are that they come from different age groups and are frequently family members. This pattern is different from the activists of the 1960s. What I recall from my 20s was precious little connection with siblings, a distancing from my parents' ideas, and suspicion about most people over 30.

In describing how he began his work, Cire Kane of Synapse Center (www.synapsecenter.org) in Senegal said that he kept remembering his grandfather's and parents' advice:

“Dare to build on your relationships rather than pursuing money. Success in life lies in relationships.’ I have learnt from them the value of understanding myself and my place in this world. I’m here because many people contributed to my development. And I remember so much of what happened to me and understand more myself when I listen closely to others. My whole life is a simple movement circling around community, relationships and joy. And this community is expanding everyday beyond the borders of my birth land, crossing oceans and connecting with many good-hearted people around the world.”

There may be some who believe they can make these journeys alone, as rugged individuals. But why? Why wouldn't we all want to find close companions to share our journey? Why wouldn't we seek others excited by the same possibilities and the same questions? Where would we find nourishment if we traveled alone?

A Spiritual Center

What do leaders need to have in order to stand with confidence in a complex, changing and unpredictable world? A partial answer, I suspect, is that holding an encompassing view requires, at least from time to time, a higher level of consciousness. The evolution of such consciousness seems to require a spiritual

practice. Each of these learning center founders works from a spiritual center. Their practices are simply a part of their daily lives.

Zoë Nicholson, founder of LifeWorks in England, says:

“I started a meditation practice about the same time I began this work and I realized it was possible to have a fuller life at a slower speed. I didn’t really need to run around filling up my life. I could just slow down, unpack and my life would be a lot fuller... We can do all the intellectual stuff about saving the planet, but the bottom line is how can I find a way to feel alive?”

Una Nicholson, Zoë’s sister, adds:

“Things just seem to happen a lot more harmoniously, bountifully and easily. The right things happen at the right time. Surprises come along and good things happen. For me, it just becomes a practice of being aligned with myself—that seems to provide the path.”

When I asked Manish Jain from India about his work at the core of Shikshantar (www.swaraj.org/shikshantar), the learning center he has created with others in Udaipur, India, his response was:

“This work is not about saving or changing the world, but about how I live my own life and live it as an invitation to others. As the *Bhagavad-Gita* says: ‘Try to live the way that you feel is true with your own inner values. Don’t worry about the results.’”

The presence of a spiritual center is what allows these leaders to hear and trust their inner voices and follow their calls. They also move, with that spirit, into a place of reflective learning that acts as a compass to guide their action.

A Demand for Diversity

When these leaders look at a given situation, they look for the surrounding web of relationships and systems. They look for the whole picture. The younger leaders I’ve worked with all have had experience in multiple cultures. Such experiences may not be a precondition for enspirited leadership, but they usually shake people up enough that they begin to see the world more broadly. Ante Glavas who started Horizon (www.horizont.hr) in Croatia says:

“When one is born in one culture, it is taken for granted that the world is as it is. When one then truly learns another culture deeply, then one realizes that there is not a set way of seeing the world.”

The capacity to understand that the way we view our lives is a construct our minds have created makes it easier to let go of false certainties. In *Beyond*

Culture (Doubleday, 1976), Edward Hall suggests that multicultural experiences literally demand an expansion in consciousness. An expanded consciousness is required for this work.

The presence of others whose ideas and experiences differ greatly from our own invites us to let go of our limited view of what's needed and what can happen. Diversity is a key to open exploration and inquiry. It is what helps us let go of old ideas and solutions and to search for what else might be possible.

Reflective Learning as a Guide

For these leaders, the search for spiritual grounding is accompanied by a continuous process of surfacing facts and impressions, revealing patterns and assumptions, examining actions and behaviors, and affirming or changing the course of action. This continuous process makes up reflective learning.

In early 2002, I met with many younger leaders in Prague, and we characterized this approach as follows:

- Above all, this is a creative adventure. It is experimental. It calls us to focus our attention on the now. Our work, and our lives, are laboratories of grace. (Ann Doshier, an elder and community psychologist who serves on The Berkana Institute's board of directors, first coined the term "laboratories of grace" in the late 1990s.)
- This work is much bigger than any of us are separately, and it still calls on each of us to be separate and ourselves.
- We are called upon to use our full imagination and learning, our collective diversity, our respect for synchronicity and mystery, and our willingness to be transformed.
- We do this important work with a spirit of play, humor, friendship and love. We are connected and we connect to others.
- Our local work is the critical ground from which global transformation can emerge, with integrity.

These reflections are alive. They hold a sense of genuine curiosity. This kind of reflective learning affirms life and invites inquiry into the uncertain path of transformation. The process of making such reflections explicit is as ordinary for these leaders as their spirituality is. They have a capacity to move easily from the realm of spirit to the realm of thought, and this motion gives them balance.

Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Ambiguity and uncertainty are befriended in this work. To follow a sense of calling, in the company of others, aware of a diverse world, from a spiritual center and with an awareness of assumptions, is to let go of control. There is simply no other way. Doing all of those things throws the doors of ambiguity and uncertainty wide open.

A choice each of us can make is whether ambiguity and uncertainty open a pathway to fear or a pathway to balance. When we think we are supposed to be in charge, when our self-confidence is based on being able to predict what will happen and how things will turn out, then ambiguity and uncertainty usually invite our fear to rise up and bite us.

When we are able to release ourselves into the uncertainty, we are invited to become explorers, to discover what lies ahead as we work with others to create that future. Cire Kane put it well:

“Today, the path is still unclear. It is literally invisible, and yet my heart is often being moved and my soul split open. My lovely work is taking me every day on a journey of new experiences. These experiences are opening my heart to the unimaginable beauty of life and community around me. Every day I awaken to a new day. I go out into the world with a feeling of excitement and joy and a feeling of being at home, everywhere in our diverse supportive community. I do my work with engagement and joy, with lots of downs and still many ups. I break for prayer, sometimes meditation, often to be with my parents or to hang out with friends. I love my work. I love my community and I love the life I’m living. I will persevere through uncertainty and fear about my ability to carry out the mission before me.”

Landmarks in Your Life

The work of these leaders is *enspirited*, in that it comes from a strong inner force that demands attention. It is *appreciative*, in that it looks for strengths that can be built upon. It is *emergent*, in that it creates both its path and its destination. These six landmarks are a guidance system for work in this territory.

As exciting as this work can be, it is also easy to get lost. I have opportunities to talk with people all over the world engaged in this enspirited work, and they often feel discouraged, isolated, lonely and disconnected. They’ve forgotten to make sure that what they are doing is their true work. They have lost touch with those around them. They’re just too busy to slow down and be quiet. They’ll get to reflection later. The views of others are just too distracting. And, oh yes, wouldn’t it be nice to have some certainty?

My work, and that of the Berkana Exchange, is to help people be wildly excited and deeply grounded in this kind of work. These landmarks are part of this process. Please think about how they are present in your life and work.

Questioner: I want to do social work, but I don't know how to start.

KRISHNAMURTI:

I think it is very important to find out not how to start, but why you want to do social work at all. Why do you want to do social work? Is it because you see misery in the world—starvation, disease, exploitation, the brutal indifference of great wealth side by side with appalling poverty, the enmity between man and man? Is that the reason? Do you want to do social work because in your heart there is love and therefore you are not concerned with your own fulfillment? Or is social work a means of escape from yourself? Do you understand? You see, for example, all the ugliness involved in orthodox marriage, so you say, “I shall never get married,” and you throw yourself into social work instead; or perhaps your parents have urged you into it, or you have an ideal. If it is a means of escape, or if you are merely pursuing an ideal established by society, by a leader or a priest, or by yourself, then any social work you may do will only create further misery. But if you have love in your heart, if you are seeking truth and are therefore a truly religious person, if you are no longer ambitious, no longer pursuing success, and your virtue is not leading to respectability—then your very life will help to bring about a total transformation of society.

I think it is very important to understand this. When we are young, as most of you are, we want to do something, and social work is in the air; books tell about it, the newspapers do propaganda for it, there are schools to train social workers, and so on. But you see, without self-knowledge, without understanding your-self and your relationships, any social work you do will turn to ashes in your mouth.

It is the happy man, not the idealist or the miserable escapee, who is revolutionary; and the happy man is not he who has many possessions. The happy man is the truly religious man, and his very living is social work. But if you become merely one of the innumerable social workers, your heart will be empty. You may give away your money, or persuade other people to contribute theirs, and you may bring about marvellous reforms; but as long as your heart is empty and your mind full of theories, your life will be dull, weary, without joy. So, first understand yourself, and out of that self-knowledge will come action of the right kind.

- excerpt from A Matter of Culture, J. Krishnamurti, 1930

Munir Fasheh (Arab Education Forum)

In light of my experience in Palestine

(especially in the 1970s and during the first intifada 1987-91)

I often reflected on (and wrote about) what I (and others) have done and experienced in Palestine, but this is the first time I reflect on ‘activism’ itself. My immediate reaction is that what you all refer to as ‘activism’, I would like to refer to as manifestations of attentiveness, aliveness, love, freedom, and taking risks. ‘Activism’ sounds too abstract and professional for me, and I don’t remember I ever used it to describe what we were doing. For example, the two most inspiring periods in my life – the decade of the 1970s and the first *intifada* 1987-91 (both in Palestine) – no one referred to what people were doing as activism. The first time I heard the word used was during the first *intifada*, and it was used by the mass media and then picked up by political parties and others. My worry stems from my experience where every time a word was used, it could only name what is visible and, thus, I am afraid that using ‘activism’ would contribute to blinding us to much of what people do, that cannot be captured in words, and cannot be comprehended by the mind. Let’s not contribute to the disappearance of meaningful acts. What I am trying to say is avoid making what we name take over and slowly rob communities of acts and abilities that have been vital in people’s lives for thousands of years. What I started realizing, since the early 1970s, is how useful the mind and language are in organizing, planning, competing, controlling, and winning, but how limited they are in their ability to comprehend life in its fullness, richness, depth, and beauty, and how limited they are in their ability to ‘see’ harmony, how things fit together in a natural way. That realization made me ask what would be lost/ ignored/ disvalued/ made invisible by talking only about what the mind can understand and language can express. I believe that this question is relevant to discussions concerning activism.

One reason as to why the two periods I mentioned above were inspiring to me was the fact that there were no leaders and no funds, and no one appointed self as an agent of social change. People were thinking and acting in a more humble and concrete way, and having faith that that would lead to meaningful change determined by people and the realities of the situation, and not by “professionals” who determine the path and the outcome. People’s actions were in harmony with what the Zapatistas articulated 20 years later: changing traditions in traditional ways (and not in tearing apart the social fabric of society). In addition, institutions and organized groups were either marginal (like in the 1970s) or ordered closed by Israeli occupation authorities (like in the first *intifada*). The absence of leaders and the lack of intervention by institutions provided freedom and released energy within people to act autonomously, and to use ‘structures’ that were part of communities and culture. Everyone did what s/he thought s/he could do and was good at doing – and be ready to face consequences and punishment by the army. In other words, people and communities were self-governed. What I

experienced (in the two periods) dismantled the modern myth that people cannot govern themselves or function without institutions and professionals, and without leaders directing and helping them all the time.

I will tell two stories (both of which happened during the first *intifada*) to give concrete meanings to what I said above. The first is a story that I wrote about elsewhere but is relevant to repeat here. It is a story (which was a common scene during the first *intifada*) about a number of Israeli soldiers harshly beating a young man in his early twenties in the central district of Ramallah. Several women rushed toward the scene shouting and trying to pull the soldiers away from the young man. Suddenly, a woman carrying a baby ran up and started shouting at the young man, "I told you not to leave the house today, that the situation is too dangerous. But you didn't listen; you never listen to me." Then she turned to the soldiers and said, "Beat him; he deserves this. He never listens. I am sick of my life with him." Then back to the man she cried, "I am sick of you and your baby; take him and leave me alone." She pushed the baby into his arms and ran away. The soldiers were confused and left the man and went on. A few minutes later, the woman reappeared, took back her baby, told the young man to go to his home, and wished him safety and quick recovery. I then realized that they were total strangers!

The woman was not acting or pretending; and she was not a superhuman or a hero (as many like to characterize Palestinians). Nor, on the other hand, was she a subhuman or a member of a non-people (as many Israeli and Western experts have been portraying Palestinians for decades). She would not label herself as an activist. She was simply acting humanly, in a spontaneous and compassionate way. What she did is a manifestation of attentiveness, aliveness, freedom, love, and taking risks. Her action brought out the hope in human beings: how incredible and how unpredictable human beings can be. Above all, she did what she felt was good – an attribute usually forgotten in a world dominated by rational explanations, such as power relations, or oppressed vs. oppressors. She acted outside laws, customs, paradigms, and the intension of producing social change, and without evaluating, figuring out, or thinking of consequences. She even risked the possibility of getting her baby harmed. She didn't ask where the young man was from or his political orientation or religion. She did what she felt was good and right.

The second story was told to me by Kamal Abdul Fattah, professor of geography at Birzeit University. It is a story of a boy in Jenin who was running away from soldiers, and he entered a house, where a woman was sitting on a chair, preparing some food. When she saw the terror in the young boy's eyes, she told him to hide under her gown. For her, doing what was in her judgment good was more important than thinking whether it was appropriate or in accordance with custom. Her love for that boy (a stranger) and the impulse to do something to protect him were far more important to her than obeying a law or conforming to a custom. Her action

was a manifestation of love, doing good, being attentive and alive, acting in freedom, and taking a risk.

It is exactly in the sense embedded in the actions of the two women, that I use the word love here. What was manifested by their actions was that love is stronger than rules, laws, and customs, and that it is intimately connected to doing good. But these are not possible without freedom – inner freedom. It is exactly such actions that I am afraid would be made invisible (and slowly disappear, obviously unintentionally) by stressing ‘activism’. My fear is we will start perceiving activism as a ‘profession’ and activists as professionals.

The fact that both stories involved mothers is not an insignificant fact. What has kept Palestinian communities functional have been acts by people who did what they did as a matter of living and as a manifestation of love for others, and not as a result of planned and organized thinking. It is exactly in this sense that mothers in Gaza, for example, have been indispensable in the survival and sanity of people there, in spite of the insanity of what Israel has been doing since the 1950s – almost non-stop. [I believe one day the Gaza mothers will be looked at as an embodiment of the miracle of humanity.] No one referred to them as activists or to what they were doing as activism, and I hope no one ever will.

The voluntary work movement is an example during the 1970s that embodied what I mentioned above. It was too beautiful to give it an organizational name, such as activism or social change. Such words do not do justice to the spirit of what was happening.

I am not saying that ‘activists’ in Palestine did not have an impact, or that activism is useless or meaningless, or that people who seek change should not be doing so. What I said above is not against activism or NOW activism or change. All that I am saying is pointing out how important it is not to repeat the mistake of forgetting what has been the backbone for the survival of communities throughout history; to avoid falling into the belief that everything and all acts can be understood and organized. What I am trying to say is that what kept the Palestinian society viable and kept life going are not activists and change agents but those who were part of daily life, acting in love and freedom, such as mothers. In a sense, I am talking about humility and dignity, which – at least in my experience – activists and change agents usually lack.

It is from this perspective that I see, for example, the question “what important questions can be used to invite/ engage people who do not currently think of themselves as ‘activists’ into exploring their roles in the NOW activism?” as an example of how we may be blinding ourselves to see aspects that cannot be comprehended by the mind and cannot be expressed in concepts and through language. By asking people who do not currently think of themselves as ‘activists’

to “explore their roles in the NOW activism”, won’t we be perceiving “NOW activism” as a reference, seeing people through the eyeglasses of whether they are activists or not, rather than seeing them as they are and, thus, being open to how they perceive and describe themselves?

That’s why I feel uncomfortable with phrases that were used in some of the forwarded materials, such as ‘social change’ and ‘paradigm shift’. A most fundamental change, for me, is changing one’s perceptions; and a most profound and honest way of living is to live outside paradigms, to live with full attentiveness, aliveness, love, freedom, and taking risks. What helped people survive in Palestine has been their ability to live outside paradigms – to create life anew, almost daily. This ability is crucial in the world today.

The case of the Palestinians is not unique; many others exhibited what I said about Palestinians. The threat of Hispanics to America that Huntington speaks about in his book “who are we?” comes from people who simply live their own way and refuse to play the game of competition in living or to believe that they would be left behind if they don’t learn English. In other words, their ‘threat’ does not come from activism but from living; from being alive, loving, and free in their actions and interactions. Similarly, Blacks who responded to oppression through music and dancing... Should we call that activism? I wouldn’t. Same with the Zapatistas... All these cases reflect the power embedded in every culture (in the sense that a culture represents a ‘world’ where things fit together, rather than separate ingredients to be put together in an artificial way within institutions under the title “interdisciplinary” or “intercultural”).

This brings me to the last point I would like to share here about my ‘activism’: every time I felt attentive, alive, loving, and free, I felt like I was re-inventing the wheel, re-inventing what has been re-invented a thousand times before. In other words, if pressed, the way I would describe myself is one who never stopped trying to re-invent the wheel! Whether in relation to the voluntary work movement, working with teachers and students, creating activities with children, or to what I was involved in during the first intifada (when schools and universities were closed for several years), or to what I did at Tamer Institute or have been doing since 1998 with various groups in the Arab world (and beyond), I feel that I was involved in all of these as a way of re-inventing what has always been there. I was re-inventing in the same sense and same spirit that a new baby is born. Every time I felt I was re-inventing an act, or the meaning of a word, or what culture has, it was as if life was starting all over again. For the past few years, I have been active in re-inventing the inspiration and wisdom in a statement articulated 1,400 years ago by Imam Ali: *qeematu kullimri’en ma yuhsenoh* – which has been since 1998 the source of my ‘activism’!

The image I use to describe what I've done since 1971 is the image of watering plants. Seeds have all what it takes to flourish and grow. Similarly, every person is uniquely complete (as the Indian proverb puts it). Watering plants is the closest image I can give to how I perceive 'activism'.

In short, what I am saying boils down to the following: just like my institutional knowledge, not only makes my mother's kind of knowledge invisible and valueless but also gradually disappear; just like market economy, not only makes subsistence living invisible and valueless but also gradually disappear; just like education, not only makes learning through living invisible and valueless but also gradually disappear; and just like the medical institution, not only makes the healing ability of the body invisible and valueless but also gradually disappear, similarly my concern is that visible and articulated activism will not only make spontaneous acts that stem from attentiveness, aliveness, love, freedom, and taking risks invisible and valueless but also gradually disappear.

* * *

I sent the above reflections on July 2, 2006, before the Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Beit Hanoun (in Gaza Strip, Palestine). What Lebanon and Gaza brought out very clearly (in spite attempts by institutions, such as mass media and academia, to make it invisible) was the **reference** that nurtures people's daily lives and their thoughts, expressions, and actions. I lived through the Nasser era, through Arab nationalism and socialist visions, and through the era of national liberation, the Palestine Liberation Organization (with the exception the first Palestinian *intifada*)... their reference (whether as politicians, academicians, writers, development activists, or revolutionaries) was western (in relation to ideas, perceptions, values, and discourse). What shaped their minds, expressions and actions was the either the liberal capitalist model or the socialist communist one. I use 'reference' here to refer to what nurtures people's daily thoughts, expressions, images, perceptions, and actions. In contrast to nationalist and socialist movements, Hezbollah's reference is *within*. This is the secret and the mystery in what they have done in the face of formidable technology, weapons, and financial and political support from all major powers (US government, all European governments, most Arab governments, the UN, and major mass media networks). Part of Hezbollah's reference is feeling the injustice that happened 1400 years ago that is still part of people's daily lives. Their "activism" – if we insist on using this term – springs from that history, from people's faith, memories, dignity, hospitality, mutual support, and realities, including knowing the geographical terrain of the place where they live. Just like in other aspects of life, if activism is purely rational, I suggest that people think twice before they embark on doing what they plan to do. If what drives them is just being convinced of it intellectually or morally, but it does not form the "substance" of their daily living, what they do would still be admirable, but won't be sustainable or deep. Any activism that does not touch people's personal lives and, instead, follows a plan designed by the mind alone would

most probably be short-lived, shallow, ineffective, or even harmful and may lead activists to feeling burnt out. Any one who perceives themselves as an activist should ask about the reference that nurtures what s/he does.

Similarly, the reference of people's reactions in Beit Hanoun (in Gaza, Palestine) – especially women – to the continuous targeting via air strikes by Israelis of people and homes, was also from within. Quoting Rory McCarthy in the Guardian on Dec. 5, 2006, "...hundreds of women... marched into the town of Beit Hanoun in the middle of an Israeli incursion to free... [those] holed up inside a mosque. Two of the women were killed, but the crowd succeeded in freeing [them]... In the following days, crowds of men and women staged sit-ins at... houses, the Israeli military had warned, were about to be destroyed. The Israelis had to call off their air strikes." [It is very revealing to mention here what the Human Rights Watch organization wrote: "civilians must not be used to shield homes against military attacks... Palestinian leaders should be renouncing, not embracing, the tactic of encouraging civilians to place themselves at risk..."!! Palestinians are encouraged to use democracy, but when we do, the whole "democratic" world denounces and starves us! And we are encouraged to use non-violent acts, and when we do, even human rights groups denounce us! Really, the modern western mind has been corrupted!]

In short, what is significant about what people did in both places is the fact that their reference is what they could do with their bodies, within their communities, and driven by connection to land, history, and culture. It points to the immense vitality and resourcefulness of people, communities, and cultures – which form the real solid basis of "activism".



To Hell with Good Intentions

by Ivan Illich

An address by Monsignor Ivan Illich to the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects (CLASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on April 20, 1968. In his usual biting and sometimes sarcastic style, Illich goes to the heart of the deep dangers of paternalism inherent in any voluntary service activity, but especially in any international service "mission." Parts of the speech are outdated and must be viewed in the historical context of 1968 when it was delivered, but the entire speech is retained for the full impact of his point and at Ivan Illich's request.

IN THE CONVERSATIONS WHICH I HAVE HAD TODAY, I was impressed by two things, and I want to state them before I launch into my prepared talk.

I was impressed by your insight that the motivation of U.S. volunteers overseas springs mostly from very alienated feelings and concepts. I was equally impressed, by what I interpret as a step forward among would-be volunteers like you: openness to the idea that the only thing you can legitimately volunteer for in Latin America might be voluntary powerlessness, voluntary presence as receivers, as such, as hopefully beloved or adopted ones without any way of returning the gift.

I was equally impressed by the hypocrisy of most of you: by the hypocrisy of the atmosphere prevailing here. I say this as a brother speaking to brothers and sisters. I say it against many resistances within me; but it must be said. Your very insight, your very openness to evaluations of past programs make you hypocrites because you - or at least most of you - have decided to spend this next summer in Mexico, and therefore, you are unwilling to go far enough in your reappraisal of your program. You close your eyes because you want to go ahead and could not do so if you looked at some facts.

It is quite possible that this hypocrisy is unconscious in most of you. Intellectually, you are ready to see that the motivations which could legitimate volunteer action overseas in 1963 cannot be invoked for the same action in 1968. "Mission-vacations" among poor Mexicans were "the thing" to do for well-off U.S. students earlier in this decade: sentimental concern for newly-discovered, poverty south of the border combined with total blindness to much worse poverty at home justified such benevolent excursions. Intellectual insight into the difficulties of fruitful volunteer action had not sobered the spirit of Peace Corps Papal-and-Self-Styled Volunteers.

Today, the existence of organizations like yours is offensive to Mexico. I wanted to make this statement in order to explain why I feel sick about it all and in order

to make you aware that good intentions have not much to do with what we are discussing here. To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions; this sums up the same theological insight.

The very frustration which participation in CIASP programs might mean for you, could lead you to new awareness: the awareness that even North Americans can receive the gift of hospitality without the slightest ability to pay for it; the awareness that for some gifts one cannot even say “thank you.”

Now to my prepared statement.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For the past six years I have become known for my increasing opposition to the presence of any and all North American “dogooders” in Latin America. I am sure you know of my present efforts to obtain the voluntary withdrawal of all North American volunteer armies from Latin America - missionaries, Peace Corps members and groups like yours, a “division” organized for the benevolent invasion of Mexico. You were aware of these things when you invited me - of all people - to be the main speaker at your annual convention. This is amazing! I can only conclude that your invitation means one of at least three things:

Some among you might have reached the conclusion that CIASP should either dissolve altogether, or take the promotion of voluntary aid to the Mexican poor out of its institutional purpose. Therefore you might have invited me here to help others reach this same decision.

You might also have invited me because you want to learn how to deal with people who think the way I do - how to dispute them successfully. It has now become quite common to invite Black Power spokesmen to address Lions Clubs. A “dove” must always be included in a public dispute organized to increase U.S. belligerence.

And finally, you might have invited me here hoping that you would be able to agree with most of what I say, and then go ahead in good faith and work this summer in Mexican villages. This last possibility is only open to those who do not listen, or who cannot understand me.

I did not come here to argue. I am here to tell you, if possible to convince you, and hopefully, to stop you, from pretentiously imposing yourselves on Mexicans.

I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer. However, his good faith can usually be explained only by an abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy. By definition, you cannot help being ultimately vacationing salesmen for the middle-class “American Way of Life,” since that is really the only life you know. A group like this could not have developed unless a mood in the United States had supported it - the belief that any true American must share God’s blessings with his poorer fellow men. The idea that every American has something to give, and at all times may, can and should give it, explains why it occurred to students that they could help Mexican peasants “develop” by spending a few months in their villages.

Of course, this surprising conviction was supported by members of a missionary order, who would have no reason to exist unless they had the same conviction - except a much stronger one. It is now high time to cure yourselves of this. You, like the values you carry, are the products of an American society of achievers and consumers, with its two-party system, its universal schooling, and its family-car affluence. You are ultimately-consciously or unconsciously - “salesmen” for a delusive ballet in the ideas of democracy, equal opportunity and free enterprise among people who haven’t the possibility of profiting from these.

Next to money and guns, the third largest North American export is the U.S. idealist, who turns up in every theater of the world: the teacher, the volunteer, the missionary, the community organizer, the economic developer, and the vacationing do-gooders. Ideally, these people define their role as service. Actually, they frequently wind up alleviating the damage done by money and weapons, or “seducing” the “underdeveloped” to the benefits of the world of affluence and achievement. Perhaps this is the moment to instead bring home to the people of the U.S. the knowledge that the way of life they have chosen simply is not alive enough to be shared.

By now it should be evident to all America that the U.S. is engaged in a tremendous struggle to survive. The U.S. cannot survive if the rest of the world is not convinced that here we have Heaven-on-Earth. The survival of the U.S. depends on the acceptance by all so-called “free” men that the U.S. middle class has “made it.” The U.S. way of life has become a religion which must be accepted by all those who do not want to die by the sword - or napalm. All over the globe the U.S. is fighting to protect and develop at least a minority who consume what the U.S. majority can afford. Such is the purpose of the Alliance for Progress of the middle-classes which the U.S. signed with Latin America some years ago. But increasingly this commercial alliance must be protected by weapons which allow the minority who can “make it” to protect their acquisitions and achievements.

But weapons are not enough to permit minority rule. The marginal masses become rambunctious unless they are given a “Creed,” or belief which explains the status quo. This task is given to the U.S. volunteer - whether he be a member of CLASP or a worker in the so-called “Pacification Programs” in Viet Nam.

The United States is currently engaged in a three-front struggle to affirm its ideals of acquisitive and achievement-oriented “Democracy.” I say “three” fronts, because three great areas of the world are challenging the validity of a political and social system which makes the rich ever richer, and the poor increasingly marginal to that system.

In Asia, the U.S. is threatened by an established power - China. The U.S. opposes China with three weapons: the tiny Asian elites who could not have it any better than in an alliance with the United States; a huge war machine to stop the Chinese from “taking over” as it is usually put in this country, and; forcible re-education of the so-called “Pacified” peoples. All three of these efforts seem to be failing.

In Chicago, poverty funds, the police force, and preachers seem to be no more successful in their efforts to check the unwillingness of the black community to wait for graceful integration into the system.

And finally, in Latin America, the Alliance for Progress has been quite successful in increasing the number of people who could not be better off - meaning the tiny, middle-class elites - and has created ideal conditions for military dictatorships. The dictators were formerly at the service of the plantation owners, but now they protect the new industrial complexes. And finally, you come to help the underdog accept his destiny within this process!

All you will do in a Mexican village is create disorder. At best, you can try to convince Mexican girls that they should marry a young man who is self-made, rich, a consumer, and as disrespectful of tradition as one of you. At worst, in your “community development” spirit you might create just enough problems to get someone shot after your vacation ends, and you rush back to your middleclass neighborhoods where your friends make jokes about “spics” and “wetbacks.”

You start on your task without any training. Even the Peace Corps spends around \$10,000 on each corps member to help him adapt to his new environment and to guard him against culture shock. How odd that nobody ever thought about spending money to educate poor Mexicans in order to prevent them from the culture shock of meeting you?

In fact, you cannot even meet the majority which you pretend to serve in Latin America - even if you could speak their language, which most of you cannot. You can only dialogue with those like you - Latin American imitations of the North American middle class. There is no way for you to really meet with the underprivileged, since there is no common ground whatsoever for you to meet.

Let me explain this statement, and also let me explain why most Latin Americans with whom you might be able to communicate would disagree with me.

Suppose you went to a U.S. ghetto this summer and tried to help the poor there "help themselves." Very soon you would be either spit upon or laughed at. People offended by your pretentiousness would hit or spit. People who understand that your own bad consciences push you to this gesture would laugh condescendingly. Soon you would be made aware of your irrelevance among the poor, of your status as middle-class college students on a summer assignment. You would be roundly rejected, no matter if your skin is white - as most of your faces here are - or brown or black, as a few exceptions who got in here somehow.

Your reports about your work in Mexico, which you so kindly sent me, exude self-complacency. Your reports on past summers prove that you are not even capable of understanding that your dogooding in a Mexican village is even less relevant than it would be in a U.S. ghetto. Not only is there a gulf between what you have and what others have which is much greater than the one existing between you and the poor in your own country, but there is also a gulf between what you feel and what the Mexican people feel that is incomparably greater. This gulf is so great that in a Mexican village you, as White Americans (or cultural white Americans) can imagine yourselves exactly the way a white preacher saw himself when he offered his life preaching to the black slaves on a plantation in Alabama. The fact that you live in huts and eat tortillas for a few weeks renders your well-intentioned group only a bit more picturesque.

The only people with whom you can hope to communicate with are some members of the middle class. And here please remember that I said "some" - by which I mean a tiny elite in Latin America.

You come from a country which industrialized early and which succeeded in incorporating the great majority of its citizens into the middle classes. It is no social distinction in the U.S. to have graduated from the second year of college. Indeed, most Americans now do. Anybody in this country who did not finish high school is considered underprivileged.

In Latin America the situation is quite different: 75% of all people drop out of school before they reach the sixth grade. Thus, people who have finished high school are members of a tiny minority. Then, a minority of that minority goes on for university training. It is only among these people that you will find your educational equals.

At the same time, a middle class in the United States is the majority. In Mexico, it is a tiny elite. Seven years ago your country began and financed a so-called "Alliance for Progress." This was an "Alliance" for the "Progress" of the middle class elites. Now it is among the members of this middle class that you will find a few people who are willing to spend their time with you. And they are overwhelmingly those "nice kids" who would also like to soothe their troubled consciences by "doing something nice for the promotion of the poor Indians." Of course, when you and your middleclass Mexican counterparts meet, you will be told that you are doing something valuable, that you are "sacrificing" to help others.

And it will be the foreign priest who will especially confirm your self-image for you. After all, his livelihood and sense of purpose depends on his firm belief in a year-round mission which is of the same type as your summer vacation-mission. There exists the argument that some returned volunteers have gained insight into the damage they have done to others - and thus become more mature people. Yet it is less frequently stated that most of them are ridiculously proud of their "summer sacrifices." Perhaps there is also something to the argument that young men should be promiscuous for awhile in order to find out that sexual love is most beautiful in a monogamous relationship. Or that the best way to leave LSD alone is to try it for awhile -or even that the best way of understanding that your help in the ghetto is neither needed nor wanted is to try, and fail. I do not agree with this argument. The damage which volunteers do willy-nilly is too high a price for the belated insight that they shouldn't have been volunteers in the first place.

If you have any sense of responsibility at all, stay with your riots here at home. Work for the coming elections: You will know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how to communicate with those to whom you speak. And you will know when you fail. If you insist on working with the poor, if this is your vocation, then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go to hell. It is incredibly unfair for you to impose yourselves on a village where you are so linguistically deaf and dumb that you don't even understand what you are doing, or what people think of you. And it is profoundly damaging to yourselves when you define something that you want to do as "good," a "sacrifice" and "help."

I am here to suggest that you voluntarily renounce exercising the power which being an American gives you. I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the “good” which you intended to do.

I am here to entreat you to use your money, your status and your education to travel in Latin America. Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.

Ivan Illich is the author of Deschooling Society and other provocative books. Thanks to Nick Royal, Tim Stanton, and Steve Babb for helping to find this speech.

Reclaiming Intimacy and Friendship



<www.freehugscampaign.org>

If you did nothing at all the world could not keep running. What would the world be without development?

“Why do you have to develop? If economic growth rises from 5% to 10%, is happiness going to double? What’s wrong with a growth rate of 0%? Isn’t this a rather stable kind of economics? Could there be anything better than living simply and taking it easy?”

People find something out, learn how it works, and put nature to use, thinking this will be for the good of humankind. The result of all this, up to now, is that the planet has become polluted, people have become confused, and we have invited in the chaos of modern times.

At this farm we practice ‘do-nothing’ farming and eat wholesome and delicious grains, vegetables, and citrus. There is meaning and basic satisfaction just in living close to the source of things. Life is song and poetry. The farmer became too busy when people began to investigate the world and decided that it would be ‘good’ if we did this or did that. All my research has been in the direction of not doing this or that. These thirty years have taught me that farmers would have been better off doing almost nothing at all.

The more people do, the more society develops, the more problems arise. The increasing desolation of nature, the exhaustion of resources, the uneasiness and disintegration of the human spirit, all have been brought about by humanity’s trying to accomplish something. Originally there was no reason to progress, and nothing that had to be done. We have come to the point at which there is no other way than to bring about a ‘movement’ not to bring anything about.

- Masanobu Fukuoka

Aaron Falbel

The Price of Limitlessness

Why do we have wars? Why can't we live in peace? Like many in the peace movement, I once thought the answer to these questions had to do with Bad People in High Places. We elect Bad People to the highest offices in our government. Bad People rise to the tops of big, powerful corporations. Bad People run the military. All these Bad People start wars and profit from them. If only we could replace all those Bad People with Good People, there would be no more wars and we could go on living our lives in peace and harmony.

It now seems to me that the "Bad People" theory of war is naïve and simplistic. While I do concur with Lord Acton that power corrupts, that's only a small part of the story. As I now see it, *war is the inevitable consequence of a society committed to limitless growth, consumption, progress, and development*. In a finite world, we can't keep on growing and expanding forever without bumping up against limits of one sort or another: ecological, social, political, economic, and (ultimately) moral limits. To sustain growth in our numbers and in our standard of living, we must continually transgress these limits, so we resort to war.¹ Thus we have wars over resources, wars over territory, wars over economic dominance, and perhaps soon wars over the "right" to use the Earth as a dumping ground for nuclear waste, greenhouse gases, and other forms of pollution. These wars allow us, for the time being, to continue to live our way of life, which we are told is "non-negotiable."

The first and foremost responsibility of any political leader is to keep the economy running smoothly. Here in the U.S., this is no benign task, seeing as our huge, bloated economy has turned into a voracious behemoth. Though the U.S. represents less than 5% of the world's population, we consume more than 25% of the world's resources. That fundamental injustice is maintained by economic force in the short run but is ultimately backed up by military force (or threat thereof). We are told that we go to war to fight fascism or communism or terrorism or some other evil, or, alternatively, to promote freedom, democracy, liberty, etc. (These ultra-elastic concepts have proved convenient for rallying the troops and whipping up war fever among the public at large.) At times we are told that we go to war to "defend American interests around the globe" or to "protect our way of life." These latter reasons come a bit closer to the truth. We go to war, or

¹ Even wars that, on the surface, seem to be about religious or ethnic conflicts ultimately have an economic/ecological basis. They are about scarcity. People don't suddenly wake up one day and decide to kill their neighbors because they look or act or worship differently. Under conditions of growth-induced scarcity, each group tries to secure an advantage for its own members, which inevitably leads to conflict. From the conquest of Native American lands to Nazi Germany, Turkey, Ireland, Uganda, Indonesia, India/Pakistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Israel/Palestine, Darfur... there is a land-grab or resource-grab behind it all. It seems almost always to be some version of *we want something they have*.

threaten military action, to make sure that more than our fair share of goodies keeps flowing our way, and at the right price. “American interests” simply mean the interests of our economy.² And just who is responsible for the gargantuan size of our economy and its “interests,” which are now global in their dimensions? Why, we are: the consumers.

In short, we have wars not because of Bad People in High Places but because we do not live, and never have lived, within our means, within the limits of nature. We do not know what *enough* is. The notions of progress and development cannot accommodate enoughness. By definition, things have to keep getting bigger, faster, and better all the time. Progress inevitably means more energy, more resources, more technology, more stuff, and therefore more things to fight over. Moreover, we have seemingly infected the rest of the world with the growth/progress/development virus. Nearly everybody wishes to be just like us and make the same colossal mistakes we have made—a physical impossibility, as it turns out. We would need as many as ten Earth-like planets to act as mines and dumps if the world’s population were to adopt the high-consumption lifestyle of the average American. (And where would we find enough Martians or other extra-terrestrials whose labor we’d need to exploit to support that way of life?)

Let me be concrete. If we wish to keep driving around in cars, keep flying around in planes, keep plugging endless appliances and gadgets into the wall, keep eating food grown anywhere on the globe, keep having as many babies as we want, keep buying stuff made anywhere under who-knows-what conditions, then we have to accept war as part of the price.³ Only war can secure the level of inputs needed to keep everything running—temporarily. As scarcity becomes more severe—as it must—so will war. Like it or not, we live off the spoils of war. We all profit from it. We are all part of the Empire, no matter what slogans we chant or write on our protest banners.

You see, it does no good to march at an anti-war protest in Washington, DC, shake our fists at the White House, and then spend a week’s vacation in the Bahamas or Paris or Rio. It does no good to stand shivering at a peace vigil in the dead of winter, proclaiming “No blood for oil,” and then to go home to eat a crisp California salad whose every ingredient is practically dripping with petroleum. It does no good to rail against nuclear, coal, or gas-fired electrical plants and then to go home and plug in our cell phone, our laptop, our ipod, our palm pilot, our Blackberry to recharge all those batteries for tomorrow’s workday. Friends,

² Even Jimmy Carter, who, at least by contrast, is starting to look more and more like one of the Good People, stated in 1980, in what has become known as the Carter Doctrine, that the U.S. will use military force if necessary to protect its “vital interests” in the Persian Gulf region.

³ Other inconveniences attached to that price tag are global warming and others forms of environmental degradation, resource depletion, loss of biodiversity — just to name a few.

we have to take a good, long look in the mirror. If we are serious about avoiding war, we have to find another way to live.

To put it another way, if, by some miracle, we were to achieve genuine peace and justice worldwide, our entire economy would collapse overnight.

If limitlessness in its various manifestations is the root cause of war, then *self-imposed limits*, with an eye toward justice and the welfare of all, is an essential ingredient of peace. This entails living within our means, taking only our share, living within the limits of nature's cycles, and cultivating the virtue of enoughness. When Mahatma Gandhi, who arguably knew something about peace, was asked to sum up his life's message in 25 words or less, he replied: "I can do it in three: Renounce and enjoy."⁴ Renunciation means giving up something or some privilege that one could have but, for whatever reason, chooses not to have. Okay, but *enjoy*? Where does joy come into this picture of willful self-limitation and austerity?

For too long we have lived under the assumption that our myriad possessions—all our stuff—and our push-button lifestyle will make us happy. Perhaps, for a while at least, they bring us pleasure, comfort, and convenience, but this soon wears off, as the advertisers know all too well. True joy, as Gandhi knew, is with people, not with things. Joy is in being, not in having. A life lived within limits, a life with less stuff, can be more joyful because it frees us from the tyranny of our possessions. (We have to work long hours to pay for and maintain all that stuff.) Proving to yourself that you can get along fine without something, especially something you thought you really needed, is one way of experiencing freedom, liberation, and joy. I know this from my own experience. In our materialistic society, the list of things we can potentially give up, if we set our minds to it, is long and varied.

It seems to me that the renunciation of which Gandhi spoke is best practiced in community, among our friends and neighbors. It is certainly less isolating that way. More to the point, a life lived within limits may be more labor intensive (at least for those of us in affluent societies). Instead of pushing a button or turning a key, we have to rely on human metabolic energy: i.e. work. It is difficult, if not impossible, to do all of this work alone. The less stuff we have, the more we have to rely on other people. The Amish are famous for renouncing certain labor-saving devices precisely because such devices tend to reduce their reliance on their neighbors, which they cherish. They ask themselves, "What will this device do to our community, to our relationships with each other?" Their labor-intensive life is much less of a burden, not to speak of joyful, when the work is shared among many hands. Think of their barn raisings, their quilting bees, their haying

⁴ Similarly, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, when asked by American audiences how they can foster peace and well-being, offers a two-word answer: "Consume less."

and harvest festivals, their canning parties, etc. Among the Amish, these activities are among the high points of the year, and they keep the community bound together.

But what of *our* communities? They have largely been destroyed by our quest for economic independence, by our tremendous increase in mobility, and by “tele-” technologies of all sorts (telephones, televisions, telecommunications...), which direct our attention away from where we are and toward the remote. One possible boon of self-imposed limits is the regeneration of community and rejuvenation of local culture. We may yet rediscover that we actually need our neighbors and need to stay on good terms with them. If we restrict our mobility (say, by renouncing automotive transport), we will have to learn once again how to live well in a place. And we may yet replace our virtual communities with real, placed ones. The place to start the ball rolling, it seems to me, is with individual friendships. Is there something that the two of us can renounce together?

That’s all well and good, you might say, for an agrarian village society such as those Gandhi dealt with. But what does this discussion of self-imposed limits and renunciation have to do with our large urban centers, and especially with the urban poor who are barely scraping by as it is and who are utterly dependent on the larger economy for all their needs? They may feel, perhaps rightly, that there is nothing left for them to renounce. This is an important and serious question, but it is one to which I don’t really have a satisfactory answer. There is no getting around the fact that our urban centers are far too big. Their size is way out of proportion to their surrounding countryside, most of which has been swallowed up by urban and suburban sprawl. As such, I don’t see how such places are sustainable. They have been *artificially* sustained by an industrial economy that has systematically undermined its own future. Modern urban dwellers may soon find themselves in a trap of their own making from which relatively few can escape. In an ironic reversal of history, those who still have the ability to grow their own food, make their own clothes, build and maintain their own homes, gather their own fuel for heating and cooking, occupy a position of *privilege* today. We may have to face the fact that the world has become too crowded for more than a privileged few, who have not lost the arts of subsistence, to live within the limits of nature. How this will pan out is almost too scary to contemplate. But that, I’m afraid, is the price of limitlessness: we have borrowed recklessly from the future, and now the bills are coming due.

If it is true, as some have claimed, that we have already overshot (and thus reduced) the carrying capacity of our habitat, then a reduction of our numbers is inevitable. *How* this might happen depends on our choices. We can choose to keep consuming at our current rate until there is nothing left to consume, fighting with our military might over the last remaining scraps. Or we can choose the path of self-limitation and *drastically* reduce both our numbers and our ecological

footprint. In the first scenario, our civilization will come crashing down like a ton of bricks: catastrophic collapse. In the second, we may flutter down like a load of feathers: willful renunciation. I can't say I am optimistic. The first choice is the path of least resistance, the one we are currently taking, despite decades of warnings. The second requires a massive change in consciousness and behavior. In truth, it is hard to imagine this happening. Plus, we are running out of time. I cannot predict the future, but it doesn't look good.

What does one do? Again Gandhi gives me guidance: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." So I renounce and enjoy, whether the rest of society follows suit or not. I try to remain ready for humanity to surprise me.

Acknowledgments: This essay began as a meditation after reading *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* by William R. Catton, Jr. (University of Illinois Press, 1980). I am indebted to the following people who provided commentary on an earlier draft of this essay: Edith Ackermann, Eugene Burkart, Frances Crowe, Lee Hoinacki, Randy Kehler, Eveline MacDougall, Tom MacLean, and Juanita Nelson. I am also grateful to the late Ivan Illich, whose influence pervades this essay and who first revealed to me that the American Dream is actually a nightmare.

World Carfree Day

World Carfree Day is celebrated every year on September 22. Join the growing number of people worldwide who are saying no to their cars and pursuing alternative, eco-friendly ways of transportation. The World Carfree Network has a number of projects, including Autoholics Anonymous (to wean people off of car dependency); Carbusters magazine (to expose the problems with and alternatives to car culture); an Ecotopia Bike Tour around Europe; and various efforts towards carfree cities. *Learn more at <http://www.worldcarfree.net/wcfd/>*

Living without oil

George Monbiot

The Age of Entropy is here. We should all now be learning how to live without oil.

“NEVER AGAIN,” the Texas oil baron and corporate raider T. Boone Pickens announced this month, “will we pump more than 82m barrels.”

As we are pumping 82 million barrels of oil a day at the moment, what Mr. Pickens is saying is that global production has peaked. If he is right, then the oil geologist Kenneth Deffeyes, who announced to general ridicule last year that he was “99% confident” it would happen in 2004, has been vindicated. Rather more importantly, industrial civilisation is over.

Not immediately, of course. But unless another source of energy, just as cheap, with just as high a ratio of “energy return on energy invested” (Eroei) is discovered or developed, there will be a gradual decline in our ability to generate the growth required to keep the debt-based financial system from collapsing. A surplus of available energy is a remarkable historical and biological anomaly. A supply of oil that exceeds demand has permitted us to do what all species strive to do - expand the ecological space we occupy - but without encountering direct competition for the limiting resource. The surplus has led us to believe in the possibility of universal peace and universal comfort, for a global population of six billion, or nine or 10. If kindness and comfort are, as I suspect, the results of an energy surplus, then, as the supply contracts, we could be expected to start fighting once again like cats in a sack.

In the presence of entropy, virtue might be impossible.

The only question worth asking is what we intend to do about it. There might be a miracle cure. Photosynthetic energy, supercritical geothermal fluid drilling, cold fusion, hydrocatalytic hydrogen energy and various other hopeful monsters could each provide us with almost unlimited cheap energy.

But we should not count on it. The technical or even theoretical barriers might prove insuperable. There are plenty of existing alternatives to oil, but none of them is cheap, and none offers a comparable Eroei.

If it is true that the Age of Growth is over, and the Age of Entropy has begun, and if we are to retain any hope of a reasonable quality of life without destroying

other people's, then our infrastructure, our settlements, our industries and our lives require total reconstruction. Given that our governments balk even at raising fuel taxes, it is rational to seek to pursue our own solutions: to redevelop economic systems, which do not depend on fossil fuels.

Tinkers' Bubble is 16 hectares of woodland, orchards and pasture in the county of Somerset in south-west England. It was bought by a group of environmentalists in 1994, and a dozen people moved in, applied for shares and built themselves temporary houses. They imposed a strict set of rules on themselves, which included a ban on the use of internal combustion engines on the land. They made a partial exception for transport: the 12 residents share two cars. Otherwise, the only fossil fuel they consume is the paraffin they put in their lamps. They set up a small windmill and some solar panels, built compost toilets, and bought a wood-powered steam engine for milling timber, some very small cows and a very large horse.

Almost everyone predicted disaster. There's no question that it was hard. They fell trees with handsaws, heat their homes with wood, cut the hay with scythes and milk the cows, weed the fields and harvest the crops by hand.

But they have come through. They have made friends with the locals, who are coming to see the project as an asset: the land is biodiverse, still has standing orchards, and is open to the public. Their stall has won first prize in the local farmers' market. They have learned, often painfully, to live together. Because it does not depend on heavy machinery, this farm is not in hock to the bank. One hundred and fifty years after he published *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau is alive and well in Somerset.

Needless to say, an army of bureaucrats has been deployed to murder him. Peasant farming, the settlers have found, is effectively illegal in the United Kingdom.

The first hazard is the British planning system. The model is viable only if you build your own home from your own materials on your own land: you cannot live like this and support a mortgage. So the settlers imposed more rules on themselves: their houses, built of timber, straw bales, wattle and daub and thatch, would have the minimum visual and environmental impact. But the planning system in the U.K. makes no provision for this. It is unable to distinguish between an eight-bedroom blot on the landscape and a home which can be seen only when you blunder into it.

The residents applied for planning permission and were refused. They appealed and won, but then the Government overturned the decision. But when they reapplied, the council, which had woken up to the fact that homeless people were housing themselves without costing the taxpayer a penny, changed its mind and let them live there.

Then the environmental health inspectors struck. There are two sets of regulations in the U.K. There are those which the big corporations campaign against; and those which they tolerate and even encourage, because they can afford them while their smaller competitors cannot. This is why it is legal in the U.K. to stuff our farm animals with antibiotics, our vegetables with pesticides, our processed food with additives and our water tables with nitrates, but more or less illegal to use any process which does not involve stainless steel, refrigeration and fluorescent lighting.

The clampdown on small food businesses, on the grounds that their produce might contain bacteria, has been accompanied by a massive rise in food poisoning cases since the 1970s: large-scale production and long-distance transport provide far greater opportunities for infection. Tinkers' Bubble, which has never poisoned anyone, is now forbidden to sell any kind of processed food or drink: its cheese, bacon, juice and cider have been banned.

But the settlers have learned to live with these constraints, just as they have learned to live with all the others. They have not yet solved all their problems, but they have shown that a life which requires scarcely any fossil fuel consumption is still possible. It would not work for everyone, of course, but it works. And one day, unless we demonstrate some willingness to respond to the impending crisis, those who live this way could discover that - despite the obvious privations - their lives are more comfortable than ours.

This article originally appeared in The Guardian.

The Slow Food international movement officially began when delegates from 15 countries endorsed this manifesto, written by founding member Folco Portinari, on November 9, 1989.

The Slow Food Manifesto

Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model.

We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: *Fast Life*, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.

To be worthy of the name, *Homo Sapiens* should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction.

A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of *Fast Life*.

May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency.

Our defense should begin at the table with *Slow Food*.

Let us rediscover the flavors and savors of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of *Fast Food*.

In the name of productivity, *Fast Life* has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes. So *Slow Food* is now the only truly progressive answer.

That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it. And what better way to set about this than an international exchange of experiences, knowledge, projects?

Slow Food guarantees a better future.

Slow Food is an idea that needs plenty of qualified supporters who can help turn this (slow) motion into an international movement, with the little snail as its symbol.

Learn more at www.slowfood.com

Rachel Schattman*Food Production and the Return to Stewardship*

Richard Heinberg writes, “With a lifelong division of labor, many members of society became cut off from basic subsistence activities and processes... This subtly fosters attitudes of conformity and subordination while undermining feelings of personal confidence and competence.”¹ This phenomenon is especially obvious in a city such as Savannah, Georgia, where for the past year I have been continuing my exploration of food politics through the Living Roots Community Garden. This garden was abandoned and revived with the support of a small committed group of neighborhood residents. In contrast to this ideal, I am reminded of the disconnection between food production and consumption that is more typical of a modern urban environment.

Though the greater part of my experience in activism up to this point has been centered on visual art, and though I still believe there is a strong role for the varied disciplines within visual arts in activist culture, I find myself more concerned of late about the environmental and social challenges local and global communities face today. More and more, I find myself interested in the beautiful potential that exists for members of industrialized societies to reprioritize social and environmental capital through venues of food production and consumption. The current situation is such that smaller and smaller numbers of people have a direct connection with the process of growing the food that sustains them, or even of being acquainted with the person who grows it for them. This disconnect has only been made possible by the heavily subsidized, petroleum dependant transportation systems that have developed in countries such as the United States over the last century.

The negative effects of removing the producer from the consumer are many. Foremost, in my opinion, is the loss of social capital, (defined here as a community’s degree of civic engagement.) The environmental concerns around production and distribution of food include the destruction of soil health and other ecosystems by large industrial farms, lack of freshness and hence nutrition from food which has traveled long distances, and an overall dependence of the whole processes, from beginning to end, on oil (to name a few.) Through building public awareness around these issues, it is possible to replant the passionate stewardship that once existed in our culture, but which has the last half a century has withered from neglect.

It is exciting to observe the counter-movements to industrialized agriculture that are manifesting in the United States, as this awareness is raised and as

¹ Richard Heinberg, *The Party’s Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (British Columbia, New Society Publishing, 2003) 28.

communities are empowered to make alternate choices about where they get their food and how that food is produced.

In August and September 2006, the state of Vermont, a campaign to raise awareness about eating locally-produced food was supported by grocery stores, restaurants and farms. An encouraging number of people rose to this challenge by either eating nothing but locally produced, seasonal or traditionally preserved food items for one day, one weekend or two weeks. As a result of this campaign, a greater understanding of food production was created. Topics of conversation that autumn were fueled by public forums, not only through the workshops given around the Local Food Challenge, but also in the Northeastern Organic Farming Association's biannual conference. At both of these venues, conversations ranged from the use of petrol chemicals in food transportation to economic benefits of spending money locally and many issues in between. The collaboration between businesses, schools, and individuals served as an example of what can happen when a shared set of priorities (that of local food production and consumption which benefits a local economy and the health of individuals) are places about that of individual gain.

There are many people involved in the projects I have summarized who have divergent goals. By creating a dialogue in intimate communities first these people were able to reprioritize their goals. For many, the realization that the external health and environmental costs associated with buying less expensive food from large supermarket chains would cost them most in the long run made it possible to rationalize spending a little more time and energy to seek out locally and sustainably grown organic food. When this practice of coming together to decide what is best for the community becomes second nature, perhaps this process can extend out to a greater community, and then a greater one, until we are taking on the greatest dilemmas with confidence and clarity. Such a process will not be smooth or painless, but it is necessary to regard the microcosm before tackling the problems of the macrocosm.

For now I am trying to align my lifestyle with my values, and this purpose keeps me active and working. I am interested in building networks of people interested what share similar goals. I am currently involved in my most intimate community, but I am growing a great deal, and through this learning am invigorated by the challenge of a greater context.

I am currently readying for a six month apprenticeship at Does' Leap Organic Goat Dairy in Franklin County, Vermont, which I see as my next step towards relearning my own "subsistence activities and processes." As self-development is an unending process, my parallel passion is creating resources that help others regain their "feelings of personal confidence and competence" in the most efficient, effective ways possible.

I believe that a close connection between a community and their source of food has great potential to increase social capital with all of the benefits this implies. Whether through community-organized farmer's markets, co-op owned distribution centers or other forms of small scale local business initiatives, bringing social investment back into food production is a necessity. My greatest hope is to see a collective reprioritizing of environmental and social sustainability in our communities, coupled with the energy, efficiency and strength to make those priorities manifest.



The Pleasures of Eating

Wendell Berry

Many times, after I have finished a lecture on the decline of American farming and rural life, someone in the audience has asked, “What can city people do?” “Eat responsibly,” I have usually answered. Of course, I have tried to explain what I meant by that, but afterwards I have invariably felt that there was more to be said than I had been able to say. Now I would like to attempt a better explanation.

I begin with the proposition that eating is an agricultural act. Eating ends the annual drama of the food economy that begins with planting and birth. Most eaters, however, are no longer aware that this is true. They think of food as an agricultural product, perhaps, but they do not think of themselves as participants in agriculture. They think of themselves as “consumers.” If they think beyond that, they recognize that they are passive consumers. They buy what they want — or what they have been persuaded to want — within the limits of what they can get. They pay, mostly without protest, what they are charged. And they mostly ignore certain critical questions about the quality and the cost of what they are sold: How fresh is it? How pure or clean is it, how free of dangerous chemicals? How far was it transported, and what did transportation add to the cost? How much did manufacturing or packaging or advertising add to the cost? When the food product has been manufactured or “processed” or “precooked,” how has that affected its quality or price or nutritional value? [...]

There is, then, a politics of food that, like any politics, involves our freedom. We still (sometimes) remember that we cannot be free if our minds and voices are controlled by someone else. But we have neglected to understand that we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else. The condition of the passive Consumer of food is not a democratic condition. One reason to eat responsibly is to live free. [...]

The trap is the ideal of industrialism: a walled city surrounded by valves that let merchandise in but no Consciousness out. How does one escape this trap? Only voluntarily, the same way that one went in: by restoring one’s Consciousness of what is involved in eating; by reclaiming responsibility for one’s own part in the food economy. One might begin with the illuminating principle of Sir Albert Howard’s *The Soil and Health*, that we should understand “the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject.” Eaters, that is, must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used. This

is a simple way of describing a relationship that is inexpressibly complex. To eat responsibly is to understand and enact, so far as one can, this complex relationship.

What can one do? Here is a list, probably not definitive:

1. Participate in food production to the extent that you can. If you have a yard or even just a porch box or a pot in a sunny window, grow something to eat in it. Make a little compost of your kitchen scraps and use it for fertilizer. Only by growing some food for yourself can you become acquainted with the beautiful energy cycle that revolves from soil to seed to flower to fruit to food to offal to decay, and around again. You will be fully responsible for any food that you grow for yourself, and you will know all about it. You will appreciate it fully, having known it all its life.

2. Prepare your own food. This means reviving in your own mind and life the arts of kitchen and household. This should enable you to eat more cheaply, and it will give you a measure of “quality control”: you will have some reliable knowledge of what has been added to the food you eat.

3. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy the food that is produced closest to your home. The idea that every locality should be, as much as possible, the source of its own food makes several kinds of sense. The locally produced food supply is the most secure, the freshest, and the easiest for local consumers to know about and to influence.

4. Whenever possible, deal directly with a local farmer, gardener, or orchardist. All the reasons listed for the previous suggestion apply here. In addition, by such dealing you eliminate the whole pack of merchants, transporters, processors, packagers, and advertisers who thrive at the expense of both producers and consumers.

5. Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can of the economy and technology of industrial food production. What is added to food that is not food, and what do you pay for these additions?

6. Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening.

7. Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of the food species. The last suggestion seems particularly important to me. Many people are now as much estranged from the lives of domestic plants and animals (except for flowers and dogs and cats) as they are from the lives of the wild ones. This is regrettable, for these domestic creatures are in diverse ways attractive; there is much pleasure in knowing them. And farming, animal husbandry, horticulture, and gardening, at their best, are complex and comely arts; there is much pleasure in knowing them, too.

‘In our society growing food ourselves has become the most radical of acts. It is truly the only effective protest, one that can — and will — overturn the corporate powers that be. By the process of directly working in harmony with nature, we do the one thing most essential to change the world — we change ourselves.’

- Jules Dervaes

www.pathtofreedom.com

Helena Norberg-Hodge (International Society for Ecology and Culture)

Globalising Localisation

Today, the planet is on fire with terrorism and global warming, toxic pollution and radioactivity, fundamentalism and fear. Perhaps most disturbing of all is the breakdown of any semblance of democracy or governance. If we try to deal with these crises individually, we won't get very far. However, if we stand back and look at the bigger picture we will see that all these crises are connected to the globalised economy. Although it may initially be difficult to perceive, the economic system underpins almost every aspect of our lives today—from our jobs to the food we eat, the state of the environment to the state of education, politics to health and on and on.

We have spent enough time trying to treat the symptoms of this damaging system. Today, we need activism that addresses the root cause. This involves a period of rethinking and reflection so we, as activists, can answer the question: How can we change an economic system that is so large, so powerful?

The first step is to educate ourselves and others more fully to see that the globalising economy is truly the cause of most of our crises. In the study group program created by my organization, the International Society for Ecology and Culture, we call this "education for action." Informing oneself is as essential to effective activism as getting out there and doing something. Joining with other people makes it a participatory and more enjoyable process.

Although it is generally believed that the infamous era of conquest and colonialism is behind us, today's 'development', 'structural adjustment' and 'free trade' are simply new forms of the same exploitative process. In its present phase — economic globalisation — policymakers are pushing the western industrial system into the farthest corners of the planet, attempting to absorb every local, regional and national economy into a single centrally managed world economy based on ever-increasing trade.

Our system of education, scientific research and the development of new technologies have all been shaped by this energy and capital-intensive global economic model. Economic globalisation, with its massive, centralised system of production and distribution, is transforming unique individuals into mass consumers, and homogenising diverse cultural traditions around the world. It is destroying wilderness and biodiversity, and creating an expanding stream of waste that the biosphere simply cannot absorb. It is widening the gap between rich and poor worldwide, and leading to increased levels of crime and violence. In the name of 'growth' and 'efficiency', it is dividing us from each other and from the natural world on which we ultimately depend.

Despite the apparent enormity of the task of making changes to our economic system, isolating this root cause can actually be very empowering. Rather than confront an overwhelming list of seemingly isolated symptoms, we can begin to discern the disease itself. Just as important, the outline of a cure also starts to take shape.

The second step in changing our economic system is to actively inform others about the effects and workings of the global economy. This involves outlining the measures needed to decentralise or localise economic activity. Simultaneously, we can take steps to localize — revitalising local knowledge, culture and economy. Theaters, comic books, songs, books, radio, films and conferences are just a few of the avenues available for informing others. Localisation initiatives also take many forms. There are those most obviously connected to economic activity: local food systems that link farmers and consumers, local exchange and bartering, setting up local funds or credit unions, consumer/business alliances to keep local businesses alive, supporting local crafts and skills. There are others that help to reweave the fabric of community and culture: learning about the living environment around us, rediscovering the joys of gardening and cooking, rebuilding the relationships between old and young, turning off the television and getting involved in local culture, including participatory songs and dance.

Many of these projects are considered “new” and “progressive” in the West. However, in actual fact, they are a rediscovery of ancient wisdom and practice that still exist in many nature-based communities. We don’t have to “go back in time” and give up all comforts of modern life as some may fear, but we can look to these cultures for inspiration of how to live in relative harmony with others and the natural world.

The third step in changing the global economy means implementing structural and policy change at an international level. Already, many individuals and organisations are working from the grassroots to strengthen their communities and local economies, creating many of the positive ‘micro-trends’ mentioned earlier. Already now in the US there are something on the order of 4000 farmers markets and several thousand other local food initiatives. In Berkeley, California alone the local government is now financially supporting school gardens. There are also around 100 peak oil / relocalization groups that are working more broadly to reduce the dependence on oil and rebuild local economy. Another interesting development is the BALLE alliance with 42 business networks comprising 12.000 business members (<http://www.livingeconomies.org>).

Yet for these efforts to succeed and grow in the long term, they need to be accompanied by policy changes at the national and international level. How, for example, can participatory democracy be strengthened if corporations are allowed to direct government policy and manipulate public opinion? How can small farmers

and locally owned shops flourish if governments continue to champion 'free trade' and subsidise global TNCs? How can cultural diversity be nurtured if monocultural media images continue to bombard children in every corner of the planet? How can small-scale renewable energy projects compete against massive subsidies for huge dams and nuclear power plants?

Clearly, local initiatives must go hand in hand with policy changes if the globalisation process is to be reversed. Rather than just thinking in terms of isolated, scattered grassroots efforts, it is necessary to encourage government policies that would promote *small scale on a large scale*, allowing space for more community-based economies to flourish and spread.

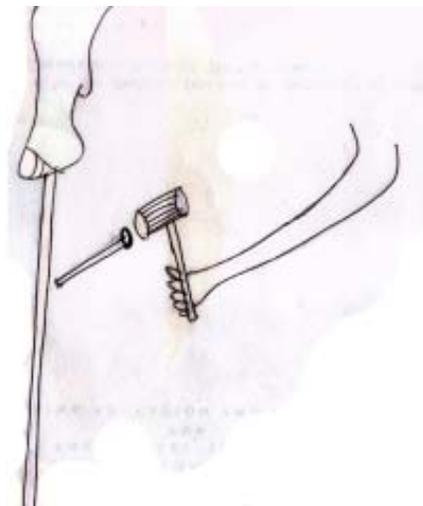
When there is a large enough critical mass of people who have woken up to the need for a fundamental shift away from globalisation to localization, our representatives will begin to negotiate international treaties to protect both the local and the global commons. Today this can sound implausible, but already now there are political initiatives at the local and regional level in this direction. Some of the early beginnings of this shift can be seen most clearly once again in the US where local political leaders are rejecting policies at the national level. Nine north-eastern states and 194 mayors from US towns and cities have pledged to adopt Kyoto-style legal limits on greenhouse gas emissions. And in Latin America, five countries announced at the World Water Forum, held from 16-22 March in Mexico City, that they were forming a "common front" against the inclusion of water-related commitments in the WTO.

For over two decades I have been advocating localisation as a positive and realistic alternative to economic globalisation. Along with many others, I believe it is the only way to ensure a sustainable future, where we are not threatened at every moment with massive ecological collapse, economic instability, war and terrorism and even the possibility of human extinction. I have experienced first-hand, in Ladakh, Bhutan and also in rural Spain, the strength, richness and sustainability of localised economies. Localised economic activity provides the solid foundation for an interdependent cooperative community, where every individual's basic needs are fulfilled, each has meaningful work and, equally importantly, a sense of belonging. Because governance is brought back to the local level, people are empowered, rather than disgruntled with inefficient and destructive policy decisions made in some far off bureaucracy. People are in charge of their economic future, enabling them to provide amply and sustainability for themselves. Multi-national corporations, driven by short-term profit until they move off to exploit another community, can offer no such assurance for long-term stability.

Economic globalisation leads us along with false promises and myths. There is nothing 'inevitable' or 'evolutionary' about it. Rather than easing violence, it exacerbates social tension and, in some cases, actually creates it. The trade system is kept afloat through subsidies paid for by our taxes. We then have to pay again for the environmental fall-out and health impacts of global trade. This is not efficiency. While some disruption would inevitably accompany a shift toward the local, it would be far less than is already resulting from the current rush towards globalisation wherein vast stretches of the planet and entire economies are being remade to conform to the needs of global growth, just as people around the world are being encouraged to abandon their languages, their foods, and their architectural styles for a standardised monoculture.

Unlike economic globalisation which requires most of us to play the part of unthinking workers and passive, greedy consumers, localisation entails the active participation of every individual in rebuilding our communities and human-scale economies. Shopping for food, for instance, becomes a form of positive activism, rather than an activity which contributes to global warming, poverty in the developing world and rural depopulation.

Activism can no longer be about addressing isolated problems. Localisation is the solution that links so many issues together; through rebuilding local economies we can work together and solve numerous problems simultaneously. Ultimately, this involves an awakening that comes from making a connection with others, and with nature. It requires us to see the world within us — to experience more consciously the great interdependent web of life, of which we ourselves are part.



Earth Democracy

Earth Democracy comprises three Swarajs, or sovereignties:

Seed Sovereignty (Beej Swaraj)

Food Sovereignty (Anna Swaraj)

Water Sovereignty (Jal Swaraj)

We need once more to feel at home on the earth and with each other. We need a new paradigm to respond to the fragmentation caused by various forms of fundamentalism. We need a new movement, which allows us to move from the dominant and pervasive culture of violence, destruction and death to a culture of non-violence, creative peace and life. That is why in India, Navdanya started the Earth democracy movement, which provides an alternative world view in which humans are embedded in the Earth Family, we are connected to each other through love, compassion, not hatred and violence and ecological responsibility and economic justice replaces greed, consumerism and competition as objectives of human life.

Food sovereignty

At the Anna Panchayat (Public Tribunal on Hunger) in May 2001, Navdanya launched its campaign on food rights and food sovereignty (Anna Swaraj), for a genuinely decentralized democratic and sustainable food system. We demand that food be accepted as a Fundamental Human Right. The entry of company like Cargill into direct procurements, transportation and processing is leading to the closure of small, local and larger agro-processing units that provide livelihood to lakhs of people.

Under the Anna Swaraj, the local communities take pledge to save our food and food culture from the onslaught of corporate takeover. More than 2500 villages have taken the pledge all over the country to protect their food from MNCs control and they wrote a letter to the Prime Minister to defend our freedom to food and food culture.

Seed sovereignty

Following Gandhiji's inspiration from the Salt Satyagraha we declared the launch of 'Bija Satyagraha' against Seed Laws and Patent Laws that seek to make sharing and saving of seed a crime and make seed the "Property" of Monsanto forcing us to pay royalties for what is our collective heritage. The Bija Swaraj campaign, launched by Navdanya, demands that Indian laws do not legalize patents on seed and food; and TRIPs is reviewed to exclude patents on seed and food. Under Bija Swaraj, we pledged to protect sovereignty to save our seeds and

grow our food freely without MNCs domination and control. We have received the precious gift of biodiversity and seeds from nature and our ancestors. We pledge to protect our rich biological heritage and fundamental freedom to save and exchange seeds.

Water sovereignty

The Green Revolution and the various policies of the World Bank related to water have already created acute water shortage throughout the country. Today, bowing again to World Bank and W.T.O. pressures, the government is rushing to privatize water and hand over its ownership to giant corporations. Privatization of water will totally bypass people's needs, sustainability and equity in the use of water. The government is signing away the water rights of the people to giant MNCs like Coca Cola, Pepsi, Monsanto, Mitsubishi, Hyundai, Suez and Vivendi.

The Jal Swaraj Movement was launched by Navdanya in the year 2000, to protect our water from privatization and commodification as well as to bring awareness among the people on the subject of the traditional water harvesting system and diverse river cultures existing in biodiversity rich India. RFSTE and Citizens Front for Water Democracy (a group of more than hundred organizations) are actively running campaigns against water privatization through World Bank schemes such as Delhi's Water Supply being handed over to the water giant Suez, which will steal Ganga water from U.P farmers. We along with farmers group from Bundelkhand and Uttaranchal have launched a fight against River Linking Projects like Ken- Betwa and Sharda-Yamuna, which are nothing but theft of our water and water heritage.

Navdanya means nine crops that represent India's collective source of food security. Navdanya is actively involved in the rejuvenation of indigenous knowledge and culture. It has created awareness on the hazards of genetic engineering, defended people's knowledge from biopiracy and food rights in the face of globalisation. Learn more on the Navdaynya website: <http://www.navdanya.org/about/index.htm>

Families all over the world are not only choosing to remove their children from schools, but are also trying to remove schooling and its ill-effects from their lives.

Unschooling Movement

In reality, unschooling is simultaneously personal and political. As John Holt said, “Change happens when people change their lives, not just their political parties.” For many people not sending their children to school is a way of saying many things: that school is not necessary to grow up all right in this country; that school’s assumptions about children’s learning, progress, families, needs, professionalism, are not immutable truths; that learning is a natural human function which should not be institutionalized.

[...]

I think both unschooling and deschooling are about creating and reclaiming places and events for adults and children of all ages to live and learn together.

- Susannah Sheffer and Pat Farenga,
“Reflecting on Growing Without Schooling”
Vimukt Shiksha 2002
www.swaraj.org/shikshantar

Vivek Bhandari (Hampshire College)

In Search of Sovereign Selves

I have been teaching at Hampshire College, a liberal arts college in the US, for the past eight years. It is a place where issues surrounding activism and political engagement are taken quite seriously, both in and outside the classroom. Over the past few years, I have increasingly come to feel that discussions about the nature and scope of activism are intimately tied to the idea of sovereignty, a concept that opens-up rich discussions on the location and nature of power. This realization has been stimulated partly in response to the ways in which people have been debating issues surrounding what, rather euphemistically, gets called “globalization.” There are numerous reasons for this, but the most obvious is that the idea of the nation-state, and indeed, statist forms of authority in general, are being challenged with growing levels of stridency. People are raising numerous doubts about the degree to which “sovereign nations,” as territorially-bounded and ideologically stable entities that supposedly protect the rights and liberties of individuals are truly capable of fulfilling their promises, or legitimate in their use of power. As the world struggles with the vagaries of transnational capital and cultural flows, people are questioning whether nation-states have the right to exercise sovereign power over their citizenry—as legal experts argue—or whether individuals possess sovereign autonomy *over and above* the state’s claims.

Such interrogations are important for activists who, by their very nature, are the kinds of people who seek to change the way their world is ordered. Activists are regularly confronted with questions that pertain to where power is located within the institutional arrangements that they inhabit. It seems self-evident that in any activist’s mind, a *theoretical understanding* of the world’s disciplinary regimes (such as nation-states, corporations, even NGOs), which variously employ statist, capitalist, or communitarian institutional arrangements, usually *precedes* the acts of political engagement. (Mahatma Gandhi, for instance, articulated such an understanding in his text *Hind Swaraj*, one of the most powerful assertions of autonomous sovereignty.) At their most fundamental level, acts of agency in support of, or against these arrangements, are built on claims of personal sovereignty. This is because activists are political agents who question the existing configurations of authority by claiming a certain degree of autonomy (and by definition, therefore, undermining existing claims to sovereign power). As agents of structural change, they chip-away at the authoritative (hence sovereign) pretensions of statist or corporate power by asserting their *own* sovereign autonomy.

For these reasons, understanding activism in terms of competing notions of sovereignty seems particularly appropriate in our “globalizing” world because in many ways, what we have been witnessing in recent years is the *dispersal* of sovereign power through the networks being created by what the philosophers

Antonio Negri and Tony Hardt evocatively describe as the “multitude.” This unstable “multitude,” people of the world who are increasingly networked, restless, cacophonous, and as such have the potential to overthrow imperial and hyperdisciplinary regimes, have succeeded in de-centering sovereignty, dispersing power, and potentially, unleashing regenerative forces on an extraordinary scale. These dispersed forms of sovereignty are, at their core, emancipatory and regenerative.

As someone on the verge of returning to India after fifteen years in the US, I have struggled with my professional location, my cultural values, and the ways in which I connect with people around me in different parts of the world. In many ways, the act of leaving India years ago opened me up to these questions in ways that may not have happened had I stayed-on. Because I cannot, in complete honesty, claim to belong to “India” or the “US,” I am very self-conscious about the *specificity* of the professional norms and practices that set the parameters of my life, or the *contingent* nature of the cultural values I practice in different locations. In the US, I work at Hampshire College, which makes no bones about its location within the institutional culture of American higher education, an ivory tower establishment if ever there was one. This has been an enduring concern for me, because even as I applaud Hampshire’s pedagogy, I struggle with many of its norms and practices (such as the need to work towards a big endowment, something it needs to fulfill its aspirations.). Even though I have no illusions that the mainstream India I am returning to is attempting to emulate the world that I am leaving, I am heading back with a deep appreciation of the need to seek alternative sovereignties, communities and networks that have not yet been cowed down by hyper-modern forms of disciplining. I know such communities exist in large numbers. As an aspiring activist, I have an enduring respect for the power of such sovereign groups and spaces — of the kind that shape the creative impulses of the “multitude.” This appreciation has become an integral part of the issues I raise in the classroom at Hampshire. Over the years, I have come to use my courses as invitations to a friendly dialogue in which we address, with as much a sense of urgency as can be mustered, the demands of the political present by experimenting with alternatives and/or modifications to the political arrangements currently available to us.

For reasons outlined above, I often find it useful to distinguish between two, radically different kinds of assertions of sovereignty among activists. One, fairly mainstream type of activism tries to challenge existing forms of authority by subverting it’s logic internally (by proposing, for instance, the replacement of capitalism with socialism, or authoritarianism with democracy). In this kind of thinking, activists seek to subvert and *modify* the locus of power, but not the systemic, or structural logic of the institutional apparatus in question. They claim sovereignty, yes, but not, in my opinion, of an enduring variety, since their assertions are premised on the notion that a redistribution of power within the

existing worldview (statist, corporate, and so on) is adequate. A second, more diffused group of activists attempts to undermine power with a spirit of humility, by interrogating the fundamentals of the structural logic at the heart of the disciplinary arrangements they inhabit, with a clear awareness that they do not have a monopolistic understanding of how the world functions, or ought to. Experimental in spirit, this second kind of activism is fundamentally regenerative, allowing each individual to claim sovereign power over his or her thoughts and actions. This form of engagement stems from a deep appreciation of human creativity, and a courageous recognition of the need to resist totalizing, “one-size-fits-all” forms of power (of the kind we associate with governmental power and consumer culture in contemporary society). Even though this second kind of activism may seem less “revolutionary” or dramatic, it is more effective at revealing the ways in which people, including the activists themselves, have been inscribed with power, how they have been conditioned to think and behave, indeed to live their lives. Such activists don’t lack a “program” or agenda, as some critics argue; they simply view their program as a work-in-progress, whose goals are contingent, and indeed, grounded. To my mind, this kind of thinking is conducive to a richer and more meaningful activism because it is based on a deeper understanding of where and how power operates, and an imaginative appreciation of the need to think outside the box.

Examples of the second kind of activism, of the kind that I would describe as truly sovereign, are to be found in everyday life, in the subtle ways in which people create meaning for themselves outside of the gaze of hegemonic structures and ways of thinking. As a faculty member, my classroom experiences have been most meaningful when my students and I have been able to move, autonomously, beyond the conventions and power relationships fostered by a “typical” classroom. This is a small thing, but within the classroom, I have found that rules about who gets to speak, when, where, and so on should be determined collaboratively by individual members of a learning community. Over time, these interactions have been enormously liberating for me personally. More fulfilling for me, however, has been watching my co-learners make choices about their future that are clearly based on their deep understanding of how power works, and how they must militantly protect their humanity from its predatory nature.

We live in an interesting world, in which the terms “liberalism,” “globalization,” “capitalism,” and “imperialism” are increasingly coming to be used interchangeably. At times confusing, this muddle has also clarified the degree to which the conceptual vocabularies normatively employed in the academy are profoundly limited. Conversations about such matters open windows into explorations of new alternatives to these sometimes stifling ways of thinking, and I believe, leave an indelible imprint on the imagination of all those who participate in them. As a participant in the classroom, I have tried hard to raise questions, and as Rainer Maria Rilke put it, to “live the questions,” not to seek easy answers. In

this, I remain hopeful that the young men and women passing through Hampshire engage with the world with a spirit of humility, and a sense of political responsibility.

I have recently finished teaching a course entitled “Locating Resistance in a Globalizing World.” The questions that we address in the course are:

· What does it mean to be political? How is power dispersed in society, and in what ways is it embedded in economic relations, culture, and the institutional apparatus of modern governance? In what ways do institutions of the state and corporate capital limit the political choices available to individuals today? How does a critical assessment of the conceptual vocabulary associated with modern societies (citizenship, civil society, the “free” market, liberal democracy, the nuclear family, etc) help us to understand the tensions that trigger acts of resistance? To what extent is our very language, the words and registers we use to construct meaning, a hindrance in our ability to imagine emancipated futures? What, in other words, is the location of power—and how do we subvert it without unleashing new tyrannies?

· Are non-violent forms of resistance effective in an age in which people have acquired a morbid taste for the surgical cleanliness of electronic warfare? If not non-violent, then what form should resistance take? If violence begets violence — as has been the case for most of human history — does non-violence beget understanding?

· How have the forces associated with “globalization” altered the shape of modern societies? In an age in which the stridency of technological determinism (in fields like biotechnology, information technology, etc.) has reached unprecedented levels, what is the place of humanistic values and sensibilities?

· What, fundamentally, are the political choices available to individuals today?

* * * *

Partly in response to these questions, one of my students, Siena Mayers, composed something that, with her permission, I would like to share. She wrote it at the end of the semester, and it articulates not just a cluster of ideas, but a deeply humanistic sensibility and optimism that I find inspiring.

rough draft of a never-ending process¹

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”²

so let us Begin:

to disbelieve in any system claiming to have a “monopoly on the truth”³
to make Noise – and to listen

to Eat great food – but not too much
to Work – but not too much
to make Art without limit
to have a place to Sleep – and someone to keep us warm
to be Untiringly Human

we refuse to be embarrassed about hope or to have dreams about checking
our email
we refuse to continue to see the world in the black and white stark contrasts of
Manichean design
we refuse to confuse Education with Capital, in which:

Chemistry is for Hotdogs
History is for War
Writing is for Contracts
Language is for Free Trade
Physics is for Bombs
Math is for Surveillance

we want to be free from the weapons of sugar and fat that they load into our
food to make us too groggy to notice the newspaper
when we go to the doctor we want to be free from the paper-work that
entangles us in the dirty details of bills and suing
we want to go to Farmers Market and know that they do not have to throw
away their greens at the end of the day

we will resist

then build

a not TOO perfect utopia

a space to share with others and a space to go back to on our own,
to think thoughts that no one else has put in our heads
constructively changing together
daring to use imagination to invent alternative rationalities (instead of just
buying them at the mall)
to agree to disagree, to share an understanding to be misunderstood

that we may drive out guilt and replace it with social responsibility ⁴
that we may experience all there is to experience
that we may triumph over the doubts that cause us to not share a piece of
chocolate with someone else
that we may know what it is to have children because we are not afraid to
burden them with our mistakes
that we may enjoy a January thaw but not forget its disturbing implications
that we may experience what it is to be in control and outside of control
that we laugh
and laugh at ourselves
that we will go outside not just to talk on our cell phones
that we may make bread and eat art together
that we may absorb something other than ourselves
that we may have someone to protect us
from those who are trying to protect us⁵
that we may not have followers
for everyone needs to write their own manifesto

we will do this through militant humanism
by looking at how power operates and functions
we will break down the facade of an all-encompassing “ism”⁶
government is only able to operate as long as we continue to consent to be
governed
by recognizing the emperor is wearing an invisibly sweat-shopped suit
we will find the state merely “an abstract concept, one that we cannot shake
hands with”⁷

by using humor and the politics of listening
caminamos preguntando⁸
we will walk while questioning

Endnotes

1. This piece which resembles a manifesto however incomplete, was not written so much as a call to action as a reflection on new thoughts and ways of thinking that I encountered during a class I took with Vivek Bhandari in January 2006. Inspired by readings and class discussions about resistance and social change, I felt compelled to set out in my own words, in simple language, what my own political vision was, what I was fighting for and against, what is important to me? What kind of world would I like to see? May it inspire my reader to amend, elaborate, collaborate, and/or write their own!
2. Martin Luther King Jr.
3. Mahatma Gandhi
4. Jessica Benjamin from “Terror and Guilt Beyond Them and Us”
5. A quotation from Banksy, an underground street artist from the UK who challenges the ever-increasing boundaries of privatized spaces. <http://www.banksy.co.uk/>
6. A reference to an in-class comment made by Vivek Bhandari
7. A reference to an in-class comment made by Vivek Bhandari
8. A Zapatista saying, which means “walk forward, but while questioning.”

*You think that
because you understand ONE,
you understand TWO,
because one and one makes two.
But you must understand AND.*

- Sufi proverb

“Pay It Forward” is a book written by Catherine Ryan Hyde, but it’s also an action plan within a work of fiction. Since the book was released in January of 2000, a real-life social movement has emerged worldwide. What began as a work of fiction has already become much more.

Reuben St. Clair, the teacher and protagonist in the book “Pay It Forward,” starts a movement with this voluntary, extra-credit assignment: THINK OF AN IDEA FOR WORLD CHANGE, AND PUT IT INTO ACTION.

Trevor, the 12-year-old hero of “Pay It Forward,” thinks of quite an idea. He describes it to his mother and teacher this way: “You see, I do something real good for three people. And then when they ask how they can pay it back, I say they have to Pay It Forward. To three more people. Each. So nine people get helped. Then those people have to do three each. So it becomes twenty-seven.” He turned on the calculator, punched in a few numbers. “Then it sort of spreads out, see. To eighty-one. Then two hundred forty-three. Then seven hundred twenty-nine. Then two thousand, one hundred eighty-seven. See how big it gets?”

Rosie Meade (University of Ireland)

Drawing Inspiration from Resistance in Ireland and Beyond

Thinking about the inspiration that I can derive from recent activism in my own country, forces me to look beyond the political sectarianism that continues to divide sections of the tiny Irish activist field. Sometimes it seems as if we on the 'left' inhabit a delusional universe, within which the values to which we aspire actually do hold sway: a universe that is not dominated by the commodifying and individualizing logic of capitalism. It is because we live in this world of make believe that we can afford to treat our closest potential allies as our greatest foes; indulgently dwelling on fine points of dogma and subverting opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Recent demonstrations against the occupation of Iraq have illustrated the Irish left's pathological inability to avoid alienating the broader populace. A groundswell of opposition to the war was reduced to a rump, as sectarian factions attempted to colonise and control all expressions of protest. In some instances, demonstrations and actions were scheduled in order to compete with rather than to complement one another, and so newcomers to activism easily became confused regarding the purpose of protests and the motives of organisers.

If I can find reasons to be optimistic about the current state of activism in Ireland, I continue to despair at the virulence of sectarianism. As a small country with a population of less than four million, the Republic of Ireland¹ has a limited pool of activists and the personal tensions and tactical conflicts that emerge in one campaign, tend to be reified and reproduced in others due to the inevitable intersections in membership. Frequently activism appears boring or formulaic, as if actions are underpinned by a 'revolutionary bad faith'. This means that they are deliberately directed towards immutable institutions of power with no expectation of efficacy, simply it seems, to confirm the unspoken belief that 'we can't change anything until everything changes (See Reed, 2000). Of course, all campaigners must be cognizant of the systemic roots of oppression, but if that analysis demands the discrediting of everything less than full-scale revolution, then the energy of most activists and all non-activists will be dissipated. Nonetheless, during the last decade there have been unleashed powerful and delightful undercurrents of resistance in Ireland and beyond. Notably the most effective and attractive of these have shown an enthusiasm for creativity, playfulness and inclusivity, and it is those tendencies that I discuss in the following sections.

DIY and cultural resistance

George McKay (1998) has described how, in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, an important dimension of activism related to the creation of alternative and autonomous cultural outlets. Identifying corporate or commercial control over

¹ I cannot do justice to the complexity of political activism and its associated tendencies in the North of Ireland.

culture as a political issue in its own right, activists organized free parties and raves, founded pirate radio stations, circulated hand made zines and picked up camcorders to make films about their own grievances and aspirations. This 'Do it Yourself' (DIY) ethic was premised upon a strong sense of personal and collective efficacy, whereby activists rejected ready made and commodified culture in the name of control over authorship and distribution. This search for 'authenticity' also generated support for the employment of 'direct action' tactics. Direct action typically involves more intimate or potentially risky confrontations between campaigners and their opponents, and thus demands a greater investment of commitment by a smaller number of activists. Such campaigners might argue that the left's longstanding obsession with mass demonstrations ensured that the intensity or effectiveness of dissent had been sacrificed in the name of populist symbolism. Accordingly, a hunt saboteur would probably assert that a foxhunt successfully disrupted through direct action is a more substantial political victory than the circulation of a mass petition articulating, what is essentially, passive opposition.

It is, of course, debatable whether passion trumps popularity as a lubricant of social change. There is a risk that the rhetoric of DIY seeks to camouflage a simple tactical choice as ontology and that other meaningful strategies become disregarded in our rush to prove the authentic spirit of our actions. Furthermore, as Adolph Reed (2000; 195) has warned, 'lack of connection to palpable constituencies makes it possible to convince oneself of all manner of ridiculous fantasies' and it is conceivable that small scale local confrontations, such as are idealised by 'direct activists', may produce little of in the way of durable or reproducible improvement. Nonetheless, this emphasis on direct action is refreshing insofar as it actually seeks to identify the connections between protest and outcomes. Instead of valourising deferred gratification or emphasising the long hard road to 'progress', 'direct activists' urge us to steal success whenever and wherever we can and in doing so, they present a vital and dramatic challenge to accepted definitions of 'revolution' or change.

McKay (1998) acknowledges that DIY is not new and that its antecedents can be traced to 1970s punk, the social movements of the 1960s and even to earlier forms of socialist struggle. Nonetheless, in asserting that cultural action has its own intrinsic and extrinsic politics, activists have reminded their peers that the scope for resistance is broader than is typically assumed by the traditional left. As if to underscore the threat DIY posed to establishment values, the British Conservative government enacted legislation in 1993 – the Criminal Justice Act – that effectively criminalized key groupings within the DIY activist scene. Ravers, free party organizers, anti-road protesters, hunt saboteurs and 'New Age' Travellers had been demonised by the media and thus became the primary scapegoats of the new measures.

Throughout the 1980s and 90s refugees from Thatcher's Britain had begun to decamp to Ireland in order to escape the worst effects of materialism, monetarism and the destruction of the welfare state. Many of the new arrivals, who were often generically (and lazily) referred to as 'New Age Travellers', were highly politicised and came with a desire to follow the logic of DIY in their new home. Although their influence has not been systematically researched or quantified, they have made a significant contribution to the revitalization and reimagination of activism in Ireland over the last decade and a half. This influence was apparent in the Glen of the Downs anti-road campaign, in the burgeoning free party scene that emerged during the mid 1990s and in the more recent enactments of 'Reclaim the Streets' in Dublin and Cork. Although usually invoked in a derogatory spirit, the labels 'hippies' or 'crusties' are frequently directed at environmental campaigners, and reflect a popular association of green consciousness and the 'New Age Traveller' lifestyle. Certainly, for many within that 'movement' a critique of the impact of urbanisation and poor metropolitan planning, a desire to reconnect with nature and a willingness to construct alternative models of community informed their decision to opt into nomadism. The vindictiveness with which nomads have been criminalized, both in the UK and in Ireland, reflects the extent to which this lifestyle, and its attendant political critique, has been perceived as a threat to the dominant ideology of possessive individualism.

It is important not to attribute a coherent or binding analysis to all who may have passed through the DIY scene. For example, many (or maybe most) who attended raves did not necessarily construct their participation as a political act; it was often more about the buzz. Nonetheless, raves or nomadic communities can be understood as constituting liminal spaces, within which the norms of conduct and prevailing social values are transgressed. By breaking through the hegemony of commercialism and by offering a focus for dissident opinion, this scene had an important influence over subsequent campaigns and protest movements. Aside from its more overt political claims regarding autonomy and action, it provided participants, however marginal their involvement, with an opportunity to disengage temporarily from society and in the process to self-identify as outsiders. This kind of ideological breach is essential to the building of any counter-hegemonic political movement, and as the media, police and establishment voices demonised the various elements of DIY, participants became further alienated from the dominant value frame of their society.

Dropping the dour, embracing creativity

One of the most persistent stereotypes about left wing activists is that we are a dour and poker-faced lot. In many ways, we have reinforced this image by conducting ourselves in ways that suggest that creativity and humour are too vulgar for protest; that the correct stance for the wannabe revolutionary is that of the arch-miserabilist. Very often, our political aspirations are reduced to mumbled chants as we shuffle along in directionless marches or to truisms printed on

monochrome posters that invoke the 'hardship vocabulary' of the left – struggle, oppression, work, etc. Of course, we must not trivialise the challenges we face and we do have an obligation to construct alternative discourses through which the realities of inequality can be appraised with rigour. But surely a critical consciousness can coexist with an optimistic outlook or a more dynamic spirit! The tendency towards excessive sobriety is not just a feature of activism in Ireland, but is observable in the UK and USA also. Ralph Rugoff (1995, 160) has described how wrestler/hero/activist 'Super Barrio' injected an appealing mixture of high camp, mystery, ordinariness and playfulness into Mexico City's activist scene. Marco Rascon, a 'spokesperson' for Super Barrio estimated the value of his contribution in the following terms;

'Before Super Barrio, everything to do with social movements had to be represented in a very serious way, with proper respect for the solemnity of the people's struggle,''All the social movements we see in the US still have this solemnity. The political opposition there is expressed in very humourless, rational terms, but in Mexico, people don't distinguish so precisely between the real and the fantastic.' (Rugoff, 1995; 160).

Happily, some more boisterous elements have become visible at recent demonstrations in Ireland. The mobile sound system, a direct descendant of the free-party scene, is now a regular feature of protest and invites the understanding that it is possible to dance and still be part of the revolution. At the anti-Bush demonstrations at Shannon airport in 2004, one of the most hilarious and memorable groups of dissenters were the absurdist 'Orange Men', demanding their right to walk wherever they wished. By sending up the sectarian unionists who insist on marching through republican communities in the North or Ireland, these bowler-hatted protesters also drew attention to the ways by which the Irish state has constrained public access to the airport in order to facilitate the smooth transit of US warplanes en route to Iraq. Their sharp and multi-layered political analysis was readily comprehensible to the broader public, but was communicated with consummate wit and charm. Likewise such self-consciously funny groupings as the global 'Pink Fairy' anti-capitalist block or the more distinctly local 'Dogs Against War', represent a deliberate movement away from the 'mystification' of self-sacrifice that has long been a feature of left wing campaigning. By embracing humour, protesters also convey their desire to connect with a broader constituency, winning friends among children, parents, teenagers and elders.

Building a discursive community of resistance

One of the most exciting recent developments to occur in Irish radical politics was the foundation of indymedia.ie in winter 2001. This independent and comparatively unregulated discussion forum promises a free trade in the kinds of ideas, information and viewpoints that are typically ignored or misrepresented by the mainstream media. The substance of its news derives from frontline reports

that are posted by activists and although contributors have a moral responsibility to record accurately, they are, unlike professional journalists, unburdened by allegiance to the liberal myth of objective reporting. Indymedia invites all who log onto its pages to cast off the humble role of news consumer and instead to participate as equals in the creation and definition of alternative news. However, by promoting the ethos and practice of 'open publishing', Indymedia also challenges writers to use that space constructively. All too frequently, the 'pages' of <indymedia.ie> are overrun over by contributors whose main political purpose appears to be the subversion and ultimate destruction of this experiment in information sharing. Rigorous debate becomes sidelined as sectarians trade insults and trolls launch diatribes against the integrity and tactics of fellow activists. In these, its worst moments, the news service becomes little more than a frat-house for dysfunctional cyber-lefties: lefties who appear to have abandoned any hope of engagement with a broader constituency. In its best moments, however, indymedia.ie, grants minority or counter-hegemonic voices room for expression and thus helps disconnected individuals and groups to become part of a more potent oppositional community through which friendships and alliances can be built. By offering a safe house for all manner of contrary discourses and by allowing activists to frame their thoughts and actions in words of their own choosing, <indymedia.ie> inverts the objectifying processes, which define mainstream media practice. It is the fundamental difference between reporting and being reported on, between speaking and being spoken about. We cannot overestimate the worth of such independent discursive spaces, particularly since Irish journalism is overwhelming centre-right in its orientation and commercial in its sense of obligation (See Corcoran 2004).

In May 2003, I attended a meeting in Dublin at which plans for an all Ireland Social Forum were being discussed. The Irish Social Forum was based upon the WSF/FSM model, which binds participants to a minimalist statement of principles and which emphasises the value of dialogue for dialogue's sake. There were, at the Irish meeting, some expressions of disquiet from activists who saw this comparative value neutrality as a weakness. One contributor asserted that the Irish left is characterised by 'too much talk and not enough action', and urged the ISF to attach to its support to an upcoming campaign that his group was championing. At this all too predictable interjection, I sighed deeply and muttered angrily to myself about 'those blasted cultists' and how 'they always try to hijack something new for their own narrow motives'. Nonetheless, I did have some sympathy with the speaker's point. He was fearful that his energy and time were going to be exhausted in yet another talking shop that produces little in the way of tangible outcomes. The World Social Forum itself has been criticised for its top heaviness, for its secret love affair with bureaucratic organisation and for its failure to generate much in the way of programmes or clear proposals. Clearly there is every possibility that an Irish Forum might replicate these shortcomings. I believe, however, that the failure of the Forums to deliver 'actions' reflects not

the surfeit of conversations within the left, but their absence. We cannot know what we want as a collectivity, unless we begin to appreciate who we are. Even if the ISF or WSF do not provide the optimal conditions for such open and productive discussion, they are at least reminders that talk may bring its own rewards.

Since no one among us can say with certainty where the left begins and ends, we must show modesty as we begin the slow unwieldy process of building and securing alliances. We must become less defensive, stop cheerleading our pet parties or projects and instead work towards the creation of discussion spaces where the certainty of action is replaced by the uncertainty of exploration. It is because Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2001 and 2005) have attempted to acknowledge and celebrate a pluralized conception of the left, that I draw particular inspiration from their work. They have theorised the form and political character of 'the' counter hegemonic movement that is most appropriate to the complexities of contemporary globalised society – or what they term 'Empire'. The Marxist left's longstanding fixation with the 'industrial working class' as harbingers of revolution has, they argue, effectively denied the political subjectivity of a range of actors, including peasants, unwaged domestic workers, and the unemployed. Like good Marxists, however, they also recognise that dominant systems of production and exchange tend to generate the forces of their own undoing. Domination and resistance, it seems, are perpetual bedfellows. Because Empire is ubiquitous, because its commodifying and anti-democratic logic insinuates itself within all aspects of individual and collective life, we may legitimately hope that the currents of our opposition are similarly far-reaching and diversified. Hardt and Negri (2001, 2005) also seek to redefine 'the proletariat' in terms that are more inclusive and so they invoke the 'Multitude' as the ultimate author of political opposition in our times. 'Multitude' signifies a collectivity that is pluri-vocal and heterogeneous, where a multiplicity of interests acts simultaneously in defiance of imperial power. This theorisation is also self-effacingly non-prescriptive, refusing to delimit the mechanisms through which individual elements of the multitude might converge or to prematurely determine the content of a shared political programme.

'We do not have any models to offer for this event. Only the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real.' (2001; 411) Perhaps this might be construed as vague or fuzzy thinking. However, I would prefer to believe that their work is infused by optimism of the intellect *and* of the will: the kind of optimism that is the foundation of a genuinely reflexive political praxis.

Conclusion

I do not think that it is possible to deliver a definitive appraisal of the state of the Irish activist left, largely because my own analysis swings over and back between despair and hope. There are specific campaigns, most of which I have not

mentioned in this article, whose aspirations I share or whose tactical energy I admire. Nonetheless, I also believe that there are too many groups whose actions are over determined by pragmatism and by a thirst for power. My search for seeds of inspiration has been intentionally dialectical, largely because I believe that tactical choices always must be negotiated with reference to the specific historical circumstances within which activists operate. Of course, I am concerned also that I might be judged guilty of sectarianism if I endorse specific tendencies or celebrate particular campaigns too wholeheartedly. Building a discursive, dynamic and mutually supportive activist community will be no easy task. Our allegiance to the party or to the latest trend in tactical expression, very often the stuff that gives us our identity as activists, may become depleted as we seek to engage honestly with potential allies. However, without such potentially risky dialogue, the Irish left will stagnate. Whether they are local, national or international, forums that take seriously the project of alliance building are to be welcomed. They may be tentative and awkward, and might not amount to much in the way of a new utopianism, but wherever I find such efforts, I also find something to inspire me.

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Excerpted from *Days of War, Nights of Love*
Crimethinc

“You know it’s true. Otherwise, why does everyone cringe when you say the word? Why has attendance at your anarcho-communist theory discussion group meetings fallen to an all-time low? Why has the oppressed proletariat not come to its senses and joined you in your fight for world liberation?

Perhaps, after years of struggling to educate them about their victimhood, you have come to blame them for their condition. They must *want* to be ground under the heel of capitalist imperialism; otherwise, why do they show no interest in your political causes? Why haven’t they joined you yet in chaining yourself to mahogany furniture, chanting slogans at carefully planned and orchestrated protests, and frequenting anarchist bookshops? Why haven’t they sat down and learned all the terminology necessary for a genuine understanding of the complexities of Marxist economic theory?

The truth is, your politics are boring to them because they really are irrelevant. They know that your antiquated styles of protest — your marches, hand held signs, and gatherings — are now powerless to effect real change because they have become such a predictable part of the status quo. They know that your post-Marxist jargon is off-putting because it really is a language of mere academic dispute, not a weapon capable of undermining systems of control. They know that your infighting, your splinter groups and endless quarrels over ephemeral theories can never effect any real change in the world they experience from day to day. They know that no matter who is in office, what laws are on the books, what “ism”s the intellectuals march under, the content of their lives will remain the same. They — we — know that our boredom is proof that these “politics” are not the key to any real transformation of life. For our lives are boring enough already!

And you know it too. For how many of you is politics a *responsibility*? Something you engage in because you feel you *should*, when in your heart of hearts there are a million things you would rather be doing? Your volunteer work — is it your most favorite pastime, or do you do it out of a sense of obligation? Why do you think it is so hard to motivate others to volunteer as you do? Could it be that it is, above all, a feeling of *guilt* that drives you to fulfill your “duty” to be politically active? Perhaps you spice up your “work” by trying (consciously or not) to get in trouble with the authorities, to get arrested: not because it will practically serve your cause, but to make things more exciting, to recapture a little of the romance of turbulent

times now long past. Have you ever felt that you were participating in a ritual, a long-established tradition of fringe protest, that really serves only to strengthen the position of the mainstream? Have you ever secretly longed to escape from the stagnation and boredom of your political responsibilities”?

It’s no wonder that no one has joined you in your political endeavors. Perhaps you tell yourself that it’s tough, thankless work, but somebody’s got to do it. The answer is, well, NO.

You actually do us all a real disservice with your tiresome, tedious politics. For in fact, there is nothing more important than politics. NOT the politics of American “democracy” and law, of who is elected state legislator to sign the same bills and perpetuate the same system. Not the politics of the *“I got involved with the radical left because I enjoy quibbling over trivia/ details and writing rhetorically about an unreachable utopia”* anarchist. Not the politics of any leader or ideology that demands that you make sacrifices for “the cause.” But the politics of our everyday lives.

When you separate politics from the immediate, everyday experiences of individual men and women, it becomes completely irrelevant. Indeed, it becomes the private domain of wealthy, comfortable intellectuals, who can trouble themselves with such dreary theoretical things. When you involve yourself in politics out of a sense of obligation, and make political action into a dull responsibility rather than an exciting game that is worthwhile for its own sake, you scare away people whose lives are already far too dull for any more tedium. When you make politics into a lifeless thing, a joyless thing, a dreadful responsibility it becomes just another weight upon people, rather than a means to lift weight from people. And thus you ruin the idea of politics for the people to whom it should be most important. For everyone has a stake in considering their lives, in asking themselves what they want out of life and how they can get it. But you make politics look to them like a miserable, self-referential, pointless middle class/bohemian game, a game with no relevance to the real lives they are living out.

What should be political? Whether we enjoy what we do to get food and shelter. Whether we feel like our daily interactions with our friends, neighbors, and coworkers are fulfilling. Whether we have the opportunity to live each day the way we desire to. And “politics” should consist not of merely *discussing* these questions, but of acting directly to improve our lives in the immediate present. Acting in a way that is itself entertaining, exciting, joyous — because political action that is tedious, tiresome, and oppressive can only perpetuate tedium, fatigue, and oppression in our lives. No more time should be wasted debating over issues that

will be irrelevant when we must go to work again the next day. No more predictable ritual protests that the authorities know all too well how to deal with; no more boring ritual protests which will not sound like a thrilling way to spend a Saturday afternoon to potential volunteers — those won't get us anywhere. Never again shall we “sacrifice ourselves for the cause.” For we *ourselves*, happiness in our own lives and the lives of our fellows, must be our cause!

After we make politics relevant and exciting, the rest will follow. But from a dreary, merely theoretical and/or ritualized politics, nothing valuable can follow. This is not to say that we should show no interest in the welfare of humans, animals, or ecosystems that do not contact us directly in our day to day existence. But the foundation of our politics must be concrete: it must be immediate, it must be obvious to everyone why it is worth the effort, it must be fun in itself. How can we do positive things for others if we ourselves do not enjoy our own lives?

To make this concrete for a moment: an afternoon of collecting food from businesses that would have thrown it away and serving it to hungry people and people who are tired of working to pay for food — that is good political action, but only if you enjoy it. If you do it with your friends, if you meet new friends while you're doing it, if you fall in love or trade funny stories or just feel proud to have helped a woman by easing her financial needs, that's good political action. On the other hand, if you spend the afternoon typing an angry letter to an obscure leftist tabloid objecting to a columnist's use of the term “anarcho-syndicalist,” that's not going to accomplish shit, and you know it. Perhaps it is time for a new word for “politics,” since you have made such a swear word out of the old one. For no one should be put off when we talk about acting together to improve our lives. And so we present to you our demands, which are non-negotiable, and must be met *as soon as possible* — because we're not going to live forever, are we?

1. Make politics relevant to our everyday experience of life again. The farther away the object is to our political concern, the less it will mean to us, the less real and pressing it will seem to us, and the more wearisome politics will be.
2. All political activity must be joyous and exciting in itself. You cannot escape from dreariness with more dreariness.
3. To accomplish those first two steps, entirely new political approaches and methods must be created. The old ones are outdated, outmoded. Perhaps they were NEVER any good, and that's why our world is the way it is now.
4. Enjoy yourselves! There is never any excuse for boredom!

Lisa Aubrey (University of Ohio)

Citizen Activism Now: Beyond Neo-Conservative Liberalism

In thinking about global citizen activism now, my first reaction is that I am frustrated that genuine participatory governance theories seem to be at a historic impasse. My frustration is at its height as there seems little hope that the dispossessed globally are gaining voice fast enough, even though the old liberal paradigms of the 17th and 18th centuries, warmed up and spun anew after the end of the Cold War, are losing credibility with deliberate speed among many in the world.

These resuscitated paradigms, which we currently call neo-liberalism, are losing credibility because of their arrogant and erroneous assumptions about how the world operates in linearity from tradition to modernity; that all the world's peoples want to follow the path of progression and development of former Western empires; and that different cultures of various people and places do not matter in the way they govern themselves. The truth is that the neo-liberal paradigm grounded in Western European history has never had universal applicability even though neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama, its major proponent at the end of the 20th century, argued with certainty that liberal democracy was the "universal homogenous state" and the end of ideology as well as history.

Despite its inapplicability to most polities in the world, liberal democracy continues to be hailed as the final form of global human governance by international institutions (IFIs) and states, even though Fukuyama himself is now questioning his own earlier "wisdom." Moreover, liberal democracy has never been the popular choice of the majority of people in any country. Only certain people initially allowed to participate in politics in the public sphere had a say in the choice and crafting of the system of governance, such as propertied white men who wrote and ratified the US constitution; a small percentage of aristocratic men were allowed to negotiate with the King under a feudal system for a shift toward a limited form of democracy in Britain, for themselves; and only certain Greek property-owning men were allowed to participate in city-states' direct democracies! Excluded were Native Americans made landless, Africans enslaved and transported as labor, all women, and white men who did not meet property qualifications in the US until political activism and war cracked a fissure in the political system; lesser men, women, and the enslaved in Britain until social pressures widened the political space overtime; and women, the enslaved, foreigners and aliens, and the majority of men who did own sufficient property in Greece. All of these people had no choice in creating the system that ultimately determined how they were governed.

Liberal democracy has been imposed on numerical majorities in different parts of the world at different times for the past three centuries, without their consent: in the US, where ironically liberal democracy has come to be lauded as "the model";

in former communist and socialist countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War in 1991; in Global South underdeveloped countries, especially in Africa, in synchronous waves in the same years toward a parallel Afrostrakia; and, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq where the US has initiated wars of aggression and is responsible for the deaths of thousands, which it now subsumes under the Global War on Terror, for the purpose of establishing US political and economic dominance in the Middle East where it attempts to systematically eliminate all formidable rivals by any means necessary. US policy globally yells to all the world that it has an inherent right to all the world's resources, like Iraq's oil, and dares anyone to get in the way of its access—governments or citizens.

While many political elites in Global South countries, and aspiring elites, scramble to figure how, in the US sense, political parties work, how civil societies work, how the media and judicial systems work, how elections work (*or don't*), how to set up their militaries and other state institutions in ways that will be get Western approval and aid for “good behavior,” while screaming about their civil and political “rights” and “freedoms” under new constitutional democracies, many of us within these so-called established and sustained liberal democracy countries shake our heads and laugh, albeit with sadness, as we have lived majoritarianism under liberal democratic principles and practices manipulated by race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and patriarchal and corporate interests. We feel sorry for the mimic men, and their impotence, dependence, and sometimes gullibility; and for women who get caught in this patriarchal game of politics as well. We join activist organizations that aim to end political and economic hegemony over the Global South, and over poor and dispossessed populations in the Global North.

The promise of the benefits of liberal democracy—freedom, justice, equality, equal protection, choice, compromise, voice, participation, vote—being tied inextricably to modern free market capitalism (*which is not free*) has eluded and betrayed many generations, just as the American dream has been a nightmare to a marked number of Americans, yet liberal democracy continues to be propagated and exported across the world as the liberation paradigm for all peoples—embrace it economically and it will “free” you politically, especially those of you who once lived under communist rule. The logic goes: the more economic freedom you have, the more political freedom you will want and demand; the more you produce and sell, the more say you will want in government about fiscal and monetary policies; and the more say you have in the formulation of these policies, the more money you will get to keep for yourself in profits to enrich yourself and consume. As Fukuyama notes, with liberal democracy in the political sphere, all of the world's people will gain easier access to “VCRs and stereos” in the economic sphere, and for this he thinks citizens of the world should celebrate.

Are these the promises of liberal democracy? Is pacification with material goods a satisfying substitute for democratic practice? Current activism says a cautious no. Instead, activism now seems to say material improvement in life circumstances is part, but participatory governance as an end in and of itself is also important, with freedoms, rights, reciprocity, and consent between state and society. Yet important questions abound: is there an amount of material goods with which the average person can be bought? With what electricity, especially in the rural areas in most parts of the world, will average folks run these VCRs and stereos? In liberal democratic practice today, are consumption and consumerism of the homo economicus replacing the demand for political, economic, and social rights of homo sapiens?

Without knowing the definitive answers to the above questions, what is certain is that “entrepreneurship” and “finding the market niche” are fast becoming the mantras of the democratic spirit in this day and age, and making profit as an individual, without a thought toward extended kin, local community, the human family, ancestors, or the environment is prevailing. Private enterprise expansion is a base measure of liberal democratic success by liberal democracy proponents. I doubt however even the most Eurocentric of traditions would chant this mantra without wanting to add on some caveats, for individuals, born into families and cultures, do tend to care about the well-being of others, albeit in different degrees. All is not a cold and calculating world, as theories about political and economic rational choice behavior would suggest. Some cultures, especially ones in Africa, maintain widespread communitarian values where sharing in economic successes, as well as failures, is expected. Rational behavior to these cultures is to share the spoils, even ones gained on an individual basis from elected public office. These values which uphold the commitment to the community remain in constant conflict with liberal democracy’s focus on the individual in modern governance. Moreover, these values generate activism against increases in taxes, against water privatization and electricity privatization, against the increases in fuel prices, against multinational exploitation of local communities, like Shell Oil in Nigeria, and for external debt reduction. This activism that is generated in Ghana is called “wahala.”

In spite of communitarianism and group well-being remaining important values in many parts of the world, countries that do not make a passing grade in transitioning to and consolidating liberal democracy with the requisite focus on the “individual” and on the development of domestic “capitalism” are said to be “stuck in tradition” and not creating the middle classes nor the markets for liberal democracy to work. Liberal democracy proponents ask no questions as to what type of governance people want; instead their primary concern is that individuals are not developing the tastes and generating the financial resources to buy VCRs and stereos, hence they will have no impact on democratizing governments. Most troubling is that these criticisms do not only come from the Washington

consensus—World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and US Treasury, and other European institutions promoting liberal democracy; sadly they also come from some of the political, economic, educated elites in Global South countries who likewise demonize communitarianism and their own Global South cultures. They argue that it is traditional institutions, that are hierarchal, conservative, and based on kinship, that make it impossible for liberal democracy to take hold. One wonders if these Global South elites are Western-identified, and how they became so? In whose realities do they live daily? Moreover, whose interests and pockets do they have in mind? Perhaps capitalism has liberated them on an individual level, and the majority of the world's citizens do not count in their worldview. They blame the victims of global inequalities for their marginal conditions. Whether the world's downtrodden are liberated or not does not matter to them. The hope they see for activism today is in the development of capitalism under the liberal democratic governance paradigm. As such, we should also ask what type of activism they hope for, for not all activism is necessarily progressive.

Despite the twinning of liberal democracy and capitalism, there remains no proof that liberal democracy and capitalism necessarily go hand-in-hand, or that liberal democracy coupled with capitalism is an assured route toward harmonious living bringing about social justice in a fair, peaceful, and stable environment. Even though capitalism and liberal democracy can make no promises whatsoever for effective, efficient, or good governance, we think little of alternative forms of governance. Fukuyama tells us that alternative ideas are merely “strange thoughts” to people in Burkina Faso and Albania.

More understandable than Fukuyama's comments are comments by people who do not know where to turn ideologically. They are not convinced that liberal democracy is liberating, and some even find themselves unfulfilled and frustrated by liberal democracy's outputs, so they ask, “Well, if not liberal democracy, then what? They find themselves without alternative suggestions, as their mode of thinking is dichotomous, conditioned by the propaganda of the Cold War—making a false analogy comparison of “democracy or communism,” as if communism could not ever be democratic, not even in theory! Their question also highlights a resignation of many in the world that “there are no alternative paradigms of governance,” as well as no alternative ways of living, and no alternative ways of citizen activism not generated by capitalist development. To this, we must ask what has happened to the human imagination, human innovation, and creativity of the human spirit?

Frustration has reached its apex: We know that liberal democracy is disempowering to us politically, economically, and culturally. What are we doing about it? Are we resigned to let liberal democracy take us to the guillotine? We have lost confidence in ourselves, and our ability to govern ourselves. Activism today must restore our self-confidence, and our ability to think broadly about

what we can create in the world. Activism now demands that we pull up stories from our archives of historical knowledge to give us direction for action. We can do this as activism is an ancient practice.

Beninois civil society, expatriate in France and in-country in Benin, for example, pulled up a historical story from its archives, as a way to force Mathieu Kerekou, Benin's President first from 1972 to 1991 to open the way for political and economic reforms. By calling Africa's first National Conference, Benin scheduled and held Africa's first democratic elections after the end of the Cold War. Beninois civil society called on its cultural knowledge, shared with the French former colonialists, linked to King Louis XVI for regime change, to redefine popular sovereignty and to renegotiate the social contract. Beninois activists succeeded in their mission and ushered in a change in government in Benin.

Activism today must take place in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, schools, clubs and organizations, churches, mosques, other places of worship, markets, universities, and on the radio, internet, and other communication waves. Activism must as well be transnational and cross-cultural. It must become not only something that we do, but more fundamentally something that we are. It must become as natural as breathing, as well as a continual process.

In pulling up our historical archives we will see that past activist movements are important and instructive for us in continuing activism today. The poor and dispossessed have been critical in starting and pushing movements forward. Liberal democratic theory attempts to confuse us by making us think that it is the capitalist and middle class that makes the big difference. But look at Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Kwame Nkrumah, Dedan Kimathi, Mahatma Gandhi, Julius Nyerere, and Nelson Mandela. Were they entrepreneurs who found their niche in the capitalist machine and from that trajectory pushed for change as the neo-conservatives tell us is the path toward political activism? Is liberal democracy trying to hoodwink us?

On a visit to the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Non-Violent Social Change in Atlanta Georgia USA in 2006 that Kaari, my 13 year old daughter, insisted that we make, I came across a definition of "power" by Dr. King that I had not seen before, and that has stayed with me. He left us with a profound thought that says, "Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love." In Dr. King's definition there is nothing about the means or ends of power being about dominance, calculation, manipulation, force, or coercion—some of the usual ways we think about and talk about power. Political scientists, in my learned trained profession, would assuredly balk at this definition as it turns our more commonly used paradigms completely on their head.

Defining power in Dr. King's way demands that we make a revolutionary shift in the way we think about the world and relationships between human beings and institutions. Power is not determined by the balance of arms—conventional and nuclear, and not by “the ability of A to get B to do what B otherwise might not do in the ordinary circumstance.” If we embrace Dr. King's definition of power, what a difference this would make in the US approach to talks with North Korea; to the amorphous War on Terror; to the US government's interaction with Iran; to US international relations with Venezuela; to intra-national relations between citizens and the state in the US. What different orientation to the world and individual countries would this bring to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization? People with HIV/AIDS would not have to reject medications because they would have enough food to eat so as to absorb the drugs and slow down the virus. The reality is that global inequality makes daily food insecurity a challenge for the majority of people in the Global South, and that it is the lack of sufficient food due to poverty, and not to HIV/AIDS, that is killing many. If we perceived power in the way that Dr. King did, everyone in the world would have enough water for daily consumption and use. And every child would have a chance to be educated. Social justice would begin with the recognition that all of us, regardless of where we live and what our identities are, are human beings deserving of having our basic human needs met, without preference of one over others. We might only then lean toward a world with greater certainty of non-violence. Activists now can make this type of world come to fruition.

Perhaps, as activists, we should stop looking for the way forward in leaders and saviors. Perhaps leaders will not save us, as intellectuals will not save us either, as they have possibly been misled and mis-educated to mimic. Perhaps we need to unlearn modern-day hierarchies, and remove ourselves from hierarchies, and look deeper inside ourselves as average everyday world citizens for activism to grow. We depend so much on leaders and their pre-packaged directions that we forget to think for ourselves. We don't think and don't espouse what and how we feel.

As for me, activism is simply a part of who I am, while I try to remember each day the interconnectedness of Power, Love, Justice, and those who came before me, giving me the optimism to envision possibilities beyond liberal democracy and knowing that change will come.

The Art of Slow Protest

DO THE BUDDHA WALK

The Buddha walk has its origins in the 1992 documentary movie *Baraka*, in the scene where a monk is moving ever so slowly and peacefully through a busy New York city street. The idea was adapted for Buy Nothing Day in a large shopping mall – one of the world’s largest – in Edmonton, Canada.

Four of us started moving in super-slow motion, one behind the other, as the busy mall patrons passed us by. The action worked – shopper after shopper stopped to watch as we made our way from the ground floor to the main floor. People gathered, and many of them wondered out loud what we were doing and why we were there. Some of them thought we were part of the local fringe theater festival. Others remarked that we were simply strange; one person even suggested that we might steal something. Eventually a mall security officer arrived to engage us in a conversation as we continued our slow progression through the mall.

SECURITY: You have to stop that or I’ll have to remove you.

US: Stop what?

SECURITY: What you are doing.

US: What are we doing?

SECURITY: You are creating a spectacle.

US: How are we creating a spectacle?

SECURITY: Well . . . uh . . . you are walking very slowly.

US: [*slowly pointing to an elderly person moving across the mall very slowly*]: Well, what about her? She’s moving very slowly.

SECURITY: No, she’s moving at the appropriate speed.

US: Can you show us what is the appropriate speed? I mean, how slowly can we walk and still remain in the mall?

SECURITY: [*getting flustered*] No, you simply have to leave the mall. Leave the mall or I will call the police to remove you.

At that point, we left the mall. We didn't feel the need to press the issue with the police department. But as we walked off, a strange thing happened. The crowd that had gathered started clapping for us and jeering at the security officials. These shoppers – primarily middle-aged people – were now applauding, partly because of the absurdity of the situation and partly, perhaps, because we all have a desire to stand up to authority and we get a certain sense of catharsis when other people do.

We live in a time when we all seem to be out of breath most of the time, running from place to place. The Buddha walk lets you take a much-needed breath. At the same time, the action breaks people out of their routines, which is one of the first steps to change.

And, besides, it's one of the best actions for any old lazy day when you want just a little something to do.

Adapted from An Action a Day Keeps Global Capitalism Away (Between the Lines, 2004), a book by Mike Hudema that outlines 52 enjoyable ways to protest globalization.



Sergio Beltran (Universidad de la Tierra)

What is Now Activism?: The Case of Oaxacan Society Uprising

In the last two years, with a very diverse group of people, I have become involved in a process of experiencing, reflecting and discussing the changes and shifts in the activism during the last four decades. We have been unfolding new characteristics and definitions of the human life flow, and the way personal and collective “moves” influence the way societies are organized. The transformation is happening not only at the visible layer of the “strategies” of protesting, but at deeper levels, affecting the means and purposes of activists’ demands themselves.

In the middle of the 20th century, activists around the world were protesting and demanding the recognition of civil and human rights around the “civilized” countries”. They demanded the State and the rest of society recognize equality among people living in the same country . . . even at a “human” level. At the same time, the colonial countries (in the traditional use of the concept) testify to the organization of the “radicals” (labeled wrongly by the “experts”) in liberation and guerilla armies, fighting for independence. After they succeeded (at least at some level) the “strategies” of struggle and demonstration, as well as the means of the protest switched in some degree. Recognized at the general level as the right to “equality”, the demand was for the local power institutions of the State to make the legal changes that allowed the people to effectively address their rights. A few years later, the struggle was concentrated on demanding that the “global” institutions draw the frames to contain the “local” governments and societies. At that moment, activists and general societies felt the right to protest and try to change any social, economic, environmental, gender, etc., injustice around the world.

Something that was shared by all the activist and social movements described above, is the notion that power is somehow held by “others”, out of the people’s hands. And that it was necessary to demand that the “legitimate” holders of that power consider the ways they were exercising power, in order to achieve people’s desire for the “way it should be”.

In recent times, the western “modern” conception of power has been changing. Increasingly around the world, activists, social studies “professionals” and people in general have started to believe that power is somehow in their own hands, that it is something that depends on the individual and could be shared at the community and social level. It is, in opposition to the “modern” concept, under people’s control, and representative democracy has been challenged. Diverse social movements and actions taken by activists around the world are now exercising that “power” for social transformation with effective actions for change. We are not “demanding” that someone else do the changes or actions we want; we are not “waiting” for the “proper conditions” to live the way we want. We are transforming

our realities at the local level, without abandoning the hope that this transformation could be a “good example” for others to effectively transform the world we live in.

The Oaxacan case

The social uprising that has been occurring in the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, is a good example of the transformation at the core of activists’ and social movements’ conceptions. This is true not only at the strategy level or at the level of the means for social transformation or the way we conceive power, but it is also a radical change in the “typical” actors of social change.

On May 20, 2006, the local section of the teacher union started a conventional strike to demand better work conditions and an incremental increase in their salary levels. At the beginning, ordinary people and social organizations were not paying attention to them. Teachers sitting in the main plaza of the city was quite normal, people were used to it. The strike happens every single year when the labor contract of the teachers reaches a level of new negotiations. After an intense media campaign against the teachers’ union, on June 14 the local government decided to use the police for repression of the strike. What was considered by the rest of Oaxacan society to be a “normal” labor strike, then catalyzed into a questioning of Oaxaca’s government. All the social inconformity that was isolated until that moment, all the struggles, unified against the governor.

In the days after the unsuccessful attempt to “finish” the teachers protest, the strike was transformed into a generalized social movement against the constituted powers. The labor and economic demands of the union were put aside, and the general demand was the dimition of the governor. The call reached society at all levels: social and civil organizations, “alternative” political parties, communities, indigenous movements and almost all the grassroots organizations and collectives. All of these came together to “fight” together for the common purpose.

The demand that the “head” of the government step down was just giving a frame for the real struggle. The real reason for the people’s struggle is the effective transformation of the power structure and the framing of new social “rules” for living together. People discovered that effective power is held by all and they are using it to put pressure on the constituted institutions to transform the way society has been commonly “ruled” in Oaxaca.

The way this collective and popular movement has decide to organize themselves is one of the key elements that made me feel it is a good example of the way activism is NOW under transformation. In order to coordinate and guarantee that very different efforts, demands and social collectives (some who’d consider others the “enemy”) could work together, Oaxacans decided to search their roots to find a way to ensure that their actions could be effective, and at the same time, prevent majority groups from imposing their vision and strategies on others. In

indigenous communities, they found the assembly structure for social dialogue and collective decision-making . At the end of June, the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) (*Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca*) was born. The name implicitly recognizes the plurality and multi-culturality of Oaxacan society. At the beginning, urban “professional” analysts, were making fun of the idea that a popular Assembly needed to be of the people. The use of the plural is a recognition of the multiple differences between social and cultural groups, that at the same time, recognize each other as equals.

The decision-making process is “filtered” by using consensus as the only way to take decisions; the voting model is only used to take minor decisions (the date or route of a demonstration, but never the strategic importance of doing it or not; the use of a word or another in a document, but never the content of it). The Assembly model has open spaces of participation for social groups never listened to before (like the women’s movement, youth, etc.). It has enabled otherwise “antagonistic” groups to discuss and struggle together. In a session of the Assembly, the Marxist/Leninist Communist party can testify on one side, and on the other, the grassroots groups of the Catholic church. Both listen to the other side’s arguments and express their own arguments and often, discover together that both are part of what has been notoriously recognized in Oaxaca in recent days as The People.

During the last 7 months, the State of Oaxaca constituted power has been effectively “neutralized” by peoples’ actions. The struggle has unmasked the idea that a society cannot exist without strong governmental institutions. Peoples’ organizations at all levels have substituted government actions that weren’t easy to imagine before. Some examples could illuminate this. After 3 weeks with no one collecting the garbage, several neighborhoods in the city of Oaxaca started to organize themselves and now the parks of the city have benefited with several composts and recycling projects have more clients than ever. At some corners of the city, garbage was used as construction material for the barricades. Unfortunately, those images were circulated (out of context) around the world by the mainstream media, without any understanding of the deep meaning of both the barricades and the use of the garbage.

Another amazing example of the Assembly process is the way people deal with security. For ages, humanity was told that police and government institutions were necessary for the sake of peoples’ security. However, there was no police presence at all for four months in the city of Oaxaca, as well as in several other parts of the state, and there was not an increment of insecurity in the streets. An international journalist was telling me one night, while we were visiting some barricades, that she couldn’t imagine any other city in the world that has burned in fire and wasn’t robbed after two days without police. Even though several thieves were “arrested” by Assembly members, there was not an increase in delinquency during the period that people controlled the streets. Nor was there

any massive attack to commerce like the ones that the mainstream media needed (and sometimes even claimed) to increase their sales. The people organized night barricades not to protect themselves from other people, but for protection against the paramilitary attacks that plain clothed police officers (but using official cars and guns) and governor supporters perpetrated at night against the movement. The worst attack to formal commerce was not perpetrated by the protesters. It was done the night the Federal Police took the plaza and moved the people out. An owner of a newspaper stand declared to the media the next morning that after 5 months of people controlling the plaza, his business had never been attacked, but the night the Feds came in, they took all the magazines and destroyed the stand. Even the mainstream media circulated this story (all of them were recording the interview). So, in concern for security, another mask fell down.

But the most notorious change that the Oaxacan struggle has shown is the way different actors are participating in this process. Different social groups have come together in an unique way, trying to reach a new way of governance for the state of Oaxaca, and through that, for the country. Non-violent actions (often brutally attacked by the government) have been the strategy to bring together gigantic demonstrations, where people from all over the state, from all different cultures, beliefs and social sectors, came together to show the strength of The People, recognizing diversity as the only way to reach unity. It is important to remember here, that even though they had been historically and systematically ignored by governmental institutions, the Oaxaca movement has followed all the legal ways of demanding the removal of the governor and a new constitution, or at least, radical changes to local laws. Government institutions have been scaling up the conflict.

On August 1, the women actively participating in the Assembly had a parade (literally, without women, this movement wouldn't made half of the actions it has made). After their protest (a peaceful but very noisy march of the women around the city smashing pots and other kitchen materials, which is becoming a popular action in Oaxaca), they took the decision to "do something" against the local government TV channel's misinformation about the Assembly. They decided to march to the channel and demand for an hour to broadcast their position. When they arrived, the manager of the TV station (another woman) laughed at the hundreds of women sitting outside her office and denied the petition. Then the channel was "taken" by the women. They sent home all the staff, who first turned off the equipment to prevent the women from broadcasting themselves. However, a few hours later, the movement was broadcasting, giving voice to anyone who asked and increasing their capacity to transfer information.

After almost a month of the TV in the hands of the movement (plus the university radio and the teachers' union pirate radio) the violence imposed its logic. The government shot out their own transmitter to remove the TV from the airways.

The police action took place around 3 in the morning and by 7 a.m. all the commercial radio stations (12) were taken by the movement, who recognized the importance of alternative media use and communication as a strategic way of struggle.

These are a few examples of the new ways struggle is being born in Oaxaca. They are not the only ones, and not only in Oaxaca, but may be found around the world. However, the innovation of the Oaxaca struggle is not in the actors or in the strategy, or in any specific action. Instead, the new is rooted in the general conviction that power is in the hands of the people, that now, we are the ones called to make the change, that never again will people renounce their power to the hands of representation, no matter how legitimate it could be. That conception of power is what is challenging the formal politicians. And that is what will never allow Oaxaca to be normal or what we used to be again. And that is what NOW we want to share with the world.



A Yogic Phenomenon

Swami Ram Dev ji Maharaj (affectionately known as Baba Ramdev) has been leading something of a spiritual, self-healing revolution in India. He has been promoting *yoga* and *pranayama* as paths to a healthy and peaceful world. (*Yoga* can be broadly defined as an ancient system which unites body, mind and spirit; *pranayama* consists of controlled breathing and meditation.) In Baba Ramdev's words, *yoga* is "a complete medical science, a philosophy of life, a way of life."

Over two million people from around India and other parts of the world have participated in his *yoga* camps, while over 250 million people have been watching him on various TV channels. The stretching and breathing practices he demonstrates are freely available to all, with the intention that these practices can alleviate the symptoms of, and even cure, various diseases like asthma, obesity, depression, high blood pressure, etc. His own organization, Divya Yog Mandir, has been actively researching organic agriculture and various *ayurvedic* medicines. Hundreds of thousands of people have already benefited from his approach. This has made him hugely popular in the subcontinent and abroad.

Baba Ramdev has been speaking out against the unethical businesses of both weapons and allopathic medicines. He has challenged the hegemony of doctors and the medical establishment and is trying to restore power over one's health to one's own hands.

Baba Ramdev believes that *yoga* and *pranayama* can offer a solution for the violence we are experiencing on all levels. In healing mind, spirit and body, he feels that many of our modern problems will be eliminated.

Learn more at www.divyayoga.com

“Caterpillars chew their way through ecosystems leaving a path of destruction as they get fatter and fatter. When they finally fall asleep and a chrysalis forms around them, tiny new imaginal cells, as biologists call them, begin to take form within their bodies. The caterpillar’s immune system fights these new cells as though they were foreign intruders, and only when they crop up in greater numbers and link themselves together are they strong enough to survive. Then the caterpillar’s immune system fails and its body dissolves into a nutritive soup which the new cells recycle into their developing butterfly. The caterpillar is a necessary stage but becomes unsustainable once its job is done. There is no point in being angry with it and there is no need to worry about defeating it. The task is to focus on building the butterfly, the success of which depends on powerful positive and creative efforts in all aspects of society and alliances built among those engaged in them.”

- Elisabet Sahtouris

www.ratical.org

Debbie Frieze (The Berkana Institute)

*The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad,
and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What
demon possessed me that I behaved so well?*

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

I am not an activist.

In the early 90s, I was a student at Amherst College. Amherst has long been considered a “bastion of liberalism” on the East Coast, and it was no different then. Our small community was immersed in post-modernism, occupying ourselves with deconstructing every piece of identity we could wrap our minds around — politics, race, gender, class and nation.

Sure, we did the usual campus activism thing. We held rallies. We waved our fists at the Chinese government over Tienanmen Square. We dutifully showed up each year for Take Back the Night. Someone even immolated himself on the town common my junior year to protest the Gulf War.

But for most of us, I don’t think our hearts were in it. Mine wasn’t, anyway. After all, everything we’d been studying told us that there wasn’t really a right and wrong, there was no shared story, and there certainly wasn’t any such thing as absolute truth. We went to rallies because that’s just what politically and socially aware students do. We’d chant the chants and write the slogans and wave the posters. But I don’t know if I ever really believed in the cause. I certainly never considered myself an *activist*.

Intellectually, I was curious about just how much I was willing to let go of. I chose philosophy as my platform, and gravitated toward skepticism and nihilism. I discovered you could really believe in absolutely nothing, and the world would hang together just fine. I had a practice in those days, too. My practice was to periodically check in with myself to ask whether this moment, this *now*, was exactly where I wanted to be. If the answer was no, then wherever I was — in the middle of a class, at a party, on the phone — I would ask myself what was required of me to create the environment I sought. Often, that meant having to leave.

After graduation, I moved to Colorado to ski — in part because there was no reason not to. That led to working at a ski magazine. And from there, I went to business school. What made that odd transition possible was the idea that, given my lack of belief or purpose around any particular thing, why not throw myself into an unlikely environment to see what would happen next?

I am grateful for that opening, because what happened next awakened my awareness about the path I was treading. My post-business school experience running a dot-com company was my first ugly encounter with the limits of a deconstructed world. How obvious it seems to me now: If you refuse to stand for your own beliefs, then someone else's beliefs will slide in to fill that vacuum. For the first time, I had discovered a system that I felt deep in my soul to be *wrong* — to be constructed in a way that did not serve humanity. What that looked like was a world in which short-term performance mattered more than long-term relationships. Incentive plans and bonuses were meant to motivate us — because our personal passions weren't in alignment with organizational goals. The work culture was designed to maximize control and predictability. We streamlined our thinking into repeatable processes and reusable components. We created long-term plans and measured the gap with our performance — as if our purpose were to excel in forecasting the future and eliminating deviation.

So I walked out of that world, completely adrift. In college, we practiced peeling away, layer by layer, the many systems of meaning and belief that gave us identity. What was left seemed to be little more than my commitment to deconstruction. And now that no longer served me either. I could no longer sustain a belief in a world of no absolute truth when I had become certain about what wasn't working.

What did serve me was the practice I had sustained over the years of checking in with myself to discover what I was being called to create. I didn't have any language for it at the time. Mostly, I referred to it as my "gut," because that was the term we entrepreneurs felt comfortable with. 'Intuition' was also an acceptable word. 'Guidance' and 'spirituality' were not... And then Berkana showed up in my life and offered me language and new ways of seeing myself in relation to the systems and beliefs that I had spent my adulthood abandoning.

For instance, I learned that systems rarely change as a result of plans and strategies. In only 18 months, I saw my dot-com company go through massive change, from an innovative and intimate community of 25 to an impersonal web of 900 people that had become oriented around self-interest. But no one planned that change. It *emerged* as a result of a complex set of conditions that were constantly changing as we grew. I learned that emergence is the process by which large-scale change does happen. As separate, local efforts connect and strengthen their interactions and interdependencies, a system of influence develops — a powerful cultural shift that influences behaviors and defines accepted practices.

Systems of influence are emerging all the time. They possess qualities and capacities that were unknown in the individuals. It isn't that they were hidden; they simply don't exist until the system emerges. They are properties of the

system, not the individual, but once there, individuals possess them. And the system that emerges always possesses greater power and influence than is possible through planned, incremental change.

So what happens when the systems of influence that emerge don't serve humanity? I believe that's the situation we find ourselves in today—from systems of corporate greed to political corruption and environmental exploitation. And I believe we can't break these systems down by protesting against them, tweaking them or trying to repair them. They are far too complex. Even if we could change each discrete element, we could never replicate and change the dynamics how they converged.

The only thing we can do is work to support the emergence of an alternative system, one that represents the good intentions that we create in the world. To do that, we have to stand for something. We have to *create*, not deconstruct—because life is relentlessly creating new things all around us anyway. In the past few years in the United States, new systems of influence have emerged around recycling, hybrid cars are visible throughout city streets, homeopathic remedies have gone mainstream, investing in sustainable businesses is on the rise. For me, the Now Activism is about creating the world we want to live in, rather than opposing the one we have. And creating it *now*, creating it *today*.

My story of the Now Activism is just beginning. As I sit and write these thoughts, I'm amazed at how my intellectual journey has brought me to this place. During college, we always wondered what would come after post-modernism. Perhaps it is the Now Activism.

76 Reasonable Questions to ask about any technology

Jacques Ellul

Ecological

- What are its effects on the health of the planet and of the person?
- Does it preserve or destroy biodiversity?
- Does it preserve or reduce ecosystem integrity?
- What are its effects on the land?
- What are its effects on wildlife?
- How much, and what kind of waste does it generate?
- Does it incorporate the principles of ecological design?
- Does it break the bond of renewal between humans and nature?
- Does it preserve or reduce cultural diversity?
- What is the totality of its effects, its “ecology”?

Social

- Does it serve community?
- Does it empower community members?
- How does it affect our perception of our needs?
- Is it consistent with the creation of a communal, human economy?
- What are its effects on relationships?
- Does it undermine conviviality?
- Does it undermine traditional forms of community?
- How does it affect our way of seeing and experiencing the world?
- Does it foster a diversity of forms of knowledge?
- Does it build on, or contribute to, the renewal of traditional forms of knowledge?
- Does it serve to commodify knowledge or relationships?
- To what extent does it redefine reality?
- Does it erase a sense of time and history?
- What is its potential to become addictive?

Practical

- What does it make?
- Who does it benefit?
- What is its purpose?
- Where was it produced?
- Where is it used?

Where must it go when it's broken or obsolete?
How expensive is it?
Can it be repaired?
By an ordinary person?

Moral

What values does its use foster?
What is gained by its use?
What are its effects beyond its utility to the individual?
What is lost in using it?
What are its effects on the least advantaged in society?

Ethical

How complicated is it?
What does it allow us to ignore?
To what extent does it distance agent from effect?
Can we assume personal, or communal responsibility for its effects?
Can its effects be directly apprehended?
What ancillary technologies does it require?
What behavior might it make possible in the future?
What other technologies might it make possible?
Does it alter our sense of time and relationships in ways conducive to nihilism?

Vocational

What is its impact on craft?
Does it reduce, deaden, or enhance human creativity?
Is it the least imposing technology available for the task?
Does it replace, or does it aid human hands and human beings?
Can it be responsive to organic circumstance?
Does it depress or enhance the quality of goods?
Does it depress or enhance the meaning of work?

Metaphysical

What aspect of the inner self does it reflect?
Does it express love?
Does it express rage?
What aspect of our past does it reflect?
Does it reflect cyclical or linear thinking?

Political

- Does it concentrate or equalize power?
- Does it require, or institute a knowledge elite?
- Is it totalitarian?
- Does it require a bureaucracy for its perpetuation?
- What legal empowerments does it require?
- Does it undermine traditional moral authority?
- Does it require military defense?
- Does it enhance, or serve military purposes?
- How does it affect warfare?
- Is it massifying?
- Is it consistent with the creation of a global economy?
- Does it empower transnational corporations?
- What kind of capital does it require?

Aesthetic

- Is it ugly?
- Does it cause ugliness?
- What noise does it make?
- What pace does it set?
- How does it affect the quality of life (as distinct from the standard of living)?

TV Turnoff Week

Millions of people all over the world have participated in TV-Turnoff Week since it began in 1995. Children and adults, rich and poor - people from every background and all walks of life - take part through schools, churches, or community groups, as families or individuals. Turning off the television gives us a chance to think, read, create, and do. To connect with our families and engage in our communities. To turn off TV and tune into life.

Sound like fun? It is! Join thousands of individuals and families by celebrating TV-Turnoff Week 2007: April 23-29, 2007. *Learn more at www.tvturnoff.org*

Margaret Wheatley

700 Years to Go

Several years ago a group of my colleagues were in a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. As they were speaking of the relentless problems of this time and their efforts to change things, as they sank into the frustration and despair that characterizes these kinds of conversations, the Dalai Lama gently counseled them: “Do not despair. Your work will see results in 700 years.”

This advice was very difficult to appreciate (of course) but, over the years, I’ve experienced the wisdom of his counsel. I believe that the essential paradox of being a NOW activist is that we need to be very present to what’s going on, to see things clearly and honestly in the present, to bear witness to the outrages and injustices of this time. Yet we also need to understand that the real fruition of our work will be in the future. This paradox has a deeper dimension. What’s occurring now invokes our attention, our anger, our sense of urgency. The more aware we are, the more we feel called to act, to do something to alleviate the terrible suffering we see and, perhaps, experience directly ourselves. Yet the very issues that call us into action, that motivate us to keep going, are inherently unsolvable, now. They will only be resolved at some distant time which we personally will not live to see.

Can we wait that long? Can we accept a far off time horizon before real progress will be visible?

It’s a fearful prospect, having to be this patient. But we need to expand our notions of time, both future and past. The problems we so urgently need to solve are taking place in the present, but they were set in motion hundreds or thousands of years ago. We are struggling with the *conclusion* of beliefs and behaviors that are very old. In my own work, I’ve noticed that when an old world view is dying, its proponents hold onto it more frantically. As they meet with increasing failure, they try desperately to make outmoded beliefs and practices work. They become louder, more insistent and even vicious as their methods continue to fail.

If we understand this time frame and these dynamics, we realize that there is no way to stop a culminating crescendo. Immediate interventions are necessary to provide some alleviation of suffering, but we cannot expect to find in the present any lasting solutions to the problems that have called us into action.

In the absence of immediate results, what is the value of our work? I’d suggest that we think of our work as setting in motion the future, now. What are the new conditions, new ways of being together, new beliefs, new world views that we want to reach fruition in the future?

You might be reading this and hoping I'm wrong, that much more is possible from our work right now. I'm only assuming this is your experience because it was mine. Being asked to wait hundreds of years for results, to do our work without any hope of seeing the benefits, is terribly demotivating. And it also seems irresponsible. Today's problems must be solved *now*. Too many people will continue to suffer if we don't find the right interventions. My own personal irony is that I don't even believe we'll be around as a species in 700 years if we don't fix things *now*.

But as I've grown to accept this long view, I have experienced far more energy and dedication to my work. Now that I don't expect it to bear fruit right away, I feel liberated from the accumulating disappointments and frustrations that mark the activist's path. This long view has led to a greater commitment to stay involved with this present world's dilemmas and horrors, but freed from the urgency and anger that had marked my earlier work. I understand (I think) why Nelson Mandela entitled his autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom". Patience offers a quality of pacing that provides perseverance and dedication in ways I had not experienced before.

What does it mean to be setting in motion the conditions for a distant time, when people can experience a more humane and healthy world? I believe we do this by consciously behaving now as we hope people will behave in the future. As we go about trying to alleviate present dilemmas, we must be very mindful of how we do our work, paying close attention to the behaviors, processes and methods we use. We need to realize that everything we do day-to-day holds the possibility of setting in motion patterns for the future. To do this well, we must be clear about the future we're hoping to create. What are our mental models, world views, assumptions and beliefs about the way humans should live and work together?

We also must be very mindful to notice when the mental models, tools and methods of the present appear in our own work. The prevailing assumptions of this time are dehumanizing and degrading. They include such beliefs as: people are motivated by extrinsic rewards; people are not to be trusted; competition works; community doesn't matter; people can be told what to do; leaders are in charge; cause and effect are straightforward; planning and control lead to successful implementation. These beliefs, and other similar falsehoods, are the ones most valued in the world today, touted as "modern management methods." It takes focus and conviction not to subscribe to them. Those of us who were professionally trained might feel more confident in these methods without being aware of their underlying assumptions. And most funders and formal leaders insist that we demonstrate our competence by using such methods. Yet to continue them in our activist work is to perpetuate the very conditions that created the messes we're now trying to change.

There are other worldviews available to us. The one I favor and use comes from our understanding of how the planet works. Some key concepts are: nothing manifests independent of a relationship; cooperation increases over time and symbiosis is to be expected; order is available without control; living systems don't use hierarchy and leadership is widely distributed; we live in a network of interdependencies. It is these and other principles that I want to set in motion now, for that far-distant time when it will be normal to think and organize this way.

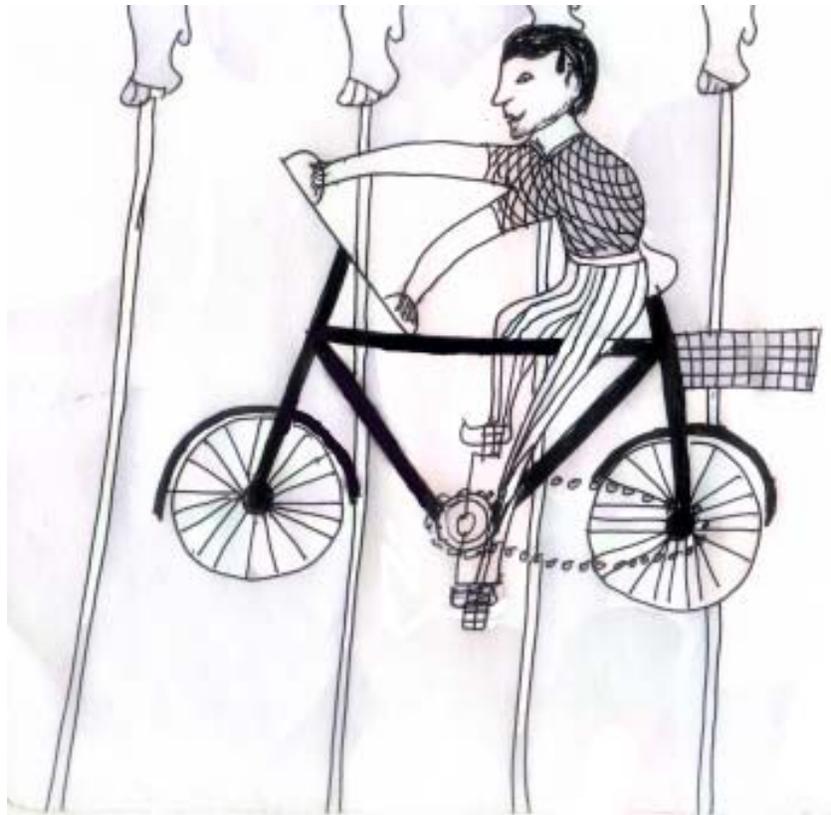
Whenever we use new approaches and methods that contradict the current worldview, people want us to fail. We can expect to be criticized, ostracized or invisible. Others will only notice our mistakes and advise us to return to the old ways. At this point, it's important not to lose our way. Not only should we expect the criticism, we also should expect failure. Of course our new approaches won't solve problems of this current time. Because these problems are the conclusion of conditions set in motion long ago, they are inherently unsolvable until we truly accept a new world view. If we truly believe this, we won't get lost. We won't deny or abandon these new patterns, even when confronted with their failures. We must value the integrity of *how* we do the work of change rather than focus on the current efficacy of these approaches. We need to draw our confidence from the nature of the behaviors themselves, not from their capacity to solve today's problems.

This statement doesn't deny the need for us to hold each other accountable or to act responsibly. We're responsible for setting the future in motion, for putting new beliefs into practice. We must stay clear and maintain focus on what those beliefs are. First we have to clarify these with our colleagues so that we're all working from the same set of assumptions and values. Then we need to focus on learning together how to embody these beliefs in what we do. We need to keep asking ourselves: Are they visible in our practices? Can we recognize ourselves and who we want to be in the practices we're using to do our work?

It's especially important that we hold ourselves accountable for the quality of our relationships. We do our work in a world suffocating in values of greed, self-interest, competition, consumption and aggression. It is very difficult to avoid being caught up in their powerful undertow. We often become competitive and critical of one another. Or we become frustrated and choose more aggressive tactics. We need to agree that we can call each other on these behaviors, that we will notice when we've been pulled down by these dynamics. Embodying the behaviors of the future — which I want to include cooperation, compassion, community and generosity — is difficult work. We need each other to help us strengthen these new behaviors. We need relationships that we can rely on, where trust is growing among us.

Our work is to give birth to the new in the midst of the collapse of the old. We are brave experimenters, learning as we go, fearless, liberated from our hope for immediate results. Yet we are only at the beginning and, as the Spanish poet Machado said, “We make the road by walking.” It is not our present successes that matter, but the way we walk together as we create this new road, setting in motion the future. The radical, truth-telling American historian Howard Zinn described this beautifully:

“We don’t have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”



walk out from...

THE READymADE World

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REAdy-MADE ALTERNATIVES

Walkout Challenge Day

Walking out from an institution, societal norm or dysfunctional mindset usually isn't easy. Sometimes we find the courage to walk-out because the dysfunction is so great, or because we're passionate about being the change we want to see in the world. This strength isn't always there, however; sometimes the desire to walk out exists, but not the confidence and courage to make it happen. A little help is needed, a little encouragement for those of us generating new ways of living.

Walkout Challenge Day is a day when walkouts help each other overcome the fear and/or inertia that's limited their walk-out/walk-on journey. On April 6, the day M. K. Gandhi defied the British by making his own salt (in 1929), walkouts in several sites throughout the world host a walkout celebration. At each celebration, people can officially 'walk out' from something they've thus far not had the courage or confidence to reject.

All over India and the world, you can find a growing network of *swapathgamis* (that is, one who makes his/her own path and walks it). They publish a magazine in Hindi and English, which features stories of walkout-walkon experiences and diverse learning opportunities that do not require much money or certificates/degrees. The magazine, as well as photo essays on their learning gatherings, and more on Walkout Challenge Day, are all available at <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/walkoutsnetwork.htm>