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## Translating Heartbreak into Action

*The work we have to do can be seen as a kind of coming alive. More than some moral imperative, it's an awakening to our true nature, a releasing of our gifts.*

—JOANNA MACY

*Without inner change there can be no outer change. Without collective change, no change matters.*

—ANGEL KYODO WILLIAMS

**N**o one can say with certainty how our civilizational crisis will play out. We don't know how much suffering and destruction—human and nonhuman—might lie ahead, or how soon. But we do know, with increasing certainty, that the actions of human beings have created an existential predicament; and we also know that the actions of human beings—for good or for ill—will determine the future of our great grandchildren and most other living beings. The stakes could scarcely be higher. We cannot wait to “see what happens” before we act on this awareness. Rather, we are obliged right now to do whatever we can to help prevent or mitigate the horrific

scenarios that we may have set in motion. What could be a greater moral imperative?

Only human beings can protect and defend the future of life on Earth from human beings. It will take conscious individuals making deliberate choices based on the best information available—people presuming responsibility to make a difference. Nothing could be more honorable and worthwhile.

The word “activist” conjures images of sit-ins, people circulating petitions and raising money and marching and organizing and meeting, and getting people to the polls. But it also means doing research, starting businesses, making loans, and changing one’s diet. When people creatively act on their moral intuition, all kinds of things happen. The world of activism is very big, diverse, and dynamic. And it requires—and helps us along in—transcending the collective trance.

## GRATITUDE, GRIEF, AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Spiritual life involves growing into a wise and healthy relationship to reality. The word “spiritual” points to the deepest level of being—essential and existential. Spiritual growth and development enable us to glimpse the bountiful grace in which we live—the beauty of the world, and the privilege of conscious embodied existence. Gratitude is universal spiritual wisdom, and it is sufficient.

Such gratitude is awake. It is realistically in touch with loss and death and threat—not in denial. Saints are grateful even while resonating empathically with suffering. Everything we love is mortal, even the living Earth. Everything regenerates, and yet is also wounded and under threat. The heart breaks to see the destruction of vulnerable people, living creatures, and wild places. We want to protect them. We want to help. As Joanna Macy so sagely puts it, “If everyone I love is in danger, I want to be here, so I can do what I can.” Activism is simply acting on the impulse to “be of benefit” to something greater than yourself, in a whole variety of ways. Not all of them look like overt “activism,” but many do. All are natural expressions of human maturity.

But exactly how can we effectively address the totality of this crisis? If addressing it requires knowing exactly how the crisis will unfold and exactly what it will take to prevent it, then we can't. As we have seen, no one, not even the best of scientists, has that degree of omniscience, especially with the kind of wicked predicament we are facing. There is no way that we can address the whole tangle of causes and consequences—everything is connected to everything else. Our predicament requires a revolutionary transformation of every aspect of human life—a “Great Transition” or “Great Turning.” It will ultimately require revolutionary changes in human consciousness, behavior, culture, and the physical, economic, and political infrastructure of our whole civilization. It is so vast and intricate, it easily seems impossible. We might be tempted to despair, but despair easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. And yet, because this huge transformation has so many aspects, every one of us can readily find ways to magnify love and sanity and beauty and truth and human connection. Every one of us can find many things we can actually *do*.

Paradoxically, the many little things we can do—each of which may seem in itself woefully insufficient to our total predicament—may well be a good start. We will continue to see the endings of life all around us, and we will grieve for all of the losses we witness. Our spirit and consciousness will go through a transformative ordeal as we take in new terrible truths about our predicament. But many actions on many levels, when collectively engaged (and perhaps further catalyzed by positive black swan breakthroughs) may ultimately add up into a single great action. At our micro level, there are many things we *can* do, and *are doing*, to address even our mega crisis.

To be an effective agent of change does not mean we have to know everything. But it does require opening to another level of transformation and creativity. Our predicament presents us with a vast demand and limitless opportunity for growth. Our crisis seems overwhelming, and yet we live in a universe of awe-inspiring creative potential—in nature, in our fellow humans, in the evolutionary process, and certainly in ourselves. The story of evolution is a story of miracle after miracle. We must simultaneously take in the magnitude of the problem—grieve for much

inevitable suffering—and do what we can on behalf of creative solutions, on every scale. To do both requires great openness on our part—openness to growth and to creative responses that we didn't know were possible. We give ourselves over to something that feels true. We magnify health and wholeness, even in the face of fragmentation—and in our trust of the larger process, we also become more effective. Our souls are positively stirred, and conscripted. This process of growth is clearly never-ending.

The first stage of the journey into spiritual activism is grounded robustly in gratitude and appreciation. In the second stage, we awaken from denial, apprehend the enormity of the challenge before us, and allow a great grieving process to transform the soul. We benefit even from the awful moments of hopelessness—because despair is not just the end of our conventional hope. It is also the beginning point for a new possibility, a third stage—perhaps a kind of *unreasonable* affirmation.

### *The Wisdom of Grieving*

Not only is grieving a stage of the spiritual activist's journey, but the grieving process *itself* often unfolds in stages, which can be described using Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's famous five stages of grief. These five stages—*denial*, *anger*, *bargaining*, *depression*, and *acceptance*—describe the process of psychologically responding to the prospect and reality of any catastrophic loss.

*Denial* can be said to be a defense against suffering and grieving. If reality is too painful, don't face it. Maintain equilibrium and good humor by closing the metaphorical eyes, or the mind. Turn off the news, doubt its veracity, change the channel.

While we can certainly criticize people's motivations for disengagement, it is also true that the attitudes communicated in media are often reactive and draining. So there are good reasons to practice skillful, selective disengagement from the 24/7 news cycle. Making intelligent and economical use of media and politics disciplines tendencies toward both mindless addiction and reactive avoidance.

*Anger* easily becomes a habitual defense against feeling loss, sadness, and fear. There are very good reasons to be angry. Anger is the energy to change what needs to be changed. But healthy anger rises and falls, rather than becoming a chronic state, and it stays in touch with grief.

The next stage is *bargaining*, an attempt to regain lost equanimity, perhaps by imagining alternative scenarios that mitigate the sense of loss. Whereas true equanimity is based on opening up to all of reality, including its darkness, bargaining seeks to keep painful realities at bay. It is a more sophisticated form of denial.

The fourth stage is *depression*. When it is clear that heartbreaking loss cannot be avoided, the being is at least temporarily shattered. We begin to fear losing something we have always depended upon and taken for granted—such as the company of a loved one, the restorative and healing grace of Mother Earth, or the ability to live in a prosperous, secure, open liberal society without doing anything to protect or defend it.

Mature, responsible adults are charged with staying intelligently related to the realities of our lives. But that requires us to pass through all the harrowing stages of grief into acceptance.

True *acceptance* recognizes the reality of our situation and accepts responsibility to arrive in basic equanimity and a capacity to act. We find a way to choose life, even in a world that includes horrific losses. We choose engagement with reality, including the gritty and not always pleasant involvements with people we may not like and in situations we would prefer to avoid. We know we have arrived in acceptance when we are in motion, doing what we can to make a positive difference. We find deep equanimity in activism itself.

### *Grief as Gateway*

Grief is not weakness—it is a form of moral intelligence and even wisdom. It takes us through a necessary gateway.

It took me decades to fully appreciate how holy it is. And then, in 2016, the gates swung wide open. I had for so long lived such a blessed and joyous existence, I was a bit unprepared for what I would feel. But

for me 2016 was not just an election year with all the shock many of us felt about the outcome; it was also a year of an alarming series of record-high global temperatures and extreme weather events, and deep grieving over the grave damage we are doing to our living planet.

One of grief's great lessons is patience—an attitude of self-compassion. Under these kinds of circumstances, my imperfections rise to be noticed. Even under the most serious circumstances, I will be imperfect, maybe a bit of a klutz or unconscious in some moments, or seeking what cannot be found. Those limitations don't simply go away—not for me, nor for you, nor for anyone. But we are privileged (even if awed) to be present in these very interesting times, facing realities that people before us couldn't countenance without horrified despair. It may take us many tries to get this right (and even then, we are never perfect), and our failures may even be costly. But, with self-compassion, self-forgiveness, and generosity, we can see our way through.

On the other side of all disillusionment and even despair, there will also be joy, and goodness, and beauty. Gratefulness and celebration have always sprung from the soil of loss and grief. We will be alive, and life will be good. However difficult circumstances become, we will be able to savor the beauty of life in each present moment.

Seeing an overwhelming army massed on the horizon was anciently seen as the test of a soldier's mettle—it was the time to get strong, fierce, and inspired. The battle was coming. And in the meantime it was wonderful to be alive. The “meantime” is all any of us has ever had anyway.

May we all be instructed by William Blake's beautiful quatrain:

*He who binds to himself a joy  
Does the winged life destroy  
He who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in eternity's sunrise.*

## FINDING YOUR **✕YES✕**

Activism emerges from the stark recognition that we really are the cocreators of our world. We wake up from the trance in which we

had imagined ourselves to be passive observers of the world, standing somehow apart from it. We recognize that we are not “in the stands” watching the action from an objective vantage point, and we never have been. We have always been on the field, and the ball is in play. When we realize we are full participants, we awaken into activism, and our practice becomes to engage with the game completely, holding nothing back.

One reason we give it all we’ve got is that nobody knows what will come. “It’s hard to make predictions,” Yogi Berra famously said, “especially about the future.” The future is indeterminate. It will emerge, and we have a part to play in determining *what* exactly will emerge. This uncertainty calls for sobriety, humility—and the aliveness of unreasonable hope. We do not and cannot know enough to justify despair and passivity.

Scientists and environmentalists have sometimes predicted that we have twenty, or ten, or five years to turn things around, to launch a society-wide mobilization to convert our presence on the planet into a sustainable trajectory. These estimates were not just wild guesses. They were based on real data, and I respect and learn from them. But it doesn’t serve to relate to them credulously.

Human knowledge is far too incomplete to quantify our opportunities. The real bottom line is that even though the world may be seriously out of balance, we just don’t know—and can’t know—exactly how bad (and good) things really are. We don’t know how severe or sudden climate changes will really be. We don’t know how soon and how much sea levels will rise. We don’t know how disruptive the transition will be from our unsustainable global financial, food, and transportation systems to sustainable ones. We cannot and will not be able to know how much (or how little) disruption, pain, loss, and degradation are in store for us.

But we don’t have to figure it all out. We don’t have to become tangled up in our unknowable future as if it were an unsolvable dilemma. We don’t have to handicap the odds in this high-stakes evolutionary horse-race in order to respond. We can cut through all the mind chatter by asking a deeper and more essential question:

Can I find in myself a no-matter-what commitment? Under the worst-case scenario, can I still tap into the well of uncaused, unreasonable happiness? Can I still relate to my fellow humans, and to all of life, with care and love? Can I still, to the fullest extent possible, remain present as a force for good in every moment?

A no-matter-what commitment resolves all dilemmas. Even if our predicament is hopeless, incapable of being turned around, we are still capable of loving one another, capable of enjoyment, capable of doing whatever we can to make life better, and capable of surrendering to the unknown. Ultimately, we cannot know what lies on the other side of our predicament. But we can still be happy, because our happiness is not based on external certainties (or “reasons”), but rather on our ultimate connectedness with the source of all life. And this noncontingent happiness is free to express itself in the service of others and of creation. If we do these things, we are saying a resounding “Yes!” to life. And that “Yes!” makes all the difference.

Seen from another angle, this great “Yes!” is also a great “No!”

When we see an approaching slow-motion train wreck, we yell out a warning. A scream issues forth that refuses to stand idly by and allow the destruction to take place. We can feel a great “No!” shouting forth from our own hearts. It is deeper than our feelings and even our understanding. Something much bigger than us is finding its way into life through us. And it expresses as much urgency, right now, as the most pressing deadline ever could.

Life wants to keep living. Insists on it, even. Evolution wants to keep evolving, and simply will not be refused. It comes forward with ancient, revolutionary fervor.

That is what has been surfacing and circulating. This impulse toward activism is the sound of love when it roars—when it demands to be heard. The universal is deeply personal.

## THE HIT IS A GIFT

Affirmation is primal and necessary and reflects a deep truth about us, but it doesn't hide the fact that we live in shocking times. Traumatic



events can jolt and debilitate us. We can be traumatized not only by our personal experiences but also by political setbacks and shocks suffered by others in our network of care and concern. Our circumstances require us to get serious about how we are managing our attention and conducting our energy, especially when we, or those we care about, take a real “hit.”

We can learn from George Leonard’s teachings on mastery, where he used an apt phrase to convey a principle from aikido: “Take the hit as a gift.”<sup>19</sup> It means that when your sparring partner hits you, he gives you energy, energy you can use in several ways.

First, the hit can awaken you, so you can relate to it as a teacher. Second, in the dance of the martial art, the movement to hit you will to some degree unbalance your opponent, which can give you an opportunity and advantage. Third, even if they land a solid blow, it will stimulate your life energy, your *chi*, so the hit is itself a source of energy.

The new energy stimulated by the hit is often at first inflamed and reactive. The hit is intended to force you to react, and when reactive you are weakened. You really have to stay present (which usually means, breathe and feel and notice) in order for the hit to become a conscious experience. It is important to get in touch with the totality of the hit, including how it hurts, how you are reacting, even how it may have injured you—or others, or values you care about. But when you find your way entirely into the present moment, you discover that the hit has activated your whole being. It has awakened you, and it is a source of energy.

Sometimes we must respond to old hits that have already overwhelmed and depleted us. We feel emptied by pain and loss. We are exhausted, and we don’t want to deal with it. The hit is still a gift, but it asks us for an entirely different move. We have to find our way to a heart of compassion for ourselves. Noticing our own inseparable divinity and humanity, we can metaphorically take our inner child in our arms. Our self-care and self-compassion flow. They restore our felt connection to whatever we cared about that was attacked in the first place—and that is another source of strength.

Care is not fast-moving like anger. Anger is suddenly right there, ready to mobilize and move—now! Care is a warm, deep reservoir of comforting

strength and sanity that you can steadily draw upon over time. Care for yourself is the foundation. Many of us need to restore our self-care. Without a foundation of self-care, our care for others and the whole easily gets out of whack, becoming unhealthy and draining us.

On the basis of taking good care of yourself, your care for others and for the whole organically flows. When you find your way into sincere care, breathing and feeling and resting in your felt connection to everything you care for, you tap into a source of steady, stable power. It can take you wherever you need to go.

If the hit is immediate and fast-moving, analogous to anger, recognize it as a gift right away and conduct its energy intelligently. If the hit is deeper and slower-moving, more like grief, find your way to a healthy caring for yourself, others, and the whole. Doing this deliberately and somatically is wise. When you are feeling that shock, take a few minutes, close your eyes, go inside, and really feel what's going on. Remember that it is possible to discover the gift in the hit. Such resilience is crucial to sustainable activism.

## GOOD AND EVIL

My friends Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow use the word “evil” to mean “self-interest that pursues its own financial or pleasurable self-interest, knowing that in doing so it is harming the future or harming others or harming the body of life.” Much rational discourse eschews normative judgments, hesitating to cross from “what is” to “what ought to be,” but I think Dowd and Barlow’s definition is a widely acceptable, durable, and useful working definition of “evil” that can ground rational decision making in a universal morality.

It is a deep truth that when we join in battle, we tend to become like our opponents. Evolution and the course of life would be served if we could learn to fight such “evil” in a different way—such as Gandhi and other non-violent resisters have discovered—so that we can prevail without becoming like what we oppose. It is critically important that we forge new ways of coming together with one another in the service of our larger health and

wholeness. That means creating a space for all people and creatures—and even wisely and compassionately accounting for those who lack empathy and compassion, including those we may perceive as evil and threatening.

Taking a systems view of this pattern, we look to find resources for healthy change that are already right here at hand. Where is the unused energy that is ready to come forward to create wholeness?

This energy may be in our capacity for friendship. It is my experience that there is a fundamental goodness, even some latent heroism, in almost every human heart. There is a willingness to go beyond narrow self-interest in a spirit of courage and generosity. We have the potential to form relationships that can function differently, less constrained by our fear and mistrust of one another. In our friendships and families, we can build new, stronger bonds of love and trust—bonds that can withstand the tests of our evolutionary life-and-death challenges. We will also have to develop a social immune system, so that our trusting social organism isn't hijacked by charismatic psychopaths.

## THE HIGHEST CALLING OF OUR CHARACTER

Think of the American Revolution's Founding Fathers, the patrons, artists, intellectuals, and scientists of the Renaissance and the Western Enlightenment. Think of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Desmond Tutu, the fourteenth Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), Aung Saan Suu Kyi, and Pope Francis.

Think of Jesus. Or Socrates. Or Gautama Buddha.

Realize they are the saints, saviors, prophets, and nobles of a broader, universal activist spirit—the soul of the universal impulse that has activated every big step we have taken in our evolutionary journey. This is the same spirit that also animated many early Christians and early Buddhists. It can be seen in the philosophers and prophets of the Western Enlightenment, and in the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence.

It is worth considering three individuals particularly: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Each of them catalyzed great societal shifts whose time had come. These leaders were able to rise above and harmonize the negativity, reactivity, and conflict that tended to compromise others. Their appearance coincided with great cultural changes; historical forces organized themselves around them, moving history forward. And they helped reweave the social fabric. They did this in part by their words and deeds and ideas and policies. But they especially led *by their example*. These three iconic figures are almost universally acknowledged as “saints with *cojones*,” world-transforming servant-leaders, the exemplars of the highest potential of leadership and greatness.

Gandhi and King in particular were career-long advocates of nonviolent resistance, a strategy that can not only be extraordinarily effective, but can actually transform one’s adversaries—or weaken them, but based on the adversaries’ own responses. In one of his studies of exceptional individuals, psychologist and educator Howard Gardner saw Gandhi as a particularly outstanding exemplar of a class of individuals he refers to as “influencers.” On a large scale, Gandhi’s activities eventually led to Indian independence from Britain. But these large-scale changes only happened because of his ability to “become an educator, instructing his audience over time to think in a subtler manner,” convincing multitudes of people to “think differently about the most important issues. . . . All assumed that the struggle would eventually have to be engaged violently—with English arms and prestige being arrayed against Indian numbers and nationalistic zeal. Gandhi succeeded in convincing people the world over to reconceptualize matters”—including judging people as fellow human beings and keeping disagreements nonviolent. But, “most stirringly, both parties in a conflict can be strengthened if they handle themselves with dignity in the course of nonviolent confrontations.”<sup>20</sup>

The greatest of the great men and women of history—the ones we revere most highly—are the dedicated *activists*. Over the past five hundred years, our great historical advances have been championed by such activists. Giordano Bruno, Voltaire, and countless others had to defy

the Catholic Church to usher in the Enlightenment. The American Founding Fathers, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson, had to defy the British monarchy to found the United States. Countless other activists had to struggle to establish, in nation after nation, the foundations of liberal democracy that make our current culture, including the shape of contemporary activism, possible.

We have all heard many stories of heroic activism. Sometimes the fights are for basic rights, such as (in the U.S.) the abolition of slavery, the right to vote (among women and people of color), or (up to a century after slavery ended) the rights of African Americans to use all public accommodations. The heroic efforts of women to claim their equal humanity have been unending throughout history. Workers, indigenous people, LGBTQ people, and even consumers have had to fight for basic rights. Today's activism ranges through such diverse areas as access to medical care, privacy protections, and protection of the biosphere.

Activists have an irreplaceable cultural role, helping societies to evolve. It is undeniable that societies transform through many diverse processes. But historically, many of our most important transformations, the key historical advances, have required struggle. In order for history to proceed, people have had to *advocate* for the new. They have had to criticize old, outmoded customs and policies, recognize the next possibility, speak up, join together, act upon that recognition, and exert influence. Activists have moved history forward.

Notwithstanding a long list of strategic mistakes and setbacks and losses, activists have been on the right side of history again and again. We have a vital role and responsibility, and we feel the weight of it. History proves that we have a mandate and a central role, even if we are perpetually working at the margins of the dominant power structure.

## THE SOUL OF ACTIVISM

We become activists after we notice suffering and destruction, cruelty and indifference, waste and peril, and the harm in which we are living—and

heed the biblical injunction to “not stand idly by.” The injustice may be done to us, or to friends or strangers or other forms of life, or even to values. When we see such injustice, we feel absolutely compelled to act.

We speak up. We listen to the stories of others who have been through similar experiences, or whose own experiences inform us and rouse us to action. When a group of us agrees, and we dare to believe we can make a difference in some way, and we cooperate to make something happen, we have become activists. Sometimes we are acting on our own behalf, or on behalf of our group, and sometimes on behalf of others.

It can be scary to defy the norm, to dare to attempt to exert influence. You must be willing to take risks. Sometimes they are just the “opportunity costs” of giving your energy to a cause instead of investing in yourself. Sometimes they are risks of ridicule, rejection, and retribution. And sometimes they are big risks—risks of real losses to one’s job, career, community standing, and personal comfort. Sometimes there are even risks of imprisonment, violence, torture, death, or retribution against loved ones.

Wherever we may be on the spectrum of activism, to become an activist takes courage. Activists are those who dare to go against the grain of what people around them are doing. They speak truths that others do not want to hear. They defy the norm in service of a higher principle.

Activism expresses a heroic impulse. But activists need not appear extraordinary. The values that inspire activism are the same values that drive the classic stories of literature, art, and popular entertainment. Everyone who begins as an underdog, or as an ordinary individual who leads an ordinary life, and then becomes challenged or moved to stand for higher values on behalf of a community or principle, is expressing the heroic qualities of the activist. These implicit values have been imparted, via parables and stories and poetry, to all of us, from the time we were children.

Activism expresses fellowship, connection, relationship, a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. When we act on our connectedness to others, we heal something essential in ourselves. We locate ourselves in something deeper than our postmodern alienation. Our connectedness

in the service of larger things transcends the superficiality of many relationships and associations. In this era when traditional communities and extended families are the exception, the community of like-minded and heart-based activists can be an essential healing and grounding force. This is all the more true because as activists we are, to a degree, voluntary outcasts from some elements of mainstream society.

Activism is sometimes characterized as angry and strident. And sometimes it is. Sometimes anger is necessary and appropriate. Healthy anger has an essential function in advancing history. But anger tends to summon fear, and it easily becomes destructive. Healthy activism is most fundamentally an expression of care rather than anger. It is love in action.

The soul of activism was captured by Pope Francis's invocation, "Let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment."<sup>21</sup> This is an inherently rewarding and blessed state. As Marianne Williamson succinctly put it, "A life of love and effort on behalf of the collective good promises the satisfaction of knowing that you are doing what you were born to do."<sup>22</sup>

History is replete with horrible human suffering—from plagues to wars to holocausts to unspeakable cruelties against women, slaves, adulterers, gays, heretics, infidels, people of color (and those who consorted with them), aboriginals, foreigners, animals, and the natural environment. And it *is only because these horrors were witnessed and addressed by activists (humanitarians, prophets, saints, scientists, physicians, abolitionists, political dissidents) that even more unspeakable atrocities or more horrific scenarios were avoided.* In a similar fashion, it will take activism to avoid or mitigate the worst-case scenarios that our own prophets—often our scientists—are warning against.

Our creative powers—the very creativity that enables us to realize more positive outcomes—are mobilized by taking our threats seriously and doing all we can.

Middle-class citizens of imperfect Western democracies benefit from science and technology and rational discourse, privy to all the converging streams of human culture, including our highest wisdom traditions.

We have a chance to live lives that are extraordinarily comfortable, safe, free, and creative. In these times, if we have the opportunity to live extraordinarily meaningful lives, I feel we have an *obligation* to do so. If the measure of a human life is its chance to have significance that extends beyond itself, then we've hit the jackpot. We are alive at game time on the planet, when everything that we value is genuinely threatened, when it's time for all hands on deck.

When we see one another, realizing that we are in this together, and that the situation requires our collective responses, something happens. Our eyes meet; our different ways of being inspired and activated coincide. That higher purpose exalts our friendship and cooperative synergy, imbuing our connection with potential significance.

## THE SHADOW SIDE OF ACTIVISM

Meaningful service gives activists' lives deep purpose and significance. And solidarity and fellowship can be gratifying and nurturing. Our sincere care can feed us, generating healthy neurochemicals. And we experience great joy in our victories, even small ones.

And yet we also endure much frustration. Overall, the concerns that motivate activists have also tended to drain us. Any innovative social initiative must overcome tremendous inertia. Institutional change tends to take place very slowly, with victories coming only after many years of very little apparent progress. And there is little funding for it, so activists often make personal sacrifices in service of a cause—and then we rarely see quick successes. Even when we do, we often see our gains brutally reversed. Environmental destruction, bad policies, suffering, injustice, hatred—it all persists, even as we work passionately. Meanwhile, all lives, activists' included, are visited by what Buddhists call the “heavenly messengers” of sickness, old age, and death. *Activism requires enduring through difficulty.*

Activists take on an extra commitment. In addition to the need to survive and thrive personally, we are committed to making a difference at the level of society. So we experience the ongoing progress of our causes as our own advances and setbacks. This can add to our stress.



And we often find ourselves competing, at a disadvantage, with people who don't take on these extra responsibilities. Even the most heart-centered, healthy, joyful activists feel these stresses. How many activists talk about burnout? It's no wonder most people do not choose this path, even though the highest foundational values that our greatest literature inspires in every child imply the courage to take a social stand.

It takes real wisdom and skill to keep our hearts open without letting the suffering in the world drain and deplete us. This is one of the most important capacities activists must build. We have to learn to put on our own oxygen mask first—silently, internally, many times a day. The most basic level of the inner work is an absolute requirement: we must learn to manage our own emotions and motivations. If we develop the knack for caring for ourselves and allowing ourselves to be fed by the regenerative dynamics of our sincere care for the planet, the people, and the cause, we can learn to counteract the tendency to be depleted and drained by unproductive “overcare.”

Of course, that's easier said than done. Many activists do get drained, and then live in stress, with a deep underlying sense of alarm, grief, or dread. This can go on for years, even decades. It eventually degrades our immune system and neurology. In such states, judgment tends to be distorted. If the outer work is always prioritized over the inner work, personal needs go unmet. This inevitably undermines well-being and effectiveness, and often creates a subtle residue of resentment and righteousness. Activists sometimes lose humor and perspective. We become grim and pessimistic, or resentful and impatient, or sad and depleted, or righteously judgmental.

If we have been injured by systemic corruption or oppression or other gross injustices, we may also have good reason to be angry. In that case, our task is to develop an intelligent relationship with our anger. Anger is very tricky—it's a source of great power, but it can undermine everything it is trying to accomplish. Our job is to learn how to use the energy of that anger intelligently, so that we can thrive and create real change.

Meanwhile, our trauma and emotions deserve respect, sincere care, and compassion from others. Even more important, we need self-respect

and self-compassion. We generally have legitimate grievances that need to be addressed. However, the attitudes of victimhood and grievance do not empower us, they are not psychologically healthy, and they certainly don't help us communicate effectively. The people we are communicating with, even those we must oppose, cannot effectively be addressed as if they were the perpetrators of our trauma, who owe us a remedy. To the degree that our trauma has impaired us, it is imperative that we recover enough to end the cycle of injury and trauma. And that requires healing, new self-awareness, humility, and the courage to understand ourselves and engage life in positive terms. Then we can channel our energy in service of higher values, rather than recycling our unconscious compensatory motivations.

That is why inner work is so necessary. Practitioners must reconnect to the deeper meanings of their lives, and to their deepest sources of joy and inspiration. In communities of practice, they can do this together. They can support one another, and be buoyed by the awakened clarity, love, courage, and insight of their fellow practitioners. We must remember that self-care is the foundation for all healthy care. Inner work is often the remedy to the ailments common to activists.

## THE OUTER WORK IMPLIES THE INNER WORK

What will it take to cocreate a new way of being human, and a new world? How do we get started? How do we transform what we are already doing (and how we are already being) so that we can actually achieve new results?

Clearly we must move toward a convergence of the "inner work" and the "outer work." This implies a life of practice and a truly integral revolution of the being.

As we'll soon see, this is already underway. We are awakening to a deeper, more spiritually grounded awareness, and being restored and inspired by insights and intuitions borne by higher states of consciousness. We are awakening to new ways of seeing our work and the world. And we are awakening to new forms of outside-the-box thinking, with higher-order metaperspectives on the issues facing our planet.

Meanwhile, more and more spiritual practitioners are coming to recognize that our impulse toward awakening and self-actualization can be fulfilled only by being of real benefit to others. As we in the practicing community awaken to a new sense of urgency, our inner work begins expressing itself in more and more consequential outer work, service, social enterprise, volunteerism, and other good works that make a meaningful impact on people's lives. *As we awaken, a new kind of activist is awakening within us.*

Finally, as we increasingly understand the inseparability of the inner and outer work, we are realizing that an important part of our work is to awaken ourselves and others into love and freedom and clarity. This is the “activism of awakening.” And we are beginning to see how such awakening—far from taking us away from the “on-the-ground” work—is actually a crucial dimension of even the most grounded initiatives focused on tangible benefits to systems, structures, people, and the planet.