

The Many Faces of the Spiritual Activist¹

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SYNOPSIS

This small piece is a summary of my recent book which looks at how, if we are to be an effective Activist of any kind, we need to have a Heart that is awake and open, otherwise we will still be part of the forces of separation and thus still be a part of the problems we are seeking to solve. What having heart gives us is the ability to be a true ‘friend of the earth’, and thus to care for all of life at a deep level, as well as having the passion to take on difficult challenges. We will look at ten main ways that we can work as activists, and twelve concrete things that all of us, if we so wish, can do right now to make a difference.

The movers and shakers on our planet aren't the billionaires and the generals. They are the incredible people around the world filled with love for thy neighbour and for the earth, who are resisting, remaking, restoring, renewing, revitalising.

Bill McKibben

The Situation

We are all living today in a highly conflicted world. On the one hand we are surrounded by many outmoded institutions, organizations, behaviours, mindsets and values, which are holding our evolution back, destroying our planet and fighting hard to maintain their positions. On the other hand, we are seeing many new movements and organizations for change springing up in a myriad of different ways in every single country, and being pioneered by people committed to working for a new and healthier world. And this gives me great hope.

Indeed, I believe that all of us who are concerned about the fate of our planet and who are not destitute or ill, or who don't live in a war zone or a failed state, need consciously to be 'on the side' of what is innovative and thus we are challenged to find our own way of committing to 'making a difference'. In so doing, we help the forward-moving process of evolution; we serve the emergence of a new and better society. This means that we don't just talk about what we feel is wrong with our planet, we also have our lives be about doing something specific about it. In Gandhi's words, 'We need to be the change we want to see happen', implying that unless the way we choose to live harmonizes with, or is aligned to, the new and better society we would like to see emerge on our planet, we cannot be a proper agent for change.

New Wine for New Bottles

In this context, we also need to realize that we are living in new times, which means that outlooks and behaviours which may have been relevant for yesterday may not be so for today, so we need to examine ourselves carefully and make sure that everything about the way we relate to ourselves, other people and our world as a whole is uncontaminated by past prejudices. I also think we are all challenged to take much greater responsibility for sticking our necks out in terms of taking stands over what we feel to be true and what has integrity and, en route, exposing or protesting against what doesn't.

In this context, some of us may need to shift from being ostriches with our heads in the sand, hiding away from looking at certain painful truths, to becoming giraffes! And I think this is rather urgent. A lot of hugely destructive patterns are currently being played out on our planet, and they won't just vanish on their own! Put simply, change won't happen unless you and I play our part in making it happen; a new culture won't emerge unless you and I give it form and focus. Gone are the days when we can just sit back and allow our politicians, our generals

and our bankers to continue running the show, as in far too many instances they have got things badly wrong, and are directly responsible for having got us into the many messes which we are in today. In the words of Barack Obama, 'Change will not come about if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change we seek.'

This means that if we are concerned with the issue of world poverty and how little, relatively speaking, most of the very rich give to help the very poor, or if the issue of gay or women's rights is close to our hearts, or if we are angry about war, corporate corruption or political dishonesty or the destruction of our environment, or if we believe that a higher consciousness needs to come into the world – whatever it is that most concerns us – then it is up to us to take the initiative to do something concrete about it. In the words of the Buddhist mystic Shantideva:

All the joy the world contains
Has come through wishing happiness for others;
All the misery the world contains
Has come through wanting pleasure for ourselves alone.

The Significance of the Heart

Here is where the Heart is so important, as I don't believe we can effectively 'be the change' without having worked at opening our hearts, as without an open heart we won't *care enough* about people or situations which don't have an immediate impact upon our own lives. Having 'heart', therefore, is the great antidote to selfishness. The historian Arnold Toynbee understood this when he told us that 'the greatest threat to mankind's survival can be removed only by a revolutionary change of heart in human beings'. The point is that when our hearts open, we become much more sensitive – we start feeling things at a much deeper level – and this in turn inspires us to greater action.

For me, then, the big human problem is the 'heart problem', or the fact that there is not enough open-heartedness in the world. I think we have far too many 'clever' people on our planet who perfectly understand all that is wrong with our society, but because their comprehension is not anchored in the intelligence inside their hearts but lies solely in their minds – that is, is not felt by them in a loving and compassionate way – the right kinds of changes often fail to be effectively implemented.

Put another way, because we have not yet awakened the deeper residues of our hearts, far too many of us are far too indifferent to world problems or human suffering, and tend to live too much in a 'so long as I'm all right, Jack'

'far too many of us are far too indifferent to world problems or human suffering,'



cocoon. Also, if our hearts are full of resentment or if we are still greedy or destructive or fearful because we've not yet opened to the spirit of forgiveness, abundance or generosity, we are only going to continue being part of the problems in our world, not part of their solution. It follows, therefore, that if we are to be the change/solution, something radical may need to shift inside many of us, since hearts, unlike flowers, tend not to bloom without a certain amount of effort being put into the process. This includes our working at developing hearts that are loving, strong and resilient. And this requires some commitment, and may not happen overnight.

Awakening the Universal Heart

We will know when we will have become more full hearted when we observe ourselves perceiving the world outside of us very differently. Little things will delight us more. We will see more beauty around us. We will be able to savour the magic of each moment much more poignantly. We may start feeling huge indignation at all the injustices in the world, or feel spontaneously moved to help those who are destitute, or perhaps feel compelled to work for causes which involve a lot of hard grind and danger, and where there is no tangible benefit to ourselves. Conversely, we may notice ourselves feeling huge affection and compassion towards people whom we've never met, and who could not be more different from ourselves in every way!

The Power and Passion of the Heart

When we start to experience these things, we are tuning into a sacred space; we are accessing that deeper ground of heart-being connecting us all up, and this makes us capable of doing a huge amount of good in the world.

The great Jesuit priest and visionary Teilhard de Chardin suggested that there was more power inside the human heart than inside an atomic bomb, and that's a pretty awesome thought. I see our hearts *as being our greatest weapon of mass construction*, and the more we can be in touch with the fire inside them, the more passion we will have to bring to bear upon whatever cause or causes we feel moved to champion. The religious philosopher Andrew Harvey uses the term 'sacred activist', which for him is 'the fusion of the mystic's passion for God with the activist's passion for justice, creating a third force: the burning sacred heart that longs to help, preserve and nurture every living thing'. I love that idea.

The Ten Faces of the Spiritual Activist

I see there being ten main ways in which we can express our activism, and I will briefly list them.

The Radiator

Radiator activists make a difference by radiating healing, loving and transforming energy out into the world. Their doing is through the quality of their being; their work helps lift the vibrations of the environment around them. They bring calmness and light into the darkness, and in our fragmented and speedy culture, this work is very important.

The Initiator

These people are the movers and shakers, the instigators of new projects to bring benefit into the world. They are always out there in the thick of it, often fighting to bring change into corporate and political structures. They have visions of how a new world might look, and they are committed to trying to bring it into expression.

The Infiltrator

Infiltrators are the transformational equivalents of the 'double agent'! They work their way into old-style organizations and subtly try to introduce new ways of looking at the world without rocking the boat too strongly.

The Proclamator

Proclamator activists heal through the power of the spoken word, like Barack Obama, who won his elections because he encouraged people believe that with him in the White House, all would be possible. Their role is to inspire us to think and act in new ways.

The Innovator

Like a Jung or an Einstein or a Ken Wilber (for me, the new

Plato), Innovator activists bring something entirely new to the kitchen table. They inspire us to open up to whole new ways of thinking and acting and seeing the world.

The Investigator

The role of the Investigator activist is to investigate the Shadow side of life, to bring what is dark or hidden to the surface so that it may be seen for what it is, and thus become 'disinfected' by the light. This can be a dangerous path, as many kinds of regressive forces hate being 'outed' and will often fight back strongly, and do their best to destroy those trying to expose them.

The Educator

Educator activists take it upon themselves to make people aware that it is possible to see the world in a new way, that a new paradigm is emerging and that there is also knowledge to be gained from inside ourselves, if we make an effort to look. Many Educators work to remind us that, as the character in the film *Avatar* told us, 'So much of what we believe is true is false, and so much of what we think is false is real'.

The Protestor

Going out into the streets as an expression of the stand one takes on a particular issue is a powerful act, especially if many people do so. Here, we remember that 'people power' brought down the Iron Curtain and more recently, in the Middle East, it also downed a bevy of dictators. It is a very powerful way of letting the world know about some issue which one feels strongly about.

The Agitator

The job of the Agitator activist is not to make people feel calmer and more at ease – that is the Radiator's role. Rather, they do their best to shake us all up out of our complacency so we may either reach into our pockets more generously, or generally do more to help a new culture come into expression. Their gift to us is that they light rockets under our backsides in order to wake us up to take action, and not leave the business of change to others.

The Dissident

Of all the many paths available to the activist, that of the Dissident is perhaps the most noble, and requires the greatest courage to choose. Invariably, it encompasses the willingness to sacrifice one's comfort, as generally the Dissident's role is single-handedly to confront totalitarian regimes, an activity which invariably leads to long spells

in prison. The power of this activist stance was beautifully embodied in Aung San Suu Kyi. The quantum shift that has recently taken place in Burmese society resulting in it becoming more open over the last three years is a tribute to her great courage and commitment.

Resistances

Of course, there are other ways of helping the emergence of a healthier world, but these are some of the more prominent. One may be an activist in one, two or even more of them. The key thing is that, having worked at opening our hearts, we then need to follow where our hearts instruct us to go.

However, we may encounter resistance, as there are many myths conspiring to keep many of us inactive. Among them is the erroneous belief that 'things have become so bad' and 'little me' is so powerless, so we do nothing. The second is the narcissistic notion that we have to 'save the world single-handedly', which is such a huge undertaking that we also do nothing. The third cop-out is that we are so 'busy' dealing with our own affairs, that we give ourselves no time to address the larger picture. We say (weakly), 'I would love to do more to help but I am so busy with my personal family and work commitments, that I cannot!'. All these situations are symptomatic of a timid heart, not yet big enough to encompass the larger whole of life.

Here, we need a) to work through our resistances, and b) to understand that the healing of our planet is a collective undertaking, and each of us simply needs to do our little piece of the puzzle, knowing there will always be others doing what we cannot. It doesn't matter that we don't engage in large undertakings. Giving money to a friend who is down and out, taking time to support another friend who is very ill, choosing to give up being critical, relating to everyone we meet in a loving and cheerful way, giving a monthly donation to Oxfam, remembering to recycle our waste – all these 'little things' are actually 'big things'.

The Need for a Positive Outlook

Whatever path or paths we may choose, it is most important that we always hold a positive vision of the future and encourage others to do so, as at present, there are so many 'fear currents' in circulation. In the words of Fred Polak, a Dutch futurist, 'Bold visionary thinking is in itself the pre-requisite for effective social change... in every instance of a flowering culture, there had been a positive image of the future at work, and when the opposite happened... the culture decayed.'

As would-be activists, then, we are all challenged

to try to hold the next step of our human and planetary evolution optimistically inside our hearts, and inspire those around us to do the same. As I said earlier, what particularly excites me is to see how many committed, brave people there are in the world today – the vast majority of them young – who are doing just this; and to know that every year, more and more activists are spontaneously emerging out of the woodwork. Sadly, in our news media, we tend only to be told about the many negative things going on, and so we can be lulled into believing that everything is hopeless. It isn't. There is a lot of hope in the world. A lot of the destruction we are seeing today is not necessarily 'bad'! It is merely the breaking up of old crystallized patterns that need to die if something new and better is to emerge in their place. Yes, it may be difficult at times. Yes, we may need to plunge further down into our collective Shadow – viz. the terror and violence that are currently happening in Africa, the Middle East and in Russia, and the huge injustices inherent in the vast gaps between the rich and the poor – but I know that if enough of us wish it and work towards it, recognizing that species wise, we are all going through a powerful initiation at this time, that humanity will come out the other end: transformed, stronger and wiser. It is always darkest just before dawn. Remember: it is up to us. Up to you and me. Not 'them' (whoever 'they' are!). We must remember that each of us holds the whole world in our hands. Let us embrace that responsibility with a glad heart.

Twelve Things We Can Do Right Now

- 1 Spend five minutes sending good, positive healing energy to some area of the planet you feel needs it – for example, the poor people in North Korea or Syria, or people who have lost family and livelihood as a result of some terrible tragedy.
- 2 Do one (or more) 'random acts of kindness' a day. For example, putting a pound in a car metre near yours which you see is going to expire, mowing the lawn of the elderly person who lives next door.
- 3 Think of a friend who is in need and see if there is something you can do to support them, and go and do it.
- 4 Give up eating one meal a week and send the money that meal would have cost to a reputable organization addressing the issue of world hunger.
- 5 Tithes 5 per cent (or more) of your earnings to a cause or causes of your choice.
- 6 Always have change on you to give to homeless people.
- 7 We do a lot of damage through our negative projections. So think of those whom you might have negative projections

against – say, fat, gay, ugly, pretty, very rich, very poor, people, Blacks, Muslims etc. – and choose instead to take back those negative thoughts and visualize them in a positive and supportive light.

8 Meditate on peace, and try to treat everyone you encounter in a peaceful way.

9 Ask yourself whether there is anyone you feel great anger or hatred towards, and see if you would be willing to consider forgiving them. Holding negative thoughts does so much harm to all concerned.

10 If you perceive any area of 'wrong' in the field in which you work – e.g., dishonesty, injustice etc. – be willing to take some kind of stand to help rectify the situation.

11 Think of a quality of heart you feel you have more need of – e.g. more love, courage, wisdom etc. – and first visualize that quality operating inside your heart, and then feel how your life might change if you were to operate more out of that place; and lastly, contemplate what would be required actually to have more of that quality available to you every day.

12 Look at the ten categories of activism I've mentioned, and see if you feel moved to work in any of them and, if so, how.

A wonderful one hundred and twelve-year old Indian holy man, the Shivapuri Baba, was once asked how we can best help our world, and his reply was: 'To think only good thoughts of others, speak only good words of others, do only good deeds to others and give of our substance to help others.' 🌱



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Note

1 This article draws substantially on my recent book, *Awakening The Universal Heart: A Guide for Spiritual Activists*, Umbria Press, London, 2013, 368 pp, ISBN-10: 0954127587; ISBN-13: 978-0954127589, price £14.95

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