THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

The Radical Implications of Staying within Capacity

by **Miki Kashtan**

Teaching, reading, and writing for a post-patriarchal future

Like most people I know, and know of, who are mobilised towards a vision of a transformed world, for decades I have overridden my limits and stretched beyond capacity. Even after reading and sharing with others many times the famous quotation from Thomas Merton,[1] I still didn't imagine any possibility other than continuing to do so for as long as I could. I kept imagining that I was doing it in response to accurate assessment of the capacity around me and within me. I also believed that in doing so, I was embodying one of the deep principles of non-violence: that we will always choose to absorb impacts rather than passing them on to others.

A few interrelated factors led to gradually loosening the grip of this conviction, and bringing in a softer perspective towards my own and others' capacity limits. One was a growing awareness that I wasn't sufficiently applying my own teachings to myself, and thus feeling unease about integrity. Another was repeated evidence of important negative consequences of functioning in this way. A final one was seeing the cumulative impacts on me.

I have come to believe that overriding capacity limits is one of the mechanisms that sustain the patriarchal systems that have been oppressing all of us for some millennia and which, now, through the particular manifestation of capitalism and the blatant overriding of the capacity limits of the planet, are bringing us to the brink of extinction.

All systems of oppression are based on taking from some and giving to others, and this could not be done without stretching at least some of us beyond our real capacity. The more 'willingly' we do the overstretching, the less force needs to be used to keep the system going. Fear of force is one of the initial reasons we accept, early in life, the difficult options given to us within existing social arrangements. Undoing the internalisation of overriding capacity, then, can have radical implications for individuals, organisations and social movements.

Limits to Capacity

My best understanding of indigenous wisdom rests on deep trust in life that if everyone takes what they need, not more and not less, and if everyone gives what they have, not more and not less, life sustains itself. Everyone, as I understand it, goes far further than human life, including in particular plants and animals. This honouring of limits means, for example, harvesting no more than half of what's available in a field so as to sustain its capacity to renew over time. It is such practices that befuddled the European settlers who came to California, for example, and saw an abundance of food without the intensive farming techniques then used in Europe which have depleted, by now, the overwhelming majority of topsoil around the world, turning much previously fertile lands into total desert.

I see these principles of honouring limits as an aspect of reverence for life, often coupled with a gentle attitude towards ourselves and each other. Early accounts of European settlers are full of references to kindness and generosity in the people they encountered. For me, both the abundance and the kindness emerge from the total willingness to recognise that every living

form was given gifts and is precious in exactly how it is.

Patriarchal societies, including our own modern capitalist societies, are based on forcing living beings, including both humans and non-human life, to conform to practices of extraction that are rooted in mistrust of life and that lead to ongoing scarcity, separation, and powerlessness. Any time we ourselves participate in these acts of forcing – either others or even ourselves – to go beyond the limits of our capacity, we reinforce the existing social order. Any time we choose, instead, to honour the limits of our own and others' capacity, we realign with life, on however small a scale.

This means finding ways to assess what our own and others' capacity actually is, which, given the immense normative push for 'more', is in itself an act of courage and liberation. It also means, then, accepting those limits instead of forcing and pushing based on internalising the harshness of patriarchal culture. There are no shortcuts on this road, and it requires an exacting ongoing practice of mourning: both the limitations themselves, and the harshness imposed on us to override them.

We cannot do this in isolation, as individuals. We can only do this within relationships, and within an awareness of the systemic dimensions of the challenge we are facing. Especially in modern, individualistic societies, recognising limits to our own capacity means having to rely on others and on the grace of life to attend to our needs, something most of us have been trained out of. It also means giving others the information about our limits as a form of care for the impacts of that limit on others. It's only within a collective awareness of all the capacities within a community, for example, that we can care for our collective capacity well enough to attend to our needs optimally.

Increasing Capacity by Staying within Capacity

Paradoxically, once we are able to accept the limits to our capacity and operate only within

them, our capacity, both individually and collectively, can increase. This can happen in at least two ways. Individually, the moment any of us stops fighting against the limits of our capacity, all the energy that went into fighting within self is now available to be channelled towards the purpose for which the fight was enacted in the first place. Recognising the limits, mourning, and bringing tenderness to our limits also creates more willingness to receive support, as well as to adapt to our limitations by creating structures around capacity, which, again, allows us to stretch further without the same effort.

While I enjoy watching myself and others increase capacity in this way, I am even more in awe of what can happen collectively when we accept our limits. One example of this is how we engage with agreements. Most groups and organisations I am familiar with tend to create agreements that are aspirational rather than within capacity. This means that they create pressure on individuals to act in ways that are beyond their actual capacity. This is one of several reasons why so many agreements made are not kept.

When agreements are made *within* capacity, and when they are actual *agreements* rather than imposed *rules*, they are much more likely to be kept, and they then begin to act as support for moving towards how we want things to be, rather than creating pressure that everyone then resists. Again, this releases energy, both from what goes into the resistance and from what goes into the push to do what we can't do.

As one trivial example, suppose a communal household is working out how to do household chores. Very often, a core principle is one of fairness or equality, both of which are inattentive to capacity. Under the principle of equality, maybe the five members of the household would rotate who takes the garbage out on Tuesday. If we imagine that one of them lacks the capacity to track when it's 'their turn' to take out the garbage, it's extremely likely that they will routinely forget, leading to various and

sundry problems in the household, including conflict and resentment by others, especially those who dislike taking out the garbage and only do it because it's 'their turn', which only increases their annoyance at the person who forgets. If, on the other hand, they base their agreements on capacity and willingness, it may well be the case that the same individual wouldn't at all mind always taking the garbage out every Tuesday, provided someone else who has ease in tracking such things sends them an email reminder. Then no one does something that is outside of their capacity or willingness; the garbage is taken out without fail; and the individuals who are now freed from taking out the garbage altogether are available for other tasks they may have more willingness to do.

A Vision of Possibility

Leaning deeply on the contributions of Genevieve Vaughan[2] and Heide Goettner-Abendroth,[3] and on Maturana and Verden-Zöller's book *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*,[4] I have come to accept the view that we are a mothering species that, due to external circumstances rather than intrinsic defects, has taken a turn against life through the patriarchal path of control within a paradigm of scarcity, separation and powerlessness. This makes what has happened to us a tragedy of unspeakable proportions rather than an inevitable outcome of who we are.

For as long as humans are still here on planet earth, the possibility remains for us to realign with life. Aligning with life means, in part, restoring the faith that the mothering principle, based on the flow of gifting towards needs, is the human way. Once we rest within this possibility, we can begin to see that the principles of controlling nature and ourselves, and of distributing resources through exchange, sit on top of and hide the continuing practices of gifting that exist both in the actual mothering relationship and in intact communities that function outside of market logic.

Restoring gifting is no small task in a world where all of us are trained to believe in scarcity,

act in separation from others, and feel powerless to change much of anything. The practice of learning to honour the limits of our own and each other's capacity is one small part of this path that can help us lean more deeply into compassion, generosity, humility and mourning, all of which are part of the soft qualities that have the power to transform patriarchy.

For example, a while back I was asked to contribute financially to an organisation I care deeply about and yet have significant concerns about how they function. I asked to have certain things put in place, things I thought would be simple to do and that would add to integrity and make it easier for me and others to give. I didn't receive a response, and my resistance to giving was big; I just couldn't find willingness. At some point I realised deep in my body that if the organisation had the capacity to do what I requested, they would. It wasn't within their capacity, for reasons I don't and likely won't know. Then it was simple again. My resistance melted into compassion and generosity, I sent for me a significant amount of money, and I invited others I know to contribute, too.

From the other end of things, we also need to honour our limits, and not do what we don't have capacity to do. In a collective setting, this doesn't mean 'anything goes', because we are interdependent, and what we do or don't do has impacts on others. Instead, a principle some of us have adopted is something we call 'do or ask': when we discover something that needs doing within a group or project we are part of, we either do it, or ask others if anyone has capacity. If no one does, this creates a known void, a collectively recognised need that isn't being attended to rather than having anyone do it because of fear, obligation, or through forcing themselves to overstretch. Realigning with life means trusting the creativity and resilience of a community. It may mean that someone will eventually attend to it when the impacts are big enough, or that we will find a way to function around the thing not getting done. One way or another, life will go on, without shoulds and have-tos.

If we want to transcend and transform the way we function, we soon discover the degree to which we are pulled down and away from our visionary purpose of realigning with life by thick patriarchal patterning whenever we lose our conscious focus. Even then, operating within a larger whole that is committed to liberation and to restoring trust in life means that someone else can then pick up the vision and keep it going for the next few steps, until they, too, reach their limit and pass it on in an endless and organic relay. The deepest principle that guides such ways of functioning is about holding together the totality of what is needed and seeing where the capacity is. This is when capacity finally becomes a collective rather than an individual trait. Even the thought of increasing individual capacity then loses its power.

In a fully interdependent way of living, within reverence for life, it is simply a clear acknowledgement of reality to notice that some do and some don't have capacity at any given moment, and to surrender to giving and receiving fully based on needs and capacity. This is as close to heaven as I know to imagine.

Notes

1 'There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. 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 projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.' Available at https://tinyurl.com/neks8z8w (accessed 24 April 2021).

2 See http://gift-economy.com/.

3 See https://www.hagia.de/en/home/.

4 H. Maturana Romasin and G. Verden-Zöller, *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2008.

About the contributor

Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (NGLcommunity.org) and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native with significant roots in Mexico and New York City, she is now vagabonding in search of learning about liberation and community. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology from UC Berkeley, and can be contacted via the editor.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony."

Thomas Merton, 1915–1968