


SIS ILLUSTRATION / VEER

Navigating the Future: A Guide for Conscious Activism

ANDREW BEATH

 OUR PLANET IS ALIVE. Air, water, fire, and geologic systems are the life-giving constituents that compose the Earth. Time and unfathomable mystery interlace these elements into harmonious relationships. The millions of life forms that surround us evolved together over hundreds of millions of years.

A new planetary danger has arisen. We are facing a critical epoch of our existence. The way we humans interact with the living Earth has set the stage for an extinction spasm affecting a significant proportion of all life, including our own species. But just as near-death experiences can result in the expansion of normal awareness, so too can this degradation that puts us at risk precipitate the emergence of a new relationship between humans and the natural world. The crisis we have created has become the impetus for the next step in the evolution of human consciousness.

Why is a focus on expanding consciousness important for effective social change? How can we integrate the new understandings we discover in order to create a healthier society? These questions provide the context for us to examine personal and social transformation.

Based on my own consciousness research, I have identified seven attributes that characterize “conscious activism.” They shine across centuries and cultural boundaries. Each one provides guidance to dissolve our isolation, demystify paralyzing concerns, and shows how individuals can make positive changes in the world. They are skills for metamorphosis that can help to heal the world.

SEVEN ATTRIBUTES OF CONSCIOUS ACTIVISM

Nonviolence—Kindness in the Midst of Passion

As the Dalai Lama has said, “Nonviolence takes a very long time.” Nonviolence is a lifelong process of refining the arts of kindness, concern, and tolerance for differences. It need not be the absence or suppression of anger or other emotions. It is a behavioral choice we make. There are a number of effective techniques that allow violent feelings to pass through like a temporary storm rather than dictate our actions. It requires an agreement with oneself to act toward others with appreciation of our shared sacred nature. ➔

Acts of intentional violence are founded in pain, disconnecting us from life's creative source. Just feeling violent is painful. And every violent act, even if it is necessary to protect family or defend against further violence, creates more suffering. It's impossible to live without harming other living beings, so the parameters of nonviolence are difficult. Nature is filled with violent upheavals. No matter how committed, no one can live without doing any harm. This is a complex challenge whose solution stems from a desire for mutual well-being.

Not Knowing Allows Spontaneity in the Moment

Not knowing enables us to put aside our entrenched ideas and reactive behaviors. Intellect and intuition become more balanced. It is a place of open mind and heart accompanied by wonderment, where spirit is readily available.

The ongoing drama of yesterday's problems and tomorrow's plans can take up all of one's interior focus. Alternately, presence is an empty vessel that provides spaciousness for infinite intelligence. It is found in a transition zone between the fullness of opinions and the emptiness of no thought. When a field of noisy voices becomes quiet, there is room for bird songs, wind, and the rustle of forest leaves—sounds of silence that were present but unnoticed a minute before. There is a place for both memory and imagination. But to always think about what is not present dishonors the moment.

Introspection for Self-Discovery

We each have a personal identity but often fool ourselves into thinking this is all we are. The ego is a harsh taskmaster who often has us on remote control, unconcerned with life's grand perspective. The inner self can lead us out of the prison of separation. As we come to understand our motives, we gain choice and are not obligated to operate from our prior automatic response patterns.

Through self-inquiry we discover an expanded personal imagination and boundless transpersonal experiences. Personal transformation is the first step in social change. Introspection is our most valuable tool for this process.

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Outraged by inequities she first saw as a child growing up in Latin America, Julie Levine identified herself as an agnostic socialist by the age of 13. Whether organizing strikes against the repressive government of Colombia in Bogotá or working in the Progressive Labor Party in the United States, Levine's activism continued to be fueled by a belief in violent revolution. Years later, even when she worked in the Bronx as director of health and human services, Levine was intent on exposing government corruption, saying she "needed to be part of a revolutionary struggle." She did not anticipate the automobile accident that would radically reorient her passionate struggles for justice. —VS



Julie Levine

I was on my way to a meeting. My friend Robin was driving. It had been raining and was overcast. We were on the New York Thruway and suddenly this huge, 18-wheel truck backed up on the shoulder of the road into our lane. The car went out of control and spun all the way around, hitting the truck on Robin's side. I was told afterward that she was killed instantly. I remember a loud noise, panic, and then nothing.

Next I found myself in a cave-like tunnel. Robin and I were both there. A presence that felt safe, loving, and wise described the experience we were about to have. We were going to go to a place that was beautiful and peaceful beyond what we had ever experienced on Earth, [but] one of us was going to have to come down and it was going to be very painful. Only one of us was going to have the strength to make that trip. I realized it meant returning to the body. Then suddenly we were suctioned up like magic out of the cave until we were floating weightless in space. The water, air, and sun were flowing through us, between us, and all around us. We had no bodies, no pain, no past, no future. We were pure energy and pure light. It was bliss . . .

[This experience] ultimately led to a transformation of my perspective on reality, my values and priorities, my sense of who I am, my connection to creation and the place within myself from which I take action in the world. About three months after the accident, I went back to work part-time. My whole life before the accident had been built around being an angry activist. I tried to make it the same, trying to prove that I could still do it and that I was the same person, because I didn't know who I was outside of that work identity. But I found I had no heart for the work. I felt like I needed to touch human beings. I needed to feel close to people in a different way. So eventually I left that job and struggled to come to terms with my new situation. Now my challenge was to allow my entire life to reorganize around the new understandings that my

experience in the light brought. I wanted to learn a more heartfelt and effective way of serving in the world. I contacted the people in the International Association of Near-Death Studies. I also started going to Buddhist meetings and meditation groups. I spent a lot of time in the woods and holding my cat. Those things felt good. I was struggling to find what was real. I moved out of New York City. I took a year off, went to spiritual retreat places, and did a lot of meditation. I slowed down a lot. Now I'm only comfortable with those who come from a loving place—from good-heartedness, whether they understand it in a spiritual way or not. People who are carrying a lot of hostility or anger are difficult for me now, which is why I couldn't work politically the way I used to. That was based on trying to take people's anger and mobilize it to help them fight the system. It was militancy. I no longer see the issue as a fight in the old sense. Rather, it is an evolution. Change will come from a peaceful place, one of growth.

In my current work, I try to bring spirituality together with activism. I'm clear that we're not going to create positive social change if we're only about opposition. Many revolutionaries haven't transformed their lives and are working from hate rather than love. This won't create anything that's better than what we have now. That's what's different for me. I make sure to be in relationship with understanding, authentic people—both inside and outside of spiritual circles. At work it's different for me now. I'm there to be a healer, not a disrupter, and I'm trying to build healthy communities in a positive, loving way. I hope to create a workplace where people can be happier and more present with what they are doing and why they are doing it. I'm definitely a different person. Before this happened, I paid no attention to spirituality. Now I know there is spirit in the trees—and in everything. It's all about connection.

—*Excerpted and abridged from Consciousness in Action by Andrew Beath (Lantern Books, 2005).*

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Our intuition and all our senses come alive in the wild, where we are educated by nature's sensuous intelligence. Likewise, there are techniques to roam the wilderness of our interior self and extend its borders. Both in nature and in one's inner world, looking carefully reveals interwoven threads in a grand tapestry of life.

Eros, the Art of Loving-Kindness

On a planetary level, Eros is the cosmic attractor that acts as an omnipresent connector of all things, large and small. On a personal level, it is the archetypal energy of loving connection that is inherent in all beings and represents loving-kindness through interrelationship and appreciation.

A PLACE TO BEGIN: SOME RECENT BOOKS ON CONSCIOUS ACTIVISM

Conversations on the Edge of the Apocalypse

edited by David Jay Brown (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005)

Deepening the American Dream:

Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy

edited by Mark Nepo (Fetzer Institute/Jossey-Bass, 2005)

Democracy's Edge: Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life

by Frances Moore Lappé (Jossey-Bass, 2005)

The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community

by David C. Korten (Berrett-Koehler and Kumarian Press, 2006)

A Greener Faith:

Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future

by Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford University Press, 2006)

In the Footsteps of Gandhi:

Conversations with Spiritual Social Activists

edited by Catharine Ingram (Parallax Press, 2003)

The Left Hand of God: Taking Back Our Country from the Religious Right

by Michael Lerner (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

Planetwalker:

How to Change Your World One Step at a Time

by John Francis (Elephant Mountain Press, 2005)

The Power of Serving Others: You Can Start Where You Are

by Gary Morsch and Dean Nelson (Berrett-Koehler, 2006)

Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action

by J. Matthew Sleeth (Chelsea Green, 2006)

Waking the Global Heart

by Anodea Judith (Elite Books, 2006)

Love and beauty are not ethereal qualities. They are essential presences that can resolve the problems we have created. This is inner grace.

When asked on his deathbed for his advice about life, Aldous Huxley, England's preeminent scholar and wise elder, simply said, "Just try to be a little kinder." Anger smotheres Eros. Without compassion the flames of anger are consuming. Often they provide much-needed instant energy, but in the long run they deplete us.

Conscious activism is activism from the heart. It is composed of loving-kindness and requires nothing in return. If we love something, we want to help it thrive: redwood trees, rivers, and everyone's children. As our capacity for love appreciates, our world grows larger. As our connection with the living planet deepens, so does the place in our hearts from which we experience joy.

No Enemy, Co-Creating a Healthier World

I may disagree with someone's actions or be disgusted by them, but it is not helpful to detest the person. I clearly remember when, through ignorance, I was disrespectful of life's beauty. So it's not necessary or helpful to my cause when I create an enemy out of someone with whom I disagree. We humans are one family and have all participated in creating our current circumstance. Just putting aside fear and hatred is a revolutionary behavior that can change the world. Thich Nhat Hanh says, "You don't need the other side to make peace. You can make peace by yourself." Actions are more effective when they stem from compassion than from resentment.

Vision, Free of Reaction

It is necessary to confront social injustice and ecological degradation with opposition—yet other approaches are also needed. Let's stop the destruction, and just as important, let's envision the actions needed for a healthier future. Activism without this vision could more accurately be called reactivism. To continually struggle against enemies traps us in their drama. Opposition often

adds more juice to the entrenched system I am attempting to improve. To use the strategies of those I hope to change puts me in danger of becoming what I loathe.

Holding the vision for a successful future reduces the likelihood of getting caught up in today's dysfunction. Providing healing alternatives will attract others and cause the old system to atrophy. Change born of compassion is more likely to endure than that of opposition.

Being Joyful Without Attachment to Goals

Joy is inherent in the intricate beauty of nature. As I get older, my appreciation grows. I celebrate Earth's sanctity. Vulnerability, joy, and grief are not separate. Each is a part of heightened sensibilities, deep feelings, and concern for others. When I stay grounded in gratitude, I stay openhearted, even in the face of ongoing planetary problems. But a need to save the world or attachment to other unattainable goals can lead to despair.


It brings pleasure to live in respect. Like "reinspect," it is to pay attention by seeing deeply. This enhances relationship and loving connection. And we usually want to help the things we love. The state of the world is a mirror of our cultural values. The community of people who value a healthier culture is growing. Society's compassionate heart is feeling more deeply and gaining greater visibility. Joy abounds in this numinous life dance.

As a species we are entranced in an anthropocentric delusion of supremacy that has, until recently, been unwilling to acknowledge the damage we foment. However, the results of our actions are leading us to deeper awareness, and this process is the leading edge of the evolution of human consciousness. There is perfection in the unfolding universe that is grander than any individual act of destruction. Perhaps it was an evolutionary necessity for us to endure extreme social discord and planetary degradation in order to reconnect with natural harmony and thereby learn how to move forward with wisdom.

Conscious activism engages the world by expressing our most profound understanding of natural harmony. This form of activism endeavors to open the compassionate heart of each person, on all sides of an issue. This can only happen if we expand our own awareness—individual transformation is essential for global change. By healing ourselves we bring health to the whole.

*Giving birth,
Nourishing life,
Shaping things without possessing them,
Serving without expectation of reward,
Leading without dominating:
These are the profound virtues of nature,
And of nature's best beings.*

—The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu

—Reprinted with permission; article excerpted and abridged from *Consciousness in Action: The Power of Beauty, Love, and Courage in a Violent Time* by Andrew Beath (Lantern Books, 2005). 

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