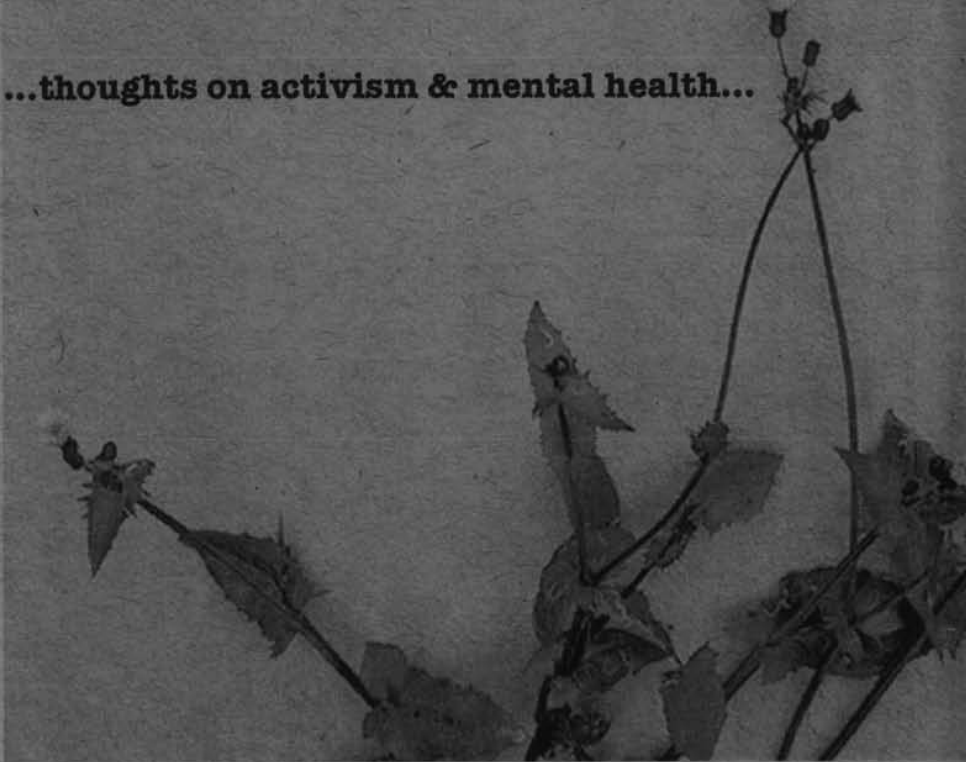# What sustains us?
What stops us?

...thoughts on activism & mental health...

• counterbalance • counterbalance • **counterbalance** • counterbalance •

Counterbalance • n. /kaunterbal(ə)ns/
1 a weight that balances another. 2 a factor having the opposite effect to that of another, preventing it from exercising a disproportionate influence. **v.** to apply weight or force in order to balance.

About the Author:

I am Pacific Northwesterner who has lived in Seattle for most of my 32 years. Some words to describe me might be: white/Euro American, female bodied, redheaded, queer (I'd be between a 2 and a 3 on the Kinsey scale, look it up!), book nerd, community-minded, friendly. I have been involved in radical politics and anti-authoritarian collective projects for all of my adult life. I tend towards depression and anxiety, I do not handle stress well, in fact, I often do not cope well with modern western society despite my privileged place in it. Because of this, I have focused my academic studies on psychology. I am interested in exploring the place where psychology, ecology, and politics meet. My intention is to use the understanding that comes out of this convergence to help inform the creation of healthier activist communities and aid in producing more effective, continuing activism.

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Acknowledgements •

Thank You •

• Welcome & Hello •

This 'zine is coming together because I have been exclusively writing academic papers now for many years on my long and roundabout way to finally getting a bachelor's degree. The intention of this project is to talk to my community, beyond academic circles, about mental health and activism. I want this to be a conversation starter of sorts as this topic is huge. The more I think about it the more I realize that I don't really understand all of the facets of it – and the more I realize that I only have my one view to look at/through – and there are so many other stories out there.

The impetus for my exploration of mental health and activism goes back about five years to my first recognized bout with severe depression. This was more than a bout really - it was a breakdown, a freeze frame, a complete halt – my life just stopped. Everything came apart and I feel like I am still putting the pieces back together, all in new and jumbled ways. I had just gotten my heart broken, I had been sooooo involved in too many projects, collectives, communities...and I burned out and freaked out. And I got on medication because I was suicidal. I retreated from the activist world and focused on myself for the first time maybe ever. I am slowly integrating those worlds again – the personal and the political – looking for a good balance. And sometimes that seems elusive. It seems we are caught in either outward political work or inward personal work – why do these often seem to be exclusive when I want them to be inclusive – working in tandem with each other.

Does what I'm saying sound familiar to any of you out there? I have noticed a trend in my community as I get older – people start to disappear from the activist community. Maybe they experience something like I did five years ago and never make it back, maybe they get a job that takes all their time, maybe they have a kid and that changes their lives, maybe the community becomes intolerable for them in some way, maybe they just move on...but I want to know – what is going on here? In what ways is our community not fostering longevity and growth within it? How are we unhealthy and unsupportive of each other despite our tendency towards community-mindedness? Why do I often feel that we are all so screwed up – both individually and collectively? This must go deeper than a surface critique of capitalism and oppression, right?

We have come to the theme of this project – I want to explore how we meld our activist lives, our political selves with our personal lives, our mental

health work and the way we are in community. And I want to ponder how we can make it all sustainable, healthy, and constructive. Come along with me as I start to delve into this conundrum. Help me along the way. Tell me what you think. Join me in unraveling this complexity.

Take care of yourselves,

Kristi Kenney 11/07
counterbalance@riseup.net
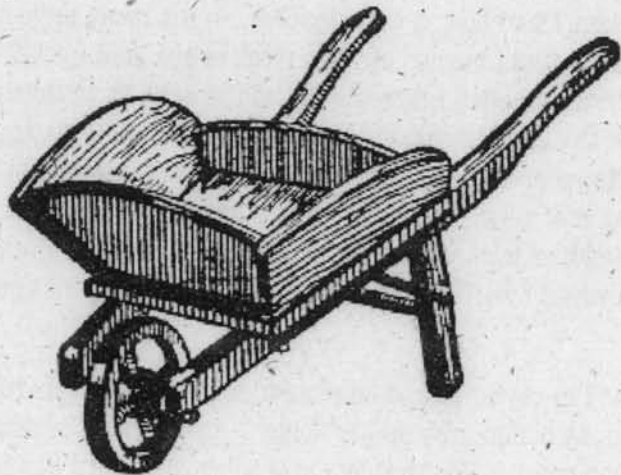
"In psychotherapy, personal pain has historically been addressed without reference to the larger context, without reference to the larger social, political, and cultural forces in which it is embedded...If psychotherapy clients bring in "the outside world," any intense concern about global issues like pollution or violence, is likely to be viewed as a sign of personal pathology or projected self-interest rather than as manifestations of our basic connection with this world."

~ Sarah Conn

• Despair for the World & Personal Depression •

Many of us who are activist are hyper-aware of the state of the world – the pain and suffering, the oppression, the economic disparity, the lack of justice, the intense and rapid degradation of the environment – and we are affected by this knowing. I often feel that this kind of awareness or sensitivity to the world is a gift, but I also have first hand experience with how it can be a curse. When not held consciously or dealt with constructively this kind of awareness can become toxic – and can lead to stagnation, defeatist thinking, negativity, isolation, depression or other mental health issues, and even physical illness.

After several years in therapy, lots of psychology classes, and after reading some important and influential books, I now have a very different view of my struggles with depression than I did five years ago. I now see my personal depression as connected to the larger world. I see how despair for the world turned inward and not let out or acknowledged can become internalized as personal depression. Our lives are embedded in and connected to the rest of the world; they cannot be separated out, especially in this age of globalization. The mental health "industry" does not often look at this connection. Our issues with mental health are frequently seen as isolated and deriving from our own personal pathology, family backgrounds, chemical imbalances. I am not saying that these and other factors are not at play – but we live in this world, this crazy world, and it touches us. We are sickened by it – and this can come out in many forms – socially, mentally, physically.

The mental health industry can be criticized for teaching us to cope with a world gone mad. MLK said in 1967 as he addressed an American Psychological Association Convention:

> I am sure that we all recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things that we must always be maladjusted to if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism and the self defeating effects of physical violence (referenced in a speech by Steve Chase).

I echo MLK's thoughts - I don't want to learn to be ok with the world as it is, I don't want to adjust to things as they are. I also don't want to be clinically depressed. What I am asking is – how can we have both?

This is the realm where our personal lives and our political orientations meet (though I think that they can never really be separated). In my experience of mental health breakdown and in working with my own depression, I have had moments where I felt the need to disengage from the world of politics. I felt overwhelmed and unable to hold that kind of knowledge or do that kind of engaged work. And that is ok, we all need space sometimes, we all need a break, and too often we don't take breaks when they are really needed. As I deal more with my mental health issues and as I engage in the world around me now, I feel an urgency about the need to do both political work and "personal" mental health work at the same time.

I see how much of the political work we need to do is actually psychological in nature – we need to change our thinking; we need to change how the western world thinks. This is the fundamental base line of real change and our political actions do not often address this level of change. Mental health and global health, personal and collective well-being must come together, must emerge at the same time. Our world so often separates and sees things as isolated; we must recognize the fallacy in this way of thinking if we are going to foster both personal and global health and create true change.

&

• Looking to Those Who Have Been Here Before:
Miriam Greenspan, Joanna Macy, & Sarah Conn

The work and writing of these three women address many of the questions I am asking about mental health, the state of the world, and activism. I have learned a lot from them and I want to share a bit about them and their work because I think that the radical/anti-authoritarian/activist community can benefit from the work they have done. As someone coming out of the anarchist community, I did not find their work until I started studying psychology. But I think it translates – they are very radical in their work and we would do well to take to heart some of their ideas – we could benefit from the stories of the paths they have already traveled.

Miriam Greenspan is a psychotherapist who is well know for her feminist views on women and therapy which she wrote about in a book called *A New Approach to Women and Therapy* in 1983. Her more recent work is called *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (2004). Joanna Macy has been an activist for four decades – she is known as a Buddhist scholar and eco-philosopher – and she facilitates workshops that help people "transform despair and apathy, in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, into constructive, collaborative action" (from her website). See the end of this 'zine and it's bibliography for info on her books. Sarah Conn is a clinical psychologist who writes and teaches about ecopsychology. She has a psychotherapy practice and lectures at Harvard.

Where their work has lead me in my thoughts about activism & mental health:

"Look into the pain of the world and you find your own private pain writ large. Look into your heart and you find the broken heart of the world." Miriam Greenspan

Conn (1995) speaks well when she says, "The Earth hurts; it needs healing; it is speaking through us; and it speaks the loudest through the most sensitive of us" (in Roszak, p. 171). I believe activists are some of the most sensitive of us. We are often what Greenspan (2004) calls "carriers;" as carriers "our emotional experience is responsive to others" (p. 215), we tend to be the ones who are empathic and the ones who emote. I believe that activists are emotional carriers on a global scale; they are carriers reacting to the problems of the world.

The opposite of a carrier is a bystander. A bystander is emotionally detached and "objective". Greenspan (2004) explains further, "In the extreme, the bystander is so numb to his own pain and /or the pain of others that his moral sense, which is intimately related to the ability to feel, is profoundly impaired" (p. 221). We live in a bystander culture, a culture of denial, detachment, and avoidance. "The bystander system perpetuates itself through a kind of unconscious collective consensus: to avoid and deny the emotional truths that would threaten or destabilize the system" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 232); further, "We live in a bystander system that relies on emotional dissociation – the separation of empathic emotion from awareness and action" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 234).

As activists, we work against this kind of apathy, yet we must be careful not to fall prey to our own version of stagnant emotions, numbness, and disconnection. Activists are carriers in a bystander world and the toll can be menacing; "carriers are at high risk for feeling emotionally overwhelmed and depleted; for high rates of depression and mind/body ailments, and for being psychiatrically diagnosed, trivialized, or punished by larger systems steeped in emotional denial" (Greenspan, 2004, p.218 - - 219.)

In the fallout of my own mental health struggles, I have been looking at our community to see why we are often at high risk for the ailment's Greenspan speaks of. We have the tendency to disregard our own problems and emotions as we focus on outward activist work. Our bias toward exclusively focusing outward can lead to severe burnout and emotional exhaustion. Ultimately, I think that the issues activists face come together in one concept - connectedness. When we or our communities are ailing it is often due to a lack of connectedness - we can get disconnected from ourselves, our emotions, the ground of why we are doing activist work, and our larger communities.

Conn (1990) talks about "direct experience - the ability to feel and to engage rather than to become numb and dulled" (p. 169). I believe that this is an area in which we are often lacking. In our frantic campaigns and actions, aspects of direct experience are pushed aside and neglected. It seems to me that we are not really engaged in emotional responsiveness to the issues we are working on. Activists, like the dominant culture, often intellectualize problems and therefore separate from the direct experience of the emotions that these issues bring up. Indeed, in this regard we are no different than the culture and possibly

worse in that "most of us are overly cerebral about feelings" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 21). In our efforts to be effective change-makers, we often separate ourselves from our feelings in order to be seen as rational or "correct". Macy (1998) calls this the "fear of appearing weak and emotional," explaining that our culture emphasizes the divorce of reason from emotion, recognizes only that which is seen as "objective," and disregards anything seen as "subjective" (pp. 30 -31). Greenspan (2004) similarly relates this as "the shadow of the great divide between reason and emotion - the head/heart split in which the western world, since Plato, has been schooled" (p. 63). Despite our critiques of the dominant culture, activists are influenced by this deeply imbedded way of thinking. Conn (1990) offers additional thoughts to this line of thinking:

Much of the burnout that occurs...in social change organizations occurs because there is no acknowledgment of the powerful emotions involved in living as part of a threatened world and working to save it. Indeed, one of the central barriers to constructive initiatives for social change is the taboo on public expression or even acknowledgement of these emotions. Breaking through the taboo and harnessing the power of our emotional connections is essential work to be done...(p.174)

Radical activists have not yet fully broken through this cultural taboo and we would do well to take Conn's words to heart.

If we are out of touch with our emotions and do not respond to the world, each other, or ourselves with emotional intelligence, then we are disconnected. Ultimately this leads to isolation and despair: "emotional information that could transform the system ends up being internalized by the carrier" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 218). Macy (1998) says that often activist "view their own despair as counterproductive to their efforts. They take no time to mourn...The consequent and continual repression of feelings takes a toll on their energies that leaves them vulnerable to bitterness, depression, exhaustion, and illness" (p. 37). Internalized and disregarded, despair can then become personal depression, held by us individually we then lose touch with the bigger picture, with ourselves, and with our communities. Macy (1998) clearly states "Yet of all the dangers we face, from climatic change to nuclear wars, none is so great as the deadening of our response" (p. 24). Emotional responsiveness to intense feelings like despair can be powerful and can fuel our activism if acknowledge and constructively held; "our emotional responsiveness releases energy for action" (Conn, 1990, p.164). Being in touch with the direct experience of the work we are doing and being emotional

responsive to our experience is important for us personally in terms of mental health and well-being and for our continued and truly sustainable activism.

"The pain of the world is carried in our bodies and hearts. Locked away, this pain can harm us – emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Consciously liberated in community, it moves us to a deeper sense of connection and compassion, helping us to heal not only ourselves but our environment." Miriam Greenspan
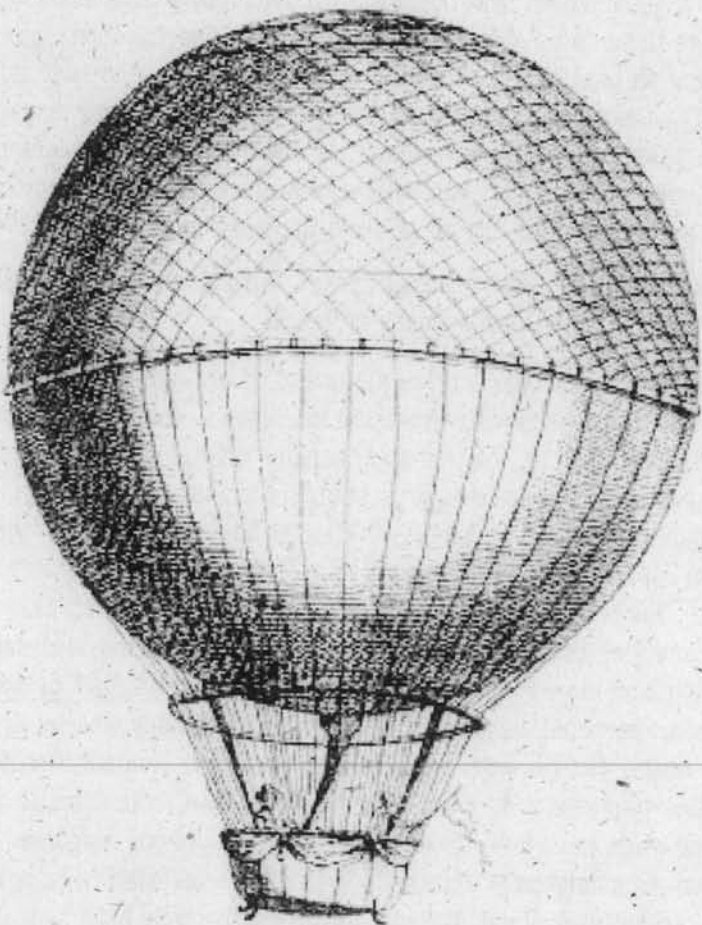
• Building A Culture of Connection as Activists •
By Jenna Goldin and Karen Hixson

"[Revolution] is a path of growth, empowerment, and organization, seeking the healing within us that we also seek for the world."
-Mark Andersen
All the Power: Revolution Without Illusion. 2004.

It took a little more than 20 months for the Redstockings[1], the original group of radical feminist consciousness-raisers, to split in 1970, over issues of separatism, elitism and expansion. Despite decades of knowledge and experience, countless activists leave their work due to group dynamics. As activist organizations struggle with infighting and burnout, the global socio-economic system continues to thrive despite the number of people outraged over human rights violations, animal cruelty and environmental destruction. With that said, where do we go from here? We have concluded that the best place to start is with ourselves and the people closest to us. Our work is grounded in the belief that connections with other people are the source of growth for all people and disconnections are the source of major problems.[2] We feel that in order for the work of grassroots organizations and activists to be sustainable, they must adopt what Steven Chase, the founding director of the Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Programs at Antioch University New England calls, "psychologically smart activism."

The Path Here

In May, we presented a workshop in Portland, Oregon, titled: "Disconnection and Burnout in Activist Communities: Tools for Sustainability and Hope." Forty people showed up, anxious to share their activist experiences with each other. The idea for the workshop grew from our personal experiences with disconnection and burnout as activists, social workers and humans trying to create healthy, interpersonal relationships in our communities. Our histories combined with a shared interest in progressive theories on communication and relationships inspired us to explore ways to use this information to support fellow activists.

Karen: I noticed over the years that the research I have done in psychology and therapy had huge implications for social justice and activist work. After 14 months as an advocate-activist for sexual assault victims, I was so burnt out and traumatized I could not do it anymore. Many would say that is par for the course, but I question our acceptance of unhealthy work environments, conditions and dynamics that manifest more negative symptoms.

Jenna: As a newcomer to Portland, I joined a political collective in an attempt to establish a community and gain self-confidence. Unfortunately, over time a lot of unhealthy interpersonal dynamics unfolded within the group. As sexism, ageism, educational elitism, information hording and misogyny reared their ugly heads, meetings became a chore and communication dissipated. These factors resulted in disconnection, miscommunication and a general loss of energy, culminating in the collective's demise. Ultimately, our inability to create and maintain healthy, mutually-empowering relationships with one another was the source of the problem. Upon reaching this conclusion I began to draw parallels to other organizations where burnout, isolation and infighting appeared to be commonplace. This prompted me to ask the question, if we cannot communicate effectively with those whom we share personal interests and political analyses with, how are we going to make our work get long-term, far-reaching, sustainable way?

Battling the Culture of Disconnection

It is important to acknowledge the culture of disconnection we live in, in order to understand disconnections within activist groups. By accounting for our cultural framework, it becomes clear that we are not personally flawed for having difficulties in our groups. The history of stratification in the United States dates back to colonialism. In Constructing The Self: Constructing America, Philip Cushman writes, "The 19th century American white identity strategy was based on the psychological processes used to define "the other". It is difficult for the young, increasingly diverse nation to develop a consensus as to what "the self" was. It was easier to develop a sense of what the self was not—the supposedly lazy, stupid 'negro' or the supposedly heathen, savage Indian.[3] The "us versus them" dichotomy reflects a power dynamic perpetuated by Western capitalism in order to keep people divided and disempowered. It is manufactured, sold and bought throughout the United States; and with the advent of globalization, throughout the world. Thus, it is extremely important to bring this awareness to our interactions. This may assist us in reducing power struggles, competition and unnecessary hierarchies. In doing so, we strengthen our relationships and increase the potential for authentic connection.

In Connection, Comrades

A group is nothing more than a collection of relationships. If those relationships are strong and nurturing, the group will last longer and do more substantial work. Time invested in making the group healthier and more supportive of its members will pay off in increased productivity and decreased dropout rates.[4]

The knowledge we are sharing with others comes from many sources, including Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). According to the theory, the goal of development is not forming a separated, independent self, but the ability to participate actively in relationships that foster the well-being of everyone involved.[5] During our workshop, we try to both raise awareness of the importance of community and encourage participants to think about and value connections. We pose questions like: "What is happening, in the interaction, when you feel connected to others," and, "When have you felt inspired by activist work? How did you feel and what did you notice about the other people you were working with?" These questions enable participants to explore and name the feelings associated with their relationships, both inside and outside of activism. As activists, we don't often take the time and space to name our feelings. Instead, we plow through our work, putting our needs aside in order to "get shit done." In All the Power: Revolution Without Illusion, Mark Andersen asserts, "We are not here simply as sacrifices on the altar of some revolution made for others, we are precious parts of the world we seek to wrap our arms around, to protect, to nourish, to build."[6] In line with fellow activists and educators like Mark Andersen and Pattrice Jones, we stress the importance of identifying, developing and maintaining mutually-empowering relationships as a way to nourish ourselves, our groups and those we are trying to support with our work.

As we move into authentic connections with the people in our lives, we will find more common ground with them, leading us toward an enlarged sense of community and possibilities for social change.[7]

Heal Those Disconnections

Disconnections are easy to identify. We all have experience with encounters that lead us to feel cut off, shut down and isolated. We came up with a brief list entitled, "When Do I Feel Disconnected From Others?", to explore disconnection; here are a few examples:

I feel disconnected when...
-the conversation is shut down by defensiveness/criticism/judgment

-the other person(s) is checked out, bored or ignoring me
-my ideas are discredited or rejected
-people are taking up too much space
-people go to others without talking to me about a problem first

It seems that these examples along with other forms of disconnection may be what caused the Redstockings to deteriorate. However, with disconnection comes the opportunity for reconnection, which is what happened in 1973, when veterans of the original Redstockings reformed and incorporated themselves as a non-profit educational and scientific organization. Too often, the culture discourages us from healing difficulties in our relationships and our groups. With the intention of moving forward, we often shrink away from bringing up difficult issues. At our last workshop, we were energized by the number of people motivated to find practical solutions that would strengthen the dynamics of their groups. The healing process is the most exciting component of our work. The ability to reconnect, to be resilient in relationship, to move back into connection to see if mutual growth-enhancing relatedness can be reestablished is one of the most important skills one can develop.[8]

Following the lead of Judith Jordan and others, we are suggesting a list of practical methods for transforming disconnection in personal relationships;

1. Ask yourself if there is a possibility for growth or mutuality in the relationship
2. Name the disconnection in a non-accusatory way
3. Locate your role in the disconnection and take responsibility for it
4. Hear the other person's sense of what is going on
5. Collectively study the variables that influenced the disconnection
6. Jointly make a commitment to improve the relationship

The list is not complete without acknowledging that relationships are living things and must be continuously nourished. In doing so, our work will thrive, grow and change for years to come.

On Hope

I was deeply moved and inspired by a recent prison update from Andy of the SHAC 7. As he sits in a federal penitentiary in North Carolina serving 3 years for simply being an activist, he chants out to us, "They have not killed me...I don't even have the wind knocked out of me." It is more important now than ever to mobilize, to stay together, to maintain hope and to continue to do our work, for humans, for animals and for the environment. We look forward to sharing our work with other activists and to being impacted by their stories, their hope and our mutual desire to change the existing system.

Unless we are to settle for compartmentalized, incomplete personal "revolutions" that don't really affect the larger societal structures, values and relationships of power, we need each other. We must be willing to stretch toward one another, to trust and believe that coalition is not only possible, but ultimately necessary.[9]

Please keep in touch. Contact Karen and Jenna at rctportland@gmail.com Thanks!

Footnotes

1 The Redstockings were one of the influential, but short-lived, radical feminist groups from the Sixties. They produced many of the expressions and actions that have become household words to people in the United States, including; "Sisterhood is Powerful", "Consciousness-Raising" and "The Personal is the Political".
2 Jean Baker Miller and Maureen Walker. The Complexity of Connection. 129. 2004.
3 Philip Cushman. Constructing the Self: Constructing America. 40-1. 1995.
4 Pattrice Jones. Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World. 138. 2006.
5 Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver. The Healing Connection. 22. 1997.
6 Mark Andersen. All the Power: Revolution Without Illusion. 218. 2004.
7 The Healing Connection. 23.
8 Judith Jordan. The Complexity of Connection. 58.
9 All the Power: Revolution Without Illusion. 87.

• Where Despair & Hope Meet •

I have been thinking about these two words a lot lately. I often oscillate between the two, dwelling from time to time in each realm – full of despair or full of hope. But recently I have come to see how related these two seemingly opposite concepts really are.

The dictionary defines these terms as polar opposites:
Hope is "the belief or expectation that something wished for can or will happen."
Despair is "to give up as beyond hope or expectation; to be hopeless." Yet, as we see in both Miriam Greenspan and Joanna Macy's work, hope can actually be rooted in the transformative power of despair.

First, despair –
Greenspan (2004) says that despair is "fundamentally related to social conditions and how we make meaning out of suffering and pain;" that despair is "a journey to the dark inner core of our banished selves and our failure to create a humane world" (p. 125).

Despair "is virtually taboo in our society. Feeling this bad in a feel-good culture is transgressive; it goes against the grain in a culture of denial" (Greenspan, 2004, p.124). Hopelessness is also taboo, most especially in political circles.

I often think that we are distracting ourselves from a very real yet denied awareness of our collective despair about the state of the world (and I think this happens both in the dominant culture and in activist circles). One of the first Western thinkers to acknowledge this kind of despair was Joanna Macy who has been facilitating groups around "despair and empowerment work" for the last 30 years. Macy (1991) attests that apathy "stems from a fear of confronting the despair that lurks subliminally beneath the tenor of life-as-usual" (p. 15). Macy (1991) defines despair through more of an environmental filter that Greenspan: "as it is being experienced by increasing numbers of people across a broad spectrum of society, despair is the loss of the assumption that this species will inevitably pull through" (p. 17). But both of these women recognize that despair "is a healthy normal human response to the situation we find ourselves in" (Macy, 1991, p. 16) and that "the wake-up call of despair beckons us not only to personal but to social transformation" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 133).

Grief, fear, and despair are what Greenspan calls "the dark emotions." She acknowledges that "the dark emotions ask us to act in some way" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 85). She councils "To sit with despair, we must find practices that allow us to tolerate our emotional state and surrender to it consciously" (Greenspan, 2004, p. 85). What would happen if we learned how to sit with what Greenspan calls "the dark emotions"? The potential power of simply acknowledging the fact that many of us feel despair about the state of the world could spur on revolutionary change. Nevertheless, without learning how to deal with or hold that despair, many of us, myself included, may find ourselves trapped in cycles of narcissistic depression and inaction. Despair, given the attention it needs and held in mindfulness, can give us the "strength needed to sustain a life of action" (Nhat Hanh, 1991, p. 99).

Macy (1991) defiantly asserts, "The first step in despair work is to disabuse ourselves of the notion that grief for our world is morbid" (p. 21). If we can unashamedly acknowledge despair and learn how to sit with and hold it, we can then do something about it. Rather than overwhelm us, despair, paired with the right tools, can then be the impetus we need to take action to make change in this world.

Now, hope –
Derrick Jensen has examined the idea of hope and given this word an altered definition; he says that "hope is longing for a future condition over which you have no agency; it means you are essentially powerless;" he goes on to say that "When we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer have to 'hope' at all. We simply do the work...we do whatever it takes...when hope dies, action begins." (pp. 2 - 3, Orion article).

Rebecca Solnit (2004), in her little book, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, gives a lot of though to hope: "In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch declares, 'Fraudulent hope is one of the greatest malefactors, even enervators, of the human race, concretely genuine hope its most dedicated benefactor' and speaks of 'informed discontent which belongs to hope, because they both arise out of No to deprivation'" (p. 13). Solnit goes on to acknowledge that fraudulent hope "is hope that paralyzes people's ability to rebel, to reject, to critique, to demand, and to make change...false hope is not so far from despair, for both can be paralyzing. But despair can be liberating...Doors might be nearby, but blind hope keeps you from locating them; in this geography, despair can be fruitful, can turn you away from the wall...and lead to the location of alternatives...In this way, despair and hope are linked" (pp. 13 – 14).

Despair can be empowering, often more so than hope. Despair is a sign of love, fierce love for that which is being destroyed, and when we allow ourselves to actually feel despair rather than guard against it at all costs, we also feel that fierce love and we take action to defend that which is being destroyed. Action disconnected from our deep despair about the state of the world is disconnected from vision and outcome and, in this sense, it is actually defeatist. We need despair to really connect to what we are working to save and to really connect to a vision of the world we are trying to create.

We don't need to wish, we don't need to cling to hope, here we are in this beautiful, messed up world and here we live out our days doing what we can, intimately connected in each moment to both hope and despair. How can we not be enveloped in both of those ideas in each breath of our lungs and each movement on this green-blue planet?

Acknowledged, transformative despair looks a lot like what hope ought to be.

"There is so much to be done, and the time is so short. We can proceed, of course, out of grim and angry desperation. But the tasks proceed more easily and productively with a measure of thankfulness for life; it links us to our deeper powers and lets us rest in them."

~Joanna Macy

• The Psychology of Social Change; or, why doesn't this seem to be working? •

We go on, despite the nagging feeling that the leviathan we are battling is winning and that we are etching out an existence on the edges, in the shadows and deep valleys of this beast. We go to yet another demo, another action, another meeting...and where is it getting us?

There are a couple of angles I want to explore here – both how the dominant culture seems apathetic and resistant to social change and how activist communities tend towards negative, defeatist, and self-sabotaging thinking.

Our world often breeds psychic numbing (desensitization and reduced emotional responsiveness) which leads to denial and other defense mechanisms (which I will explore below). These terms are important concepts to explore as their reach is obviously wide in the world and their outcome is apathy and inaction. I want to explore these concepts further because I just cannot bring myself to believe that most people want to be closed off from the world. As Joanna Macy (1991) says, "What looks like apathy is really the fear of suffering" (p. 191). I actually believe that all people are at some level aware of the pain in the world and feel despair for the state of things – many are just accomplished at steeling themselves against these feelings.

So why are we (and "them" – the dominant culture) doing stuff that hurts the planet, other people, and, in turn, ourselves? We know that our lifestyles are not sustainable (to varying degrees of course but I am speaking in generalities here), yet we keep on living in these unsustainable ways. What's going on here? Why are we so blocked from making real change?

Ironically, Freud is the one I turn to first when trying to figure this out. His concept of defense mechanisms – the ways we defend ourselves against really acknowledging the uncomfortable consequences of our actions - is so relevant to this line of questions. And there are a lot of defense mechanisms, here are just a few to think about. A quick list: **rationalization** is an attractive but untrue explanation of our behavior, i.e. but I needed that new...; **suppression** is a conscious attempt to put anxiety-producing thoughts out of our mind, it's when we actively try to think about something else, hence our cultures obsession

with entertainment; **repression** is the unconscious form of suppression, when – without even consciously trying - we don't even see what's going on around us, the US media helps with this by keeping us ignorant of much that is happening in the world; **denial** is when we insist that the anxiety provoking information isn't true or doesn't exist at all and this defense carries an undercurrent of irritation, impatience, and anger. The following three defense mechanisms are the ones that I think activists need to think the most about: **intellectualization** is when we distance ourselves from problems by describing them in abstract, intellectual terms, aren't most of us, especially activists, experts at this?...; **projection** is when we see things in others that we fail to see in ourselves, this is when we get judgmental, righteous and hostile about something to the point where we might need to look at ourselves and see what is ringing true in ourselves that is making us so irritated; finally we have **sublimation**, considered the healthiest of defense mechanisms, this is when we channel our anxiety into projects, community work, creativity and the like – often this is healthy, productive, and rewarding but I think we need to be aware of sublimation becoming almost addictive, when we are putting so much energy out into projects or activism that we run the risk of burnout – in the dominant culture this might be called "workaholic" (this list is compiled from Winter & Koger, 2004, pp. 33 – 39).

These ideas and terms are widely used in the culture but I find it is helpful to stop and think about the implications of these defense mechanisms from time to time – only when we hold them consciously can we begin to break them down. And this can battle the mass psychology of numbness, denial, dissociation, and disconnection that often seems to surround us.

Now I want to turn to the psychology of activist cultures (though I am seeing that in many ways activists and the "dominant" culture grapple with the same issues) – something which I am just beginning to delve into and think about. I can't claim to really understand this much at all but I want to throw some ideas out there to broach the topic. Often the defense mechanisms I explored above also touch those of us in activist communities. I know that I struggle with alternating levels of suppression and psychic numbing – especially when I am dealing with depression, which is of course at least partly due to the information in the world that I am trying to suppress or am feeling overwhelmed and numb about – it's a vicious cycle.

I think that there are some other things going on in activists circles too. I get soooo frustrated by the way that activists think sometimes – oscillating from

defeatist to righteous in a split second, throw in some blame and anger, mix it with feelings of persecution and paranoia and we have a potent formula for disaster. Ok, I'm being extreme and I'm looking at the negative side of things right now but I do see each of these things quite often in the activist "scene". And I want to combat it with fierce love and passion, gratitude and centeredness, connection and awareness, longevity and perseverance.

In my frustration, I found this book by Rebecca Solnit (2004) in which she is working with similar thoughts; she opens her book "...I want to propose a new vision of how change happens; I want to count a few of the victories that get overlooked; I want to assess the wildly changed world we inhabit; I want to throw out the crippling assumptions with which many activist proceed" (p.6). Hallelujah! Solnit looks at how defeatist activists can be – how negative and closed to the possibility that even if we do not have "victory" that we are indeed making some headway. "Victory" may not be instantaneous; we may be looking at things wrong or we may be closed off by narrow expectations and limited vision. Solnit (2004) says that we have to recognize that our "victories may come as subtle, complex, slow changes instead" and that we need to "count them anyway" (p. 25). She points to another sticking point I often see in the frequent gloom and doom of activist rhetoric: "Resistance is usually portrayed as a duty but it can be a pleasure, an education, a revelation" (p. 68) and, wisely, "Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism" (p. 17).

I encourage you to read this book, especially chapter 14 where Solnit (2004) says "Perfection is a stick with which to beat the possible. Perfectionists can find fault with anything, and no one has higher standards in this regard than radicals" (p. 81). If we demand perfection then nothing will even happen, no one will ever do anything because they are waiting to be perfect or all-knowing – isn't this what so often keeps people from being activists - a fear that they don't know enough or aren't good enough somehow? Let's put down that too often wielded stick and rummage through the toolbox: "Activism...is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs – even if it's a temporary and local place, this paradise of participating, this vale where souls get made" (Solnit, 2004, p. 87). Obviously, I got a lot out of Solnit's beautiful book.

Another book I've been reading (are you surprised?) is Michael Lerner's *Surplus Powerlessness* which I think can give us some more clues about the ways that activists (and the dominant culture too) can get mired in myopic and negative thinking, why we can be accosted by defeatist thinking, why we deal with burnout. Lerner (1999) explores the idea that apart from real powerlessness – the very real situation of oppression, what he calls "the actuality of an unequal distribution of power in this society" (p. 14) – there is another kind of power dynamic at work here – what he calls surplus powerlessness. Lerner defines this as such:

> But apart from this real powerlessness, our encounters with real powerlessness are often misinterpreted in ways that make us think of ourselves as even more powerless than we really are. This is what I mean by Surplus Powerlessness – the ways that we see ourselves as lacking the real power, limited though it is, that we really do have. It is our Surplus Powerlessness that keeps us from making the changes that we actually could make. (p. 3)

I think this is a huge key in understanding the blocks we encounter in trying to make real social change. "When we feel powerless for any extended length of time, we tend to become more willing to accept parts of the world we would otherwise reject" (Lerner, 1999, p. 2); this is intimately connected to the way that psychic numbing and defense mechanisms also work against social change.

Lerner equates this concept of Surplus Powerlessness with stress and self-blame. He looks at the profound ways in which stress impacts our lives – he focuses on occupational stress, but the implications reach out into the realm of activism and community involvement. Lerner (1999) focuses on "'toxic stress'—stress that is not normal and which cannot be easily accommodated to by your body" and notes that key characteristics of toxic stress are that the source of stress is hard to identify and it persists with no clear beginning or end (p. 23 - 24). I find a lot of truth in his statement that "Toxic stress is a central feature of contemporary advanced industrial societies, and it is the reason that those societies face specific kinds of physical health problems" (Lerner, 1999, p. 24). Of most significance for this discussion, Lerner points out that "stress is the way people experience their powerlessness" and that "stress is a social phenomenon" (p. 24). From my own personal experience I know that stress and depression are linked in my mental health struggles and that their periodic control over me can be seen as leading to feelings of powerlessness – hence my need to "drop out" of activism (and to isolate from people) when I was dealing with that first episode of severe depression.

"The negative impact of chronic stress is often accompanied and worsened

by the presence of self-blaming. Self-blaming is a central way that Surplus Powerlessness gets affixed to Real Powerlessness—it is one of the most important psychological dynamics that tie us to a world of oppression" (Lerner, 1999, p.32); Lerner goes on to discuss how self-blaming is connected to the very American idea of meritocracy, the idea that our ability determines our position in the world, which of course in a world of oppression is a fallacy. Yet that is not how we are taught to think. Even if we reject the concept, it is still deceptively easy for us to internalize the idea that we deserve what we get or that we are just not good enough to "make it". Despite our intentions, we may think we are just not working hard enough to make social change, that we create the stress or mental health issues that affect us, that we are failures - and we become caught in a negative cycle of self-blame and defeatist thinking.

"It is critical to see that the surplus always is conditioned by the real. When we get too far away from understanding the real powerlessness in any situation, we end up blaming the victim" (Lerner, 1999, p.16). Lerner has brought us to another phenomenon that I also see in activist communities — blame and scapegoating. We have already looked at self-blame, which can take a heavy toll. But I think that in close activist projects, collectives, affinity groups, we can also fall into blaming those we are supposed to be allies with. I know I can do this — and it's a deceptive trap. We can get our frustration out by unconstructively critiquing others and foisting our negative feelings about a situation — or about the world — onto someone in a group who becomes a scapegoat. I've seen it often in collectives — and I admit to not being "above it" myself. It is easier to blame or scapegoat someone than it is to really figure out the complexity of the world we are trying to make change in or really deal with interpersonal dynamics. Hence, scapegoating, a tool that is so often used by the dominant culture (i.e. our culture's current favorite — all Muslims are terrorists) turns in on our activist groups. Scapegoating is a scary cultural phenomenon that sometimes festers in activist communities.

And one last point in relation to Lerner:
"The huge emotional energy that gets put into repressing the alienation, self-blaming and anger that we experience...leaves us too little energy to develop emotional connectedness" (Lerner, 1999, p. 90); this relates back to emotional connectedness and activism which I was discussing previously.

Psychic numbing, defense mechanisms, defeatist thinking, perfectionism, surplus powerlessness, self-blame, toxic stress, scapegoating - these are all huge issues of which I have just scratched the surface in my attempt to get a deeper understanding of what is going on here and why social change seems so elusive. I will continue to grasp at these concepts and how they relate to activists communities. Feel free to help me along, redirect me, or add a new dimension to this inquiry.
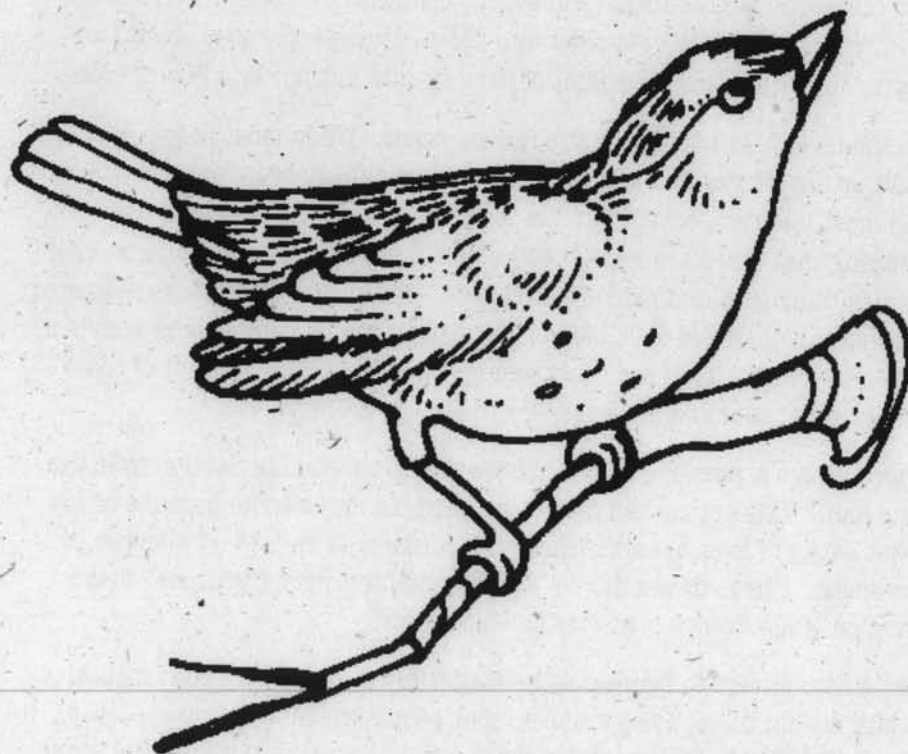
• Questions About Burnout & Aging in the Activist Scene •

By PB Floyd

One of the key weaknesses holding back the radical activist scenes I've been involved with is the speed with which people either burn out or leave the scene. Over the 24 years I've primarily identified as an "activist", I've seen almost every person I've worked with in the scene eventually "move on." It's not easy for me to tell if these folks have "burned out" – become overwhelmed or frustrated so that they reject activism entirely to lead some kind of "mainstream" life – or whether they've just left my particular corner of the activist scene to join some different kind of activist scene. What I do know is that the scene I participate in – – characterized by a direct action, anarchist, deep ecology, do-it-yourself, non-hierarchical orientation – seems to maintain a constant average age of 23 years old, while I get older and older. Most people stay about two years. There are just a handful of participants in their late 30s or older.

On one level, this holds back the radical scene. When most people who build up experience leave, groups have to constantly re-invent the wheel. The most talented, energetic folks tend to start groups and then drop out, meaning that there are many new projects, yet few that continue on long enough to mature and gain effectiveness. The scene sorely lacks seasoned people. It sometimes feels like an activist playpen – youth-based activism that never takes itself seriously enough to expand into the type of mass movement that would be necessary to change society.

There is also a personal cost for those few of us who stay active over the long haul. This article has been very hard for me to write because of my great sense of loss, abandonment and isolation as an "older" member of the scene. I have to wonder "is there something wrong with me" that I hang on while everyone around me moves on?

While I would like to figure out the magic key to promoting good mental health within the activist scene so that people would stay longer – stay engaged their whole lives and move through life's stages within the scene – I have to wonder whether I am able to stay involved precisely because I lack good mental health. In other words, is it only people too crazy to deal with "real life" that stay connected to the activist scene?

No. Although I sometimes doubt myself, I think continued participation in my activist scene is not crazy on my part nor is it pointless in terms of promoting social change. I want to try to figure out why I haven't burned out or left the scene – and why some of the other old-timers have stayed – and see if in understanding how this is possible, the scene could gain insights to help more people stick around for longer periods. The scene needs to think about this and figure out how we can make life-long activist participation a viable, reasonable, and more-common life choice. While there has recently been some discussion of mental illness within the scene, I haven't seen much discussion of the non-pathological psychological aspects of involvement in activist circles. What, if anything, can the radical scene do so more people can maintain involvement over a longer period?

Why do I stay active?

In thinking about my own activism, I can see a positive reason I stay active and a negative reason I stay active. On the negative side, I can't imagine feeling my life balanced and meaningful if I wasn't engaged in struggle to change social reality. Part of the process of my joining the activist scene was coming to terms with the depth of social problems that exist and the need to actively address these problems. In my case, I started by feeling fear of nuclear weapons, and that awareness lead me to learn about militarism, racism, sexism, capitalism, and environmental crisis. Once I became aware of all of these problems, I found that I couldn't turn off this awareness – I couldn't repress my understanding and concern, and I couldn't feel okay unless I was engaged in some form of struggle to address these problems. I call this a negative reason to be active because it is in some way related to guilt and "should" energy. I don't think the awareness of social problems alone forms the basis for activism – most of the people I know who are not actively engaged in social change work are just as aware of these social problems as am I.

The positive reason that I stay active has something to do with the exciting, rewarding experiences I have because I'm plugged into the activist scene. The activist scene is a community as much as it is a collection of groups, tactics, politics, micro-institutions and rituals. I get a lot out of the community – social contacts, social interaction, and a sense of meaning in my life. I think a key in my ability to participate in the activist scene over the long term is figuring out how to participate in a balanced fashion. While the activist scene provides some rewards, it can also consume a huge amount of one's time and energy and make you feel like your energy is going

into a black hole if you don't figure out how to participate in a balanced way.

One thing I hear a lot is that people who leave the activist scene felt forced to make a choice between staying involved and getting to live their lives. For example, they didn't feel like they could both stay in the scene and have a serious relationship, have a non-shit job, raise a child, or develop gracefully through adulthood. There is an unspoken assumption that "serious" activism involves a large degree of personal martyrdom – – that serious activists must give up their individual life so they can devote their lives to the cause.

I feel conflicted about this issue. It is true that many activists make a choice in staying engaged in the activist scene – we do give up something. For example, if you make activist work central in your life, you may end up with less money, less security, potentially less privacy, and possibly less of some forms of comfort. Yet it seems clear to me that most long-term activists are able to stay engaged precisely because we don't feel like our activism is mostly based on giving up – we don't feel that we have to martyr ourselves. Our main experience of staying engaged is not focused on what we may have given up. In fact, in discussing this article with other long-term activists, one thing that keeps coming up is an awareness of what we gain – not what we lose – by staying engaged in the activist scene. For example, we gain adventure, a sense of freedom and self-determination, enhanced satisfaction, more diversity in our lives, as well as community, a sense of purpose and belonging to something greater than ourselves.

A big factor driving people to leave the activist scene is the myth that staying connected will be more personally costly than is really the case. We need to undermine the sense that there are only costs to long-term activism – time, energy and life options that must be sacrificed with nothing that comes back. I've noticed that some activists get an odd sense of personal worth by playing up the activist martyr myth - - emphasizing how much they have given up to be part of the scene. It would be useful to figure out why this is a popular psychological tactic and help people avoid this strategy. I've found that many of the people who play up their martyrdom the most are the first ones to leave the scene – to burn out. They have no sense of personal balance and eventually, living a life based solely on sacrifice becomes too much. These most "hard-core" yet short-term activists set an unhealthy psychological tone that drives

out many others who – quite reasonably – do not want to give up their lives for the cause.

While the activist scene can try to break down the myth of martyrdom, we can play up the sense of community that does, in fact, exist within the activist scene.

Thinking about activism

Another factor that I believe drives many people away from long-term activist involvement is a sense that their activism is not making any difference. A person who joins the activist scene for a year or two is unlikely to witness noticeable social change as a direct result of their efforts – social change is a highly complex, historical process, not an instant gratification process where cause and effect are transparent.

Since activism is work and requires people to make choices and possibly give up some other activities, many people conclude that it is sensible on a personal level to leave the uncertain activist scene for more certain rewards elsewhere.

When I look at my ability to maintain activism over the long-term, I think my personal resolution of this problem is important in avoiding my own personal frustration and burnout. Permit me to share my analysis. I have the sense that my activism may make a difference because I have accepted the reality that it MAY NOT make a difference and I'm okay with that on a fundamental level. The internal story I tell myself at times of doubt is that I know – from reading history – that social change has happened and that people make change happen. I know that some movements have succeeded, and that others have failed, and that those involved at the time never knew

whether they would succeed or fail or even be crushed and killed. For instance, Rosa Parks is a household name for refusing to stand up on the bus, but for each Rosa Parks, many others resisted and were not successful. Although no one ever knows at the time whether their action will succeed or fail, it is obvious that if all those historical figures hadn't made the effort or taken the trouble – if they had assumed that their efforts wouldn't work – nothing would have changed. Only by all of these people assuming that their efforts MIGHT work did things change.

I think the activist scene has to openly deal with the fact that we are involved in a historical process and that we will never know whether any of our activities will directly result in the social change we desire. We need to find ways to grapple with the uncertainty of our actions so people won't feel so defeated or discouraged when short-term involvement does not result in noticeable progress. We need to privately conclude and rely on the possibility – but not the certainty – of our activism making a difference. People who look for certainty that their work will make a difference WILL be disappointed and will burn out and leave the activist scene.

The activist scene, in recruiting and somewhere within the consciousness and life of the scene, must help people see this reality. I don't think our main emphasis should be to celebrate successes, because the flip side of that is failure. Rather, we need to figure out ways to memorialize the long-term historical process with which we are engaged and affirm the need to keep on keeping on.

Long-term activists who have stayed engaged over a lifetime can perhaps serve as role models. When I was a teen activist, I remember feeling really impressed and inspired by some of the senior activists I encountered. They had a sense of clarity, history, and no sense of regret over their long-term involvement. I remember that I began imagining what a life in the movement might mean by seeing their life.

Support structures in the activist scene

Many discussions I've participated in within the activist scene blame burnout on the lack of sufficient support structures within the scene: childcare for parents, mental health support for troubled and stressed out participants, and radical social services of every kind.

I question whether this is really the main reason people leave the scene.

For this to be true, one would have to see some way in which people were finding the support that is lacking within the scene somewhere else – in the mainstream society. My sense is that to the extent people sometimes feel isolated and unsupported within the activist scene, there is even less support within mainstream society. At least the activist scene pays lip serve to the idea that communities should be supportive of their members. Despite the constant discussions of how the scene should be more supportive, it is correct that there often isn't much organized "support" from within the activist scene for participants. But I often see examples of informal support and mutual aid within the scene. Parents find some help (maybe not as much as they would like), people going through crisis can find some help (maybe not as much as they need or want) and people who are ill or financially strained get cut a lot of slack. In fact, many activist projects and houses I've observed are full of troubled people that the mainstream society rejects.

Generally, the activist scene is short of resources and energy. In a situation where the scene is barely capable of struggling for social change, it is hard to shift considerable resources towards creating alternative social service institutions focused on the movement's participants. I feel wary of an analysis of the causes of burnout and attrition within the scene that concludes that these problems could be solved if more resources went to support activities. This is easy to say at a meeting or at a skillshare, but as anyone who has tried to keep a long-term project knows, this type of solution would be very hard to keep going with limited resources. This isn't to say that the many types of informal support that naturally arise from community don't provide some important forms of support for the activist scene, just that the burnout issue isn't a matter of whether the scene offers more or less support.

Conclusion

In thinking about burnout from the activist scene, it is important to distinguish between changes individuals make in which they leave a particular activist scene to engage in different forms of struggle, and cases in which individuals who have been activists decide to throw in the towel and cease any form of social change work. Many individuals I know that have left the particular activist scene with which I'm involved have not left the struggle at all – they have just left a direct-action oriented scene in favor of different, perhaps less visible forms of struggle. It is important that activists don't set up narrow definitions of what constitutes activist work that, in effect, define

many people out of activist work who are in fact continuing the struggle in different ways. The social systems we aim to change are so broad and diverse that social change work is needed in all realms with a wide variety of tactics. It is impossible to know which tactics and areas can progress at any particular moment, so it is crucial to have people working in as many different areas as possible. In effect, chipping away at a mountain from all sides. Struggle within the workplace, educational system, mental health system, local government, international trade system, identity politics, military industrial complex – all of these struggles are connected, yet no one individual can struggle in all these areas. There are different scenes struggling in so many areas. And struggle takes many different forms. Activist work can include participation in protests, organizations, collectives and a variety of campaigns – from building community gardens to pressuring corporations to direct action. One really only burns out when one ceases involvement in any of the huge range of social change activities.

My feeling as a long-term activist is that social change isn't above my own life, but that it is part of my life – one of my goals, not a more important goal than any other. So rather than my only goal being my own personal success and satisfaction, I pursue more than one goal at the same time – personal satisfaction and promoting social change. This is not unusual. For example, successful and happy parents are the ones able to simultaneously prioritize their own happiness and the success of their children. They don't always choose one but figure out how to balance both. Long-term activists are most successful and satisfied when we pursue lots of goals in our lives and figure out how each contributes to the others – personal happiness, social change, environmental sustainability, raising the next generation of humanity, participating in families, maintaining social connections and caring for friends, concern for the community, etc. These goals are not really competing – when all are nurtured, each contributes to all the others.

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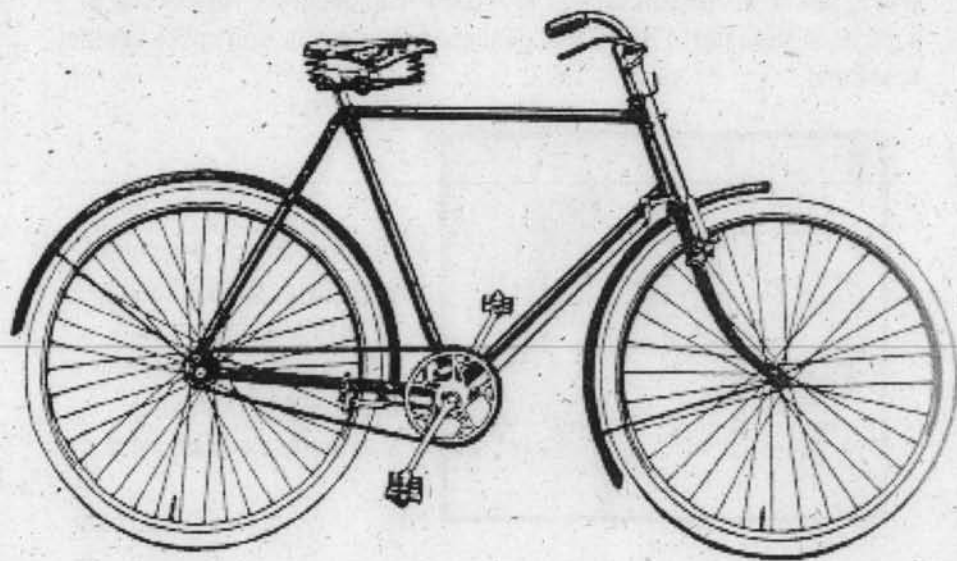
• Inspiring Activists •

I find that, from time to time, I need to remind myself about those who have come before us, those who have stuck with it, those who have persevered despite the often slow nature of cultural and social change. Remembering others who inspire us makes me realize that there is a long history here and I am just a small little part in it all, it evens out what can at times feel like a burden. This makes me feel lighter; I am held by these strong legacies. Two of my favorite inspirations are below.

Ella Baker
December 13, 1903 – December 13, 1986

This is not the first name you might think of when remembering civil rights history, despite the fact that Ella Baker was a major backbone of that movement. Her activist life spans five decades, starting long before the civil rights era and ending well into the 1980's. In the 30's Baker was involved with the Young Negroes Cooperative League, in the 40's she got involved with the NAACP, and in the 50's she worked with King's SCLC. But Baker was more radical then any of these organizations and she did not agree with their focus on charismatic leaders and non-violence. Baker helped to organize SNCC in 1960 and she worked well with young people, both black and white, and treated them as equals - she encouraged group-centered leadership and radical democratic social change. In her later years, Baker worked on the "Free Angela" campaign for Angela Davis, supported the Puerto Rican independence movement, and spoke against apartheid.

"So how do you keep on? I can't help it. I don't claim to have any corner on an answer, but I believe the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on."

~ Ella Baker

Hazel Wolf
March 10, 1898 – January 19, 2000

Hazel Wolf was a long time Seattle activist. Despite her fortitude (she lived to be 101!) and commitment as an activist (in just one phase of her activist career she helped to start 21 of the 26 Audubon Chapters in Washington), she is even lesser known than Ella Baker. In the 30's, Wolf was involved in the WPA, the CP, the Worker's Alliance, and the Federal Theater Project. From 1949 to 1963 the U.S. government tried to deport her as a "subversive foreign radical" – she had been born in Victoria BC. In the mid-60's she became involved in environmental work. She kayaked and hiked all over; when she was 80 she went to the Arctic National Wildlife Refugee in a bush plane! Starting in the late 70's Hazel did tons of coalition building with Native Americans, the Gwitch'n people of Alaska, Wangari Maathai and the Greenbelt Movement of Kenya, the Lacandones of Mexico, and with the labor movement. In her 80's and 90's, she went to Nicaragua five times to support the environmental work of the Sandinistas – she attended conferences, brought medical supplies, and even went to language school. Hazel was an extraordinary woman who lamented that she was recovering from surgery during November of 1999 and could not join the Seattle WTO protests!

"People need to know that their own interest coincides in the long run with the interest of the general community. City-livers all think they're individuals. That's one reason they're unhappy, lonely, and afraid. When they get into a community activity, they're more contented. They discover they're part of something... Individuals may make a difference by initiating a project...After that, if they don't get some allies, they won't make it. It's a collective process."

~ Hazel Wolf

• DIY Emotional Well-being Tips
— from Slingshot Organizer 2008

Standing up against oppression is righteous, but risky, behavior. It's hard work, both physically and emotionally. A much too large percentage of activists burn out and disappear from their communities because the frustrations and injuries from fighting an uphill battle, of which we may never ourselves reap the rewards, can be demoralizing and traumatic. Sharing our feelings about the difficulties of working on the frontlines is a crucial form of solidarity and friendship.

• CRISIS RECOVERY

Society provides few options for people in crisis other than mental hospitals, religion and psychiatric drugs. The value of freedom, love and community do not end when you're in crisis. In fact, they can save your life. The key is empowerment – What do *you* feel really helps?

Examples:

• A mutual support group is simply peers listening to and helping peers as equals — validating, if not "endorsing", feelings. You can learn to form one yourself. Or ask community resource organizations for lists of ongoing groups. Shop around: Some groups push the mainstream, disempowering, medication-based mental health system. Though in a pinch, finding any group may be helpful for validation of your situation if you find yourself without any support.

• Natural nutritional and herbal approaches include vitamins, St. John's Wort, etc. Eat healthy and/or consult an herbalist.

• Practicing meditation or spiritual disciplines may help you relax. (However, joining a cult is not therapeutic, so take care not to have your vulnerability exploited by a seemingly perfectly nice bunch of people who promise to rescue you...)

• Try to remember to breath.

• Ecopsychology is realizing nature and wilderness are our greatest healers. Spend some time outside the city to get centered and get away from pollution which is in itself mind-altering.

• Exercise, dance, biking and physical movement often prove helpful for epression, etc.

• Art, writing a journal, making a zine, playing music, singing, and other forms of personal expression are often safe ways to break the silence with others, and even yourself, about inner pain.

• Acupuncture, massage and other body work can be ways for others to give your whole self some gentle attention.

• Respite: In other words, focus off the crisis and onto what you find joyful for a while, until you can gather more resources.

• Don't neglect your basic human needs: sleep, eating, shelter, fresh air, etc.

• Keep in mind that some current emotional crises may be caused by traumas from the past, which may need to be emotionally and consciously processed in order not to keep recurring.

• Find a counselor who actually supports your self-determination. Ask lots of questions, especially about confidentiality, if someone else — such as your parents, boss, or governmental program — is paying for your therapy.

• There is no shame in using psychiatric drugs if you know they work for you.

• Many communities have 24 hour a day crisis hotlines or crisis centers. You can call 800-SUICIDE if you're thinking about killing yourself or 800 646-HOPE to reach a local rape crisis line for survivors of sexual violence.

• Social change: Actually address the stressful factors in your environment. Revolution can heal.

If you have a loved one in crisis, consider asking them if you and/or their counselor can hold an emergency gathering or potluck to weave together their mutual support network of trusted friends — and find out what they truly need at this crucial time. However, don't act over their heads.

• CRISIS PREVENTION

Everyone will eventually have a crisis. For example, if you love deeply,
you may one day grieve deeply. The question is, "Are you prepared for your crisis?" It is a good idea to develop your network of support, now. Modern society isolates. Some day you may need a shoulder you can trust to weep on.

• EVADE THE BRAIN POLICE

If you find yourself threatened with psychiatric coercion, it's a good time to get real calm, real fast. Authorities — shrinks, doctors, cops, schools — tend to provoke, and then diagnose your *reactions* of fear, despair and anger. So when they provoke, act even more calm. Know your rights, get a lawyer, and find real help soon.

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• In Conclusion •

This is a work in progress. It's really only a beginning. The point is to initiate conversation in activist communities so that we can look at issues around burnout, mental health, and activist work. We can then begin to figure out how to be healthier and more sustainable in our communities and in our social change work. Talk to me, talk to each other, don't lose track of why you're doing the work...

Stay in touch – counterbalance@riseup.net

• Future Inquiries & Connections •

This project has had to come together very quickly and it doesn't feel "complete" – maybe the thing is that life and thoughts are never really complete, they are always just a process.

The following is a list of topics I would like to explore in the future:

*Environmental toxicity & mental health issues
*Modern society & mental illness: the elephant in the room...
*An Activist DSM!
*Beyond talk therapy: somatics/body work, art, dream work, meditation...
*Buddhism & radical interdependence – implications for politics and
      activist's ways of thinking
*Privilege & happiness: why they don't add up
*Delving into the psychology of anti-oppression trainings:
      the good and the bad...
*Competition and "scene points" or "oppression points" – how is this hurting
      us is activist communities?
*Ecopsychology and an exploration of the fallout created by our loss of
      connection to the land
*Kids who have grown up in activist communities – how are they feeling
      about the world? Really, how are all kids feeling about the world with
      all this talk about environmental destruction and war?
*and so much more....

Care to join me?

❧

• References & Recommended Readings •

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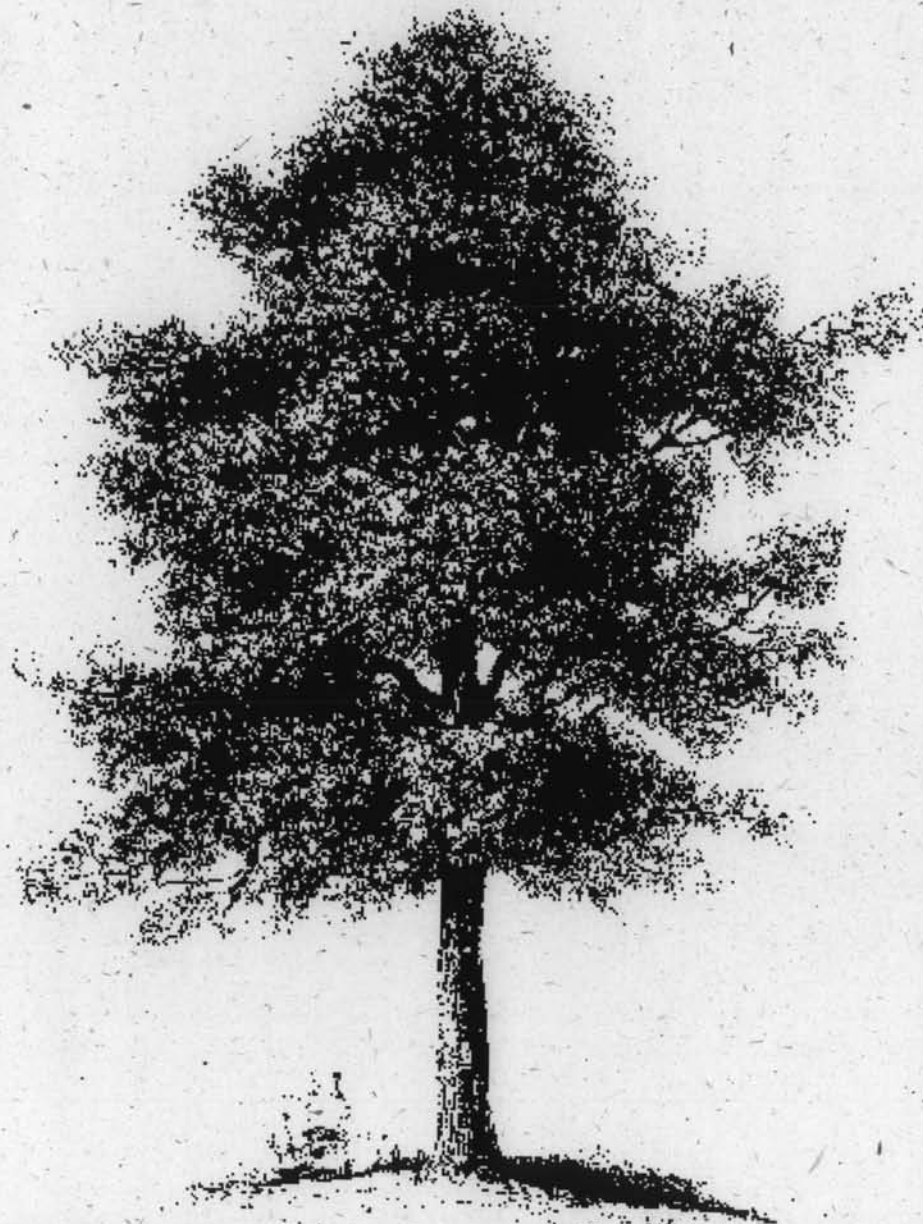
"If we become the prisoners of our own minds, if we think ourselves into despair, we can step onto wounded ground with a shovel and begin to plant trees. They will grow. They will hold the soil, provide shelter for birds, warm someone's home after we are gone. If we lose faith in ourselves, we can in those moments forget ourselves and dwell on the future of the larger community, on the blessing of neighbors."

~ Barry Lopez

burnout

breakdown   exhaustion

despair
                grief

                    isolation

balance
        self-care
    community
                healing
        mutual-aid
                transformation