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# FIRE IN THE BONES

**Campaigning for justice can be exhausting without some inner grounding. Alastair McIntosh draws inspiration from Jeremiah in exploring a theology of 'spiritual activism'**



There's a terrifying line in one of Adrienne Rich's poems that gets to the nub of what it means to be a spiritually-informed activist for change in the world. Probably moulded by her Jewish and Protestant family origins, she says, 'I stand convicted by all my convictions – you, too.'

I use this with students to whom I teach spiritual activism on the human ecology masters programme at Strathclyde University. It's a phrase that quickly sorts out anybody for whom activism is just a fashion accessory. Relative to the mainstream values of the world, the beautiful vision for change readily becomes what Ben Okri calls 'a burden, an unbearable exposure of collective cowardice and sloth and smallness of spirit in an era of malice, an era of failure.'<sup>2</sup> It is so easy to despair and stop trying, especially as we know we can never do enough. But that is precisely why an appeal to something greater than our small selves becomes imperative. Indeed, that is what can carry us beyond ego, beyond even compassion fatigue. Our challenge is to face the burdens of the world, yes, but to participate in transforming them. In Christian under-

standing, this is the way of the Cross. It shifts the violent worship of death that characterises 'Empire' into a living expression of love.

But how do we open to the grace of such transfiguration in the daily life or our activism? What attitude can we elicit or even pray for in order to try and not burn out, sell out or cop out?

## TROUBLERS OF THE PEACE

In my own work, I invariably find that when a new focus for activism breaks in on life it's like an unwanted child. You get busy doing all manner of things, then yet another challenge hammers on the door. Of course, none of us has to attend every fight we're invited to. There's a necessity for discernment and discipline about what we do or do not take on. But I've noticed that often this very process of discernment can be what leads to a radical re-ordering of one's priorities.

During the 1990s I participated in two major campaigns near the Hebridean Isle of Lewis, where I grew up. One brought about land reform on the Isle of Eigg, and the other thwarted corporate

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plans for the biggest roadstone quarry in the world that would have been in the National Scenic Area on the Isle of Harris. But throughout this period I was also getting repeated challenges from urban friends. ‘What about helping us to stand our ground and rebuild broken communities?’ they would ask. ‘It’s all very well doing your stuff on little Scottish islands where you’ve got a nice comfortable sense of belonging. But what about us, whose forbears got pushed off the land and have lost our anchor points of identity? What about communities marked not by scenic beauty, but by vomit on the pavement, graffiti on the walls and drug addiction up dead-end alleys? What about urban life and death on our native reservations?’

At first I tried to keep these voices at arms length. ‘I do rural regeneration,’ I’d tell them. ‘You do the urban stuff if that’s your wont.’ But then the very process of discernment – the very act of sitting down briefly each day and simply asking, ‘What does the deep Spirit of Life seek of me now?’ – all that starts to open up new patterns of reality that introduce their own imperatives. For my wife and I, this led to us moving two years ago to Govan, the onetime shipbuilding area of Glasgow; a place where the industrial tide has gone out, leaving behind a community where many are bereft of work and meaning.

Such life changes often come from being touched by a kind of fire. It can come from others, from circumstances, or from within us. This was something that Jeremiah understood very well. In my work I’ve often found myself being drawn to this prototypical spiritual activist at difficult times. His motivation came from a place that was far beyond his little ego self because he was grounded in something much greater.

### JEREMIAH’S BLASPHEMY

Even more than many of us today, Jeremiah cursed the way that activism messed up his life. The commentary in the authoritative HarperCollins Study Bible describes his complaint (Jeremiah 15 & 20) as being ‘the most blasphemous in the Bible.’ His choice of words according to the scholars effectively accuses God of deceiving, seducing and overpowering him into becoming an activist. Indeed, the word translated as ‘overpower’ has Biblical resonances of rape.

‘I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me,’ Jeremiah laments. Even ‘my close friends are watching for me to stumble’ (20:7,10, NRSV). Well might we observe the resonance with Jesus’ later words: ‘I come to bring not peace but a sword ... A person’s worst enemies will be the members of their own family’ (Matthew 10:34-36).

But what shines through in this text is that it is Jeremiah’s ability to see God’s alternative reality that carries him on. It shows him that the ‘peace’ of which he is the disturber is but a false peace, predicated on violence. To say nothing would be silence as the voice of complicity.

In ways about which mainstream religion preaches few sermons, Jeremiah reveals the dilemma of coming alive to spiritual vision. To ‘name, unmask and engage the Powers that Be’, as Walter

Wink puts it,<sup>3</sup> is dangerous and isolating. How much easier to join the sleeping and slowly die. And that, of course, is why Jesus found it necessary to implore his followers: ‘What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake’ (Mark 13:37).

### WHOLLY FIRE

The thrust of Jeremiah’s testimony is simultaneously social, ecological and religious (12:1-13). He bears uncomfortable witness not out of masochism or spiritual glory seeking, but from divine imperative. Speaking of God, he explains, ‘If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’ (20:9).

And there’s a hallmark of the spiritual activist. The ‘fire’ in question is God-centred passion. In shamanistic literatures of the world this viscerally emerges from the belly, the head or even the very bones. Jeremiah’s burden is crushing, yes, but he bears it because it is a precious burden. God, no less, tells him that this is so. ‘God’, the deep Spirit of Life, instructs him, ‘If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth’ (15:19).

What is the nature of this spiritual fire? Let me offer a suggestion. I remember once being on an Ignatian-style retreat near Inverness. We’d be given short scripture passages upon which to meditate for hours. One day mine really bugged me: ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’ (Luke 12:49). All day long I wrestled with a muscular notion I’d gained, doubtless from too many Hebridean fundamentalist sermons as a child, of Christ the Victor angrily drawing hell-fire down on his wayward vassals. The passage seemed to sum up the whole problem of spiritual abuse within a particular strain of Christianity. What was particularly troubling is that this was coming neither from Paul, nor Churchianity, but from words attributed to Jesus himself.

Suddenly, late in the afternoon after four days in contemplative silence, a kind of illumination broke in. I found my consciousness viscerally entering what old hippies would fondly call a ‘trippy’ state. Through my mind’s eye, the whole world started to quicken with an inwardly visible perception of the animating love that moves ‘the sun and other stars’. And I saw, with epiphanic wonder, that the ‘fire’ in question – the fire that Christ would have us kindle – is none other than the fire of love.

The story is told of the Desert Fathers that Abba Lot asked Abba Joseph what more he could do over and above observing his monastic rule. Abba Joseph replied, his hands lifted to heaven with fingers that looked like lighted candles, ‘Why not become wholly fire?’

In his commentary on such texts the French Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clément, magnificently squares the theological circle as to the nature of spiritual fire. He surmises: ‘The fire of hell is the fire of love that gives remorse a terrible clarity.’<sup>4</sup> Such was the nature of Jeremiah’s fire, for such were the leadings of the love to which he placed himself in service. This is why prophetic witness so

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often forces activists to stand and take a stand in Hell on Earth. Sometimes this is where God most needs the 'angels'.

### BEYOND EGO AND NIHILISM

Modernity still professes to believe in itself. But postmodernity has lost that faith. The resultant vacuity at the heart of much public discourse today at least offers one advantage. It gives activists who are in touch with something 'essential', something God-given, a charismatic edge. It might be stretching hope too far to suggest that postmodernity's deconstruction has ploughed a fallow field ripe for sowing fresh seeds of grace. And yet, this is a tantalising possibility, and possibly an explanation as to why it is starting to be possible to bring spirituality into public discourse. Major organisations that have done this in recent years include the Worldwide Fund for Nature, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the United Nations Environment Programme and even the World Bank.

As demand awakens in our culture for psychospiritual literacy, it is useful to offer a simple model of human psychic structure. Imagine a pyramid of three layers. The apex, like a light on top of a ship, is the ego, surrounded by its field of consciousness. This is the conscious 'me'. It likes to be on top of things, in control, and masquerades as 'rational'.

The middle part is the 'shadow', surrounded by the personal unconscious. The personal unconscious is all those parts of our individual life experience that shape us in ways of which we are but dimly conscious. The shadow is a constellation of all those parts of ourselves that ego would deny. It's the alter-ego of, say, Alastair: the potential rapist or swindler within him, the child that still hurts and 'acts out' but he doesn't quite know why, and his little cruelties to others that he hides from himself (but perhaps not so effectively from his colleagues and wife!).

This 'shadow' is the cutting edge of psychospiritual growth. We have a choice. We can either leave it as sewage to fester and leak, until the smell rises from the basement up the stairs and into the living room. Or we can set about composting it, creating rich new soil that can give life. As Jung put it, '90 per cent of the shadow is gold.' But that gold has to be worked for and refined, which is why we can't grow spiritually unless we allow ourselves to awaken and experience the trial by fire of being 'exercised'. Both New Age spiritualities and mainstream churchianity often shun this. Depoliticised, they bodyswerve applied mysticism and perhaps wallow instead in a sewage-masking miasma of bells and smells.

Lastly in our psychic pyramid is the deep or the great Self. This is the soul; the psyche's central organising principle. It rests in the 'collective unconscious', formed from our shared potential and experience. Ultimately it is the Christ within, Buddha nature, or in Hindu thought, Atman (individual self) as Brahman (universal Self). This is Paul's 'membership one of another'. It is heavenly interconnection through love as the 'communion of the saints'.

Such a model suggests why to be a spiritually

engaged activist is to engage both immanently and transcendently with Life. The articulation of outer political concerns demands an equal counterpoint of inner work, opening to the grace that draws ego, shadow and Self into right relationship in a process of continual spiritual psychotherapy. The failure of many activists to take this on, especially in ego-driven realms of politics, is the reason why so much activism implodes into schismatic organisational dysfunction.

Theologically, the implication is that true and sustainable activism is concerned with both personal and societal 'salvation' – a word that means to 'salve' or heal. This process does not destroy the ego as our face on outward reality. Rather, it gradually resolves the ego into right relationship with the Self: thus, as Paul put it, 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me' (Galatians 2:20). The ego deepened by reconciling the shadow (including 'sin') of its own alter-ego, mellows and rests into the Self, where 'All my fountains are in you' (Psalms 87:7). In Christian language, the immanence of Jesus, the male who died on a cross becomes realised or 'raised' in transcendental newness as 'Jesus Christ', in whom there is 'neither male nor female', and in the 'Alpha and Omega sustained incarnation of whom 'all things were made' (Galatians 3:28; Rev 22:13; John 1:3).

To develop this further risks betraying mystery with mere words. Suffice to add only that the ordering outlined here matters greatly. It is the ego's place to settle into the Self, and not vice versa. Where the ordering is reversed, archetypal structures idolatrously inflate the ego. The prophet degrades to the psychotic,<sup>5</sup> which is why confessional discernment skills should accompany charismatic activism.

### CONFESSING THE SHADOW

There's a cartoon where all the activists march pa bearing placards. 'No more motorways,' says one. 'Stop the War,' demands another. 'Down with the corporations,' shouts a third. And finally the guy the end proclaims, 'I hate my dad!' The point that we so easily project unresolved issues from our personal unconscious into the outer world. The corporation, government or whatever becomes psychological proxy for the authoritarian parent figure. To refine our activism we therefore have to learn to 'confess' our shadow sides. Look into the mirror of, say, the corporation, and each one of us will see ourselves. That's because corporations are to a significant degree, emergent properties of our collective consumer choices. Our placards may proclaim, 'War in the Gulf: Not in my name', but frankly we pump complicity in violence every time we pull up at a filling station.

By 'confessional discernment' I mean attempting to face up to shadow truths both individually and collectively. This humanises the 'enemy' and makes it easier to face realities and search for solutions. That sounds very pragmatic, but Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* the generation of such empathy is presented as the challenging culmination of spiritual practice. As he says through the starets (or Orthodox mystic), Zosima: 'Each one of us is unquestionably answerable to all men.'

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able for all men and all things on earth, not only by virtue of the collective guilt of the world, but also individually, for all men and everyone on earth. This realization is the crowning glory not only of the monastic way of life, but of every human being on earth.... It is only through this realization that our heart will be moved to boundless, universal, all-consuming love. Thus will each one of us be able to redeem the world and with his tears wash away its sins.... (part 2:4).

**FIELD OF TRUTH**

The Hindu gospel, the *Bhagavad Gita*, opens with a sentence translated as, 'On the field of Truth, on the battle-field of life, what came to pass, Sanjaya ...?'<sup>6</sup> Note that the battle-field of life sits in Truth (*Dharma*) – the unfolding of God's reality. And Sanjaya is charioteer to the blind king, Dhritarashtra. His gift is to see at a distance – the same eagle-seeing that Jeremiah, John's gospel, and any inspired spiritual activist does. As activists, we are called to see the spiritual interiority of external events; we are called, all of us, to prophesy (Numbers 11:29)! Our organisations and networks are our 'chariots' as we **struggling** for justice in the world. We are talking **here of par-**

ticipation in nothing less than *incarnation*.

We are left standing not far from Golgotha in solidarity with the poor and the broken of this Earth. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but fear no ill. And so our burdens become *precious burdens*. We 'become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4; Luke 17:21). Such, as I see it through my glass darkly, is the theology of spiritual activism. □

NOTES

- 1 Adrienne Rich, 'Origins and History of Consciousness' in *The Dream of a Common Language*, WW Norton, NY, 1978, p. 7.
- 2 Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, Phoenix, London, 1977, pp. 62-65.
- 3 Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1992. This is not the shortest Wink text, but it is the one I find most powerful with my students. I also make heavy use of Grof's & Grof's *Spiritual Emergency* (Tarcher), Green's & Woodrow's *Insight and Action* (New Society), *Shields' In the Tiger's Mouth* (Millennium Books), Howowitz's *The Spiritual Activist* (Penguin Compass), Weiss's *Principles of Spiritual Activism* (Ktav Publishing), Camara's *Spiral of Violence* (Sheed & Ward), as well as various writings of Alice Walker, Starhawk, Audre Lorde, Richard Rohr and Adrienne Rich. I am struck by how many of these come from Jewish backgrounds. They must have Jeremiah in the blood!
- 4 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, New City Press, NY, 1993, pp. 144, 303.
- 5 Stanislav and Christina Grof, *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*, Tarcher, NY, 1989.
- 6 Penguin Classics edn., trans. Juan Mascaró, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 43.

**Our placards  
may proclaim  
'War in the  
Gulf: Not in  
my name',  
but frankly  
we pump  
complicity in  
violence  
every time  
we pull up at  
a filling  
station**

