

Activism of 'being' and 'becoming'. The many faces of an activist

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I cannot write about activism without making a direct link to the parallel story of my own activist life - the essence of who I am and what I do is the essence of my activism. I have never been able to function within the mainstream. Living on the edge and questioning anything that becomes mainstream has to some extent been my theme song. That is not to say that I am against the mainstream *per se*. However, my experience has led me to believe that mainstreaming has a potential danger to homogenize and drain creativity and diversity in the process of replicating blue prints and models that are dry, life-less clones.

It is the reticence about the mainstream and mainstreaming that has evolved into my troubled relationship with the world of activism. A product of late '50s, my induction into the world of activism began very early.

Coming from the province of Kerala, south of India meant an organic induction into the world of activism. Bright red flags and graffiti at every corner, sickle and hammer and catchy slogans made the sleepy countryside I grew up in one of the most interesting provinces of India. It still is full of contradictions, offering no easy answers to the experts as to what makes it so different from the rest of India(1).

After completing a Masters degree in Sociology from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, I ended up in Rajasthan. A North western province of India that became a refuge for many disillusioned urban activist-academics. Late seventies Rajasthan was bubbling in many kinds of creative social activism. Some of these cutting edge programs were designed and orchestrated often from within the mainstream development institutions by visionary individuals and rebel groups. I was fortunate to be involved in some of these programs that sharpened my understanding of activism. The passion, creativity and ruthless critical enquiry in a constantly evolving arena of developmental activism is something I have missed all along after my sad departure from Rajasthan. A marriage that was doomed from the start,

led to my exit from Rajasthan after a full decade of passionate activism focusing on organizing grassroots rural women's groups.

A Dutch government fellowship to do a Master's Program at the Institute of Social Studies specializing in Women and development became a refuge. A leap into the void.

A program that was meant for fifteen months stretched to five years, working with many Dutch agencies in the area of gender and development. I met my South African husband, Philip Van Ryneveld in The Hague. A tumultuous relationship, with all the racial tones finally saw me enter South Africa after the release of Mandela. I was as confident and as exuberant to be in SA for the first election as the local South Africans.

My over confident self, determined to continue the glorious activist career met with a few hard knocks. I was fortunate enough to get some openings to work with in the NGO and some of the University related activities. I also got an opportunity to put together a South African gender and Development training manual for a national NGO, first of its kind during those days. But the deep stirrings within me had already begun. The call to quit mainstream was already beginning to take shape unbeknown to me. To make matters worse, unexpected motherhood twice in a row complicated the already challenging journey that I was hardly prepared for.

In retrospect, I could well claim that this journey saved me from a downward spiraling of depression. Apparently to get a grip with my life and not succumb to nappies and babies, I created a life around the babies and reclaiming my own soul. Years of teaching yoga and Ayurvedic primary health care - infusing politics of health and gender into these areas of new ageism, I began to realize, I am too much of a political animal to get stuck in the world of spirit alone. After all, my soul is incarnated into this physically manifest life and I felt my path is one of taking conscious responsibility of how the soul can dwell in the physical body realizing optimum balance, realizing optimum potential without having to become slave to the 'guru-cult' or for that matter any spiritual thuggery, be it that of saffron brigade or any other fundamentalists. Politics of spirituality and spirit of politics, commodification of spirituality, market-driven, instant

gratification; ascendance to enlightenment where everything is justified glorious unconditional love including the blatant stealing that goes on in the name of safeguarding indigenous people's wisdom. Another set of paradoxes that I was not prepared for.

Paradoxes of being caught in the race game, being in the politically correct crowd and yet witnessing the banalities of bending over backwards; paradoxes of the healing world, world of new age terrorist and peace thugs; development merchants and sustainable gurus making money in the name of saving the planet and the people..

It is precisely the possibility of holding these inherent paradoxes that makes the life of an activist worthwhile and passionate as opposed to the predictable and mundane. Living on the edge is always more creative and challenging than succumbing to the pressures of the mainstream and conforming to 'funding-agendas' of ever changing shades and shapes of development merchants.

With time, the notion of activism has undergone change. The '80s and '90s saw the emergence of a hard-nosed, calculating activism, slowly becoming mainstream; it was professionalized and caught up in the throes of globalization that brought the world of activism much closer as it became more visible, yet far removed from localized realities.

My attempt here is not to make any claims on the history of activism or contemporary activism, and how it has (or has not) shaped realities of women (and men). Rather, this is a personal narrative, rather 'jumbled' at times; given my own evolution from the far corner on the other side of the Indian Ocean to where I have ended up - the southernmost corner of Africa, South Africa. It is a narrative thinking aloud, reflecting on two-and-a-half decades of existence of what I thought activism was.

I arrived at the cul-de-sac of my activist career in South Africa. South Africa gave me the 'space' to go inward by not providing the spaces that I expected to automatically plug into by virtue of being an activist. My arrival in South Africa brought with it the realization that I could not participate in the activist world in the same way as I had previously. Internally, I had begun questioning the assumptions I had about activism and my own role in its

processes. However, had it not been for my experiences in South Africa - the unexpected nature of the activism here, the alienation and subtle racial and gender dynamics, combined with the personal politics of being on the edge, I would not have come this far in terms of my own personal journey.

My growing discomfort with the world of activism was linked to it becoming mainstream, increasingly serving 'funded agendas', finding its way to bigger powers, in terms of its outward manifestations and getting stuck in a reactive 'victim' mode.

After engaging in a career rooted in 'struggle-mode' I have come to realize the 'missing-link' in my activism: I did not find the sacred space to build my own sense of self worth in my activist life; the space I occupied implied that a sense of sacred self was a taboo. The 'doing' was all 'out there', making a difference, a change, bringing about justice and equality. With time and years slipping through the hourglass, I began to realize that my activities as an activist never permitted me time to 'look into' or reflect on the 'actor' of the activism.

A deep chasm was developing: between my 'self', the identity of my being and becoming; the inherent qualities, differences, strengths, weaknesses that wove the fabric of who I am, and my outer 'self', the activist. Trying to conform to the outer images of activism conflicted with my inner pursuits, which had no place in the narrow, linear boxes of my performance as an activist, gender specialist/developmental practitioner, later changing in to yoga teacher, ayurvedic cook etc etc. As time went by I became more and more perplexed when confronted with the question what do you do. How could I explain to a conditioned ear expecting a one-liner that I am all this and much more. Silently pleading, please don't box me...

I began to see contradictions between what I was involved in and what I really wanted to do. Nothing made sense anymore. In the chaos, the bigger picture and hidden connections were being lost. More and more narrow specialists emerged as part of the mainstream, speaking with authority and incredible power. Given my inner turmoil and increasing doubts about the relevance of what I was doing, they confused me even more.

I began to realize that the time had come to withdraw from the particular activist landscape that I had participated in throughout my life. I realized after almost two-and-a-half decades, it was time to listen to my inner voice and 'sort myself out'. Another kind of activism stemming from a desire to make a difference by changing my own life, owning my confusion and not running away from it, began to take shape.

Activism, many faces many agendas

Activism implies acting upon, acting against, acting for causes and issues of social concern, and not only personal concern. There is an implied sense that it is for the social good, working towards social change, a move towards something better - at least in the eyes of the activist committed to bringing about desired change.

By its very nature activism creates a tension - a polarized tension, a dichotomy, of two opposing camps - us and them. These camps are like two groups of protagonists: those who are on the right track and those who are not. A varied spectrum of activities ensues - holding this tension; moving with it; never letting it sag and never releasing it. Therein lies the continuation of the struggle. For many, this has become a way of life, and a collapsing of this tension means collapsing identities, collapsing boundaries. Often the waters of struggle become deep and murky, stale and stagnant. The same voices echo. The same forces become stumbling blocks preventing creative regeneration. Often the activist terrain becomes the playground to enact, externalize, and act out the inner polarities and unprocessed tensions.

Makings of an activist

How does this happen - the making of an activist? I never thought I was one. At least I did not go through any conscious initiation rites - that gave me the certification: 'You are hereby declared an activist, here is your certificate'.

Rather, it is a long drawn out process of engaging with life and its frustrations. It is about anger that wells up, gets collectivized and transmuted, and transcends into something more beautiful, creative and pro-active. Yearning to change a system that does not work, working to create a system that works for all. Then, as one is beginning to feel a sense of accomplishment, the big jolt comes and you realize that things are not as you

thought... . All your struggles did not materialize in achieving your goal.

The ideals - of justice, fairness and compassion - that you hoped would become a way of life; a dream world where a sense of self worth and dignity is the precursor for the greater good of all... is still a dream, too far away. There's another setback and series of frustrations and disillusionment. And the search begins again; for another way, another route, another modality that might perhaps, bring one closer to that dream... .

It is the search, that constant yearning for something that has not yet materialized, a sense that there must be another way, that keeps one on the path of activism in pursuit for that elusive (yet realizable) dream. It is a sense of impatience combined with something that is deeply meaningful, beyond personal power, agendas and instant gratification, that brings about the critical edge, the defining essence of activism... it's the ever expanding horizons and shifts of consciousness, with no predetermined outcome.

It is this integral, synergetic, expansive process, that allows true activism to break out of the box and the immediate outcome-oriented development agenda. It breaks away from setting up unwieldy top-heavy structures and mainstreaming every possible option into neat little linear outcomes-based alternatives. Not that these outcomes are insignificant. Rather, the dilemma is how to juggle the shifts within the working paradigm while not losing sight of the significant everyday battles that also need to be fought.

The challenges of keeping crucial issues centered, while broadening the conscious expansion of creative activism and activist creativity takes its toll, eventually driving people like myself away from both the processes of mainstreaming as well as mainstream struggle activism as the only credible, legitimate arena. I've considered this a coming of age, a maturing and organic pruning process. My own survival to avoid burn out depended on that instant awareness of when to `snap out`.

By snapping out of the bi-polar `blaming mode`, I salvaged myself. I was able to transmute my anger, my years of accumulated negative energies. Anger cracking up, consuming, mutilating ones soul, spewing venom forth. Anger of being marginalized, not included, and yet not knowing whether being included is the answer. Clash of world views

and clash of values separating the two worlds. How can just a token gesture of inclusivity just change and transform? I have even begun to question the energies of victories won through such processes. Processes that are negotiated at a very superficial level, , that are driven and negotiated in a life-less officious ra--ra formats duplicating, replicating models, process that are not soul-centered .

We have freedom of choice and expression - but whose voices are heard and who has the final say over the power of dissident politics and power of mainstream politics. Somewhere in between is the real power of the survivors; anchored in the power of realizing self worth - the power of seeing the hidden connections, of transmuting activist anger into creative life-generating actions.

Beyond boundaries, boundaries without borders

I dived deep into the dark tunnel of the beyonds, the black holes of my womb - to nurture and heal. Curled up, hands clasped tightly across the head, blocking the ears and eyes, shielding the life inside from the draining life outside. I went through the path of sifting through two decades of activist informatics; mending and piecing together inspiring stuff and pruning away the accumulated overgrowth in the jungle of my activism. Sharp ruthless pruning, shearing away mercilessly. Heads cut off. Ideas burnt. Collections of years of notes and materials, literature - gender bibles... all gone for recycling.

A thorough cleansing. Hours of solitude in my study. Words silently staring, silently sensing - a sense of inner quietude. With that the surging feeling of strength welling up. A new found strength rising from the ashes, leaving the past and surging forward... a new found sense of identity... the power from within. Power that is free to seek, to explore; not afraid to ask and differ, to confer and dissent.

Liberation at last. I have no label. A bundle of beautiful chaos. Chaos that can emerge and evolve and does not have to succumb to dictums and tenets, theoretics and discourses. I am `out of the box`.

A simultaneous spiraling of energies, aligning the inner and outer worlds, harmonizing the power that is anchored with in me, filling my chalice of creativity, finding the power to be in my own being, reaching out to the world around from that secure place from within. My own identity

and sense of self worth, in who I am and what I am, sifting through what is necessary to keep building my sense of self. I have found a new kind of activism - of life and meaningful living - even if it is meaningful only to me, I am no longer ashamed of this kind of activism.

Concluding remarks

How does one perfect the art of becoming an activist?

Through the act of simply living consciously and mindfully; acting upon life. By consciously engaging with life, keeping a critical edge over the insider-outsider perspective, never succumbing or submerging in the ideology that blunts the edge; being on the border without being assimilated into the mainstream.

My challenge has thus been striking a balance between the inner and outer world - only possible when one is able to take a leap of faith. It was by no means an easy walk, there was no recipes waiting either. I look for signs and messages that confirm that my intuition and the external messages are aligned. I look for openings that come my way effortlessly. No more struggle. I am drawn to a new kind of work that unfolds spontaneously, effortlessly in co-evolution with nature. There is no winner and loser in this new kind struggle. In this new kind of activism every one has a role to play. Real diversity becomes the strength of all concerned in sustaining all life forms on this planet - not just warring humans.

An activist is like a dancer holding the tension of multiple strands, enveloping the constant unfolding, evolving with the dance of creation and constantly expanding horizons. Consciously embracing the confusion, chaos, and beauty, loving and living life in touch with hidden connections that are so elusive yet so real - this for me is the Zen of an activist life.

Notes

1. I have just returned after a three weeks stay the remote village in India where I went specially to attend the goddess rituals that has been taking place in that village probably for thousands of years. Just around corner, the little shops and tea stalls, still has sickle and hammer. The astounding election results saw the left coalition winning in the province, ouster of the rightwing Hindu fundamentalists at the centre.

Nirmala Lives in Cape Town with her husband and three daughters. In the juggling act of finding a balanced eco-system of the

`inner' and `outer' through the beautiful chaos of life, she still teaches yoga, Ayurveda selectively, grows her own vegetables, tends her worms for vermicompost and finds time to recreate meaningful uplifting rituals for celebrating life.

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