

# **Creative Maladjustment**

## **Activism as a Way to Heal Self, Society, and Planet**

*by Steve Chase*

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### INTRODUCTION

It is a great pleasure to be with you this weekend. I am particularly pleased that one of the goals of this conference is to explore how psychologists and other mental health professionals can contribute to the growing movement for ecological sanity and sustainability.

I don't come to this conversation as a member of your profession. I'm not a psychologist. Nor do I have any formal training in the mental health field. I'm an activist and an activist trainer by both calling and profession. For the last five years, I've directed Antioch University New England's Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program--the only graduate environmental studies program in the country that I know of that is specifically geared to training public interest advocates and grassroots organizers working on the issues of ecological sustainability, social justice, and democratic control of corporations.

While I am an outsider to your field, I long ago learned how important psychological tools and insights can be in helping to move more people to become activists and helping more activists to become effective builders of successful social movements. I am therefore very honored to be invited to be a part of your conversation this weekend.

To start off today, I want to follow up on yesterday's request by Sarah Conn for each of us to invoke the names of our personal heroes and inspirational ancestors--the people who shape our own path in this work. I didn't call out a name yesterday, but I want to today. At the start of this talk, I want to invoke the name of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I'm sure many of you here have been touched in some way by King's legacy, as have millions of people throughout the world. Here's just one story I love about

the importance of King as a touchstone for our work. In the 1980s, a coalition of churches, civic groups, and small business leaders organized a campaign in Seattle to honor Martin Luther King. Their specific goal was to get their city council to change the name of the main street running through one of Seattle's predominantly black neighborhoods. They wanted to change the name of this street from the "Empire Way" to the "Martin Luther King, Jr. Way."

After about six months, they got the city council to agree. The night after the vote, the neighborhood organizers invited community members to a large Baptist church for a victory celebration. That night, Vincent Harding, a long-time associate of Martin's, spoke to the community. He urged everyone there to fully embrace the deep symbolism of what they had just accomplished. As he said, "You have now changed the road you travel from the Empire Way to Martin's way." Isn't that exactly the challenge we all face today—changing the road we travel from the Empire Way to Martin's Way?

For me personally, this means doing whatever I can to help weave together the "Beloved Community" that King so often invoked as his deepest, long-range vision. My sense is that this is also the deep, long-range vision of almost everyone here at this conference. I'm guessing that most of us here want to create a beloved community that includes in its circle of moral concern all people alive today, all future generations, and the more-than-human world that makes up our larger biospheric community.

#### MARTIN LUTHER KING'S CALL FOR CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

I also mention King today because I want us all to hop into a mental time machine and travel back forty years to the 1967 annual convention of the American Psychological Association. At that conference, Martin Luther King gave a keynote address. His speech focused on how psychologists could contribute to the social movements of his day for racial equality, economic justice, and a peaceful US foreign policy.

As I was preparing for my talk for this conference, I read King's APA speech to see what he had to say to psychologists that might still be relevant today. What I found was very helpful. In his speech, King specifically challenged the notion that the goal of psychology is to help individuals become "well-adjusted" to the social world around them. As King put it in his speech:

*You who are in the field of psychology have given us a great word. It is the word "maladjusted." It is good certainly declaring that destructive maladjustment should be eradicated. But on the other hand, 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.*

King argued in this speech that it is actually pathological for a person to become well-adjusted to a world of injustice, violence, and exploitation. He argued that if psychologists were going to make a more meaningful contribution to mental health, they would have to find ways to help ordinary citizens deepen their capacity for what King called “creative maladjustment.” As King put it:

*It may well be that our world is in dire need of a new organization: The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment. Men and women should be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream;” or as maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln, who in the midst of his vacillations finally came to see that this nation could not survive half slave and half free... Through such creative maladjustment, we may be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man’s inhumanity to man, into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.*

I have taken the title of my talk today from King’s speech to the APA. My talk is entitled “Creative Maladjustment: Activism As A Way To Heal Self, Society, and Planet.” I start from King’s assumption that psychological health requires us to be maladjusted to the great social and ecological sins of our day. My more fundamental argument, however, is that for us to be creatively maladjusted, we need to become active citizens working to heal our local communities and this beautiful blue-green planet that we call home. I believe it is this activist dimension that puts the “creative” into what Martin Luther King called “creative maladjustment.”

## DISCIPLINARY OBSTACLES TO CREATIVE MALADJUSTMENT

Now I’m not naïve. I know that not everyone in your field supports helping ordinary people become creatively maladjusted citizens who work together for positive social and environmental change in their communities. For all the talk in psychology these days of helping people overcome denial and learned helplessness, many psychology researchers and practitioners don’t grasp or

endorse the social dimensions of these concepts. Nor do they easily understand the larger social, political, and economic forces that cause so much of the suffering in people's lives. It rarely occurs to many people in your field that one of the most pressing questions of contemporary psychology should be, "How can psychological insights and tools be shared to help people develop the capacity to join together in social movements and make the world a better place?"

This ignorance of the power of social movements to help foster creative maladjustment and improve our natural and social communities is certainly not limited to the psychology profession. Understanding the broad dynamics of social power and social movements is also a huge challenge for many of us in the environmental studies field. Many people in my field tend to focus only on the natural and ecological sciences. It is no surprise then that out of the over 100 graduate environmental studies program in this country, only Antioch University specifically trains progressive activists to work as public interest advocates and grassroots organizers.

As noted by David Orr, the Director of the Environmental Studies Program at Oberlin College, the dominant approach among most environmental studies programs is remarkably apolitical. As he argues:

*[Most environmental studies programs] have focused on the symptoms, not the causes of biotic impoverishment. The former have to do with the vital signs of the planet. The latter have to do with the distribution of wealth, land ownership, greed, the organization of power, and the conduct of public business. These are large, complex, and to some, disagreeable subjects, and there are unspoken taboos against talking seriously about the very forces that undermine biological diversity.*

Orr is not the only prominent environmental studies educator to challenge these "unspoken taboos." Joni Seager, a feminist geographer at the University of Vermont, has also argued that we need to foster greater awareness among our students that "the environmental crisis is not just a crisis of physical ecosystems." Like Orr, she claims:

*The real story of the environmental crisis is a story of power and profit and political wrangling; it is a story of the institutional arrangements and settings, the bureaucratic arrangements and the cultural conventions that create conditions of environmental destruction. Toxic wastes and oil spills and dying forests, which are presented in the daily news as the entire environmental story, are the symptoms--the symptoms of social arrangements, and especially of social derangements. The environmental crisis is*

*not just the sum of ozone depletion, global warming, and over-consumption; it is also a crisis of the dominant ideology.*

The late Dian Marino, a former faculty member of York University's graduate program in Environmental Studies, also spoke of this ongoing challenge in her own department.

*One of the things we're not terribly comfortable with is political discourse... I once listened, in my own faculty, to a long discussion on environmental impact assessment and community participation. It lasted an hour and forty-five minutes, and in all that time the words power and politics were never used, not even once. I think this is no accident. We are extremely deskilled in talking about disempowerment or empowerment, or just relationships of power. It can be a very unfamiliar, scary, taboo topic.*

Back in 1991, Michael Lerner made much the same observation about the field of psychology in his book *Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday Life and the Psychology of Individual and Social Transformation*. For those of you who don't know about Lerner, he is a long-time activist who earned his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in 1977. He published this book in 1991 and has since become a rabbi, the editor of *Tikkun* magazine, and the director of the national Network of Spiritual Progressives. Lerner has written many wonderful books since *Surplus Powerlessness*, but this one is the most relevant to the question of whether the field of psychology does enough to encourage creative maladjustment and effective social activism.

As a rule, says Lerner, folks in the psychological therapy field are no more politically-savvy than most of us in the field of environmental studies. As he notes, "Most therapists don't understand the social conditions which lead to so much pain in personal life, so they are unlikely to be able to uncover meaningful ways for individuals to deal with those social conditions." While he admits that conventional therapy can help people be less self-destructive in their personal lives, he also points out that "these benefits mostly fit into the category of 'learning to cope' with an oppressive reality." They don't add up to aiding people to learn how to work with others to change the larger social, political, and economic reality around them.

Like King, Lerner argues that many therapists unwittingly play a repressive role in society because they squander the opportunity to foster creative maladjustment and social activism. As Lerner puts it,

*Lacking a sense of social causality, most therapists interpret the frustrations of family and personal life as individual failings. Instead of bringing their clients to an understanding of the larger*

*social forces that shape their individual experiences, therapists implicitly suggest that the problems are individual in scope, and can be adequately solved by changes in individual psyches or through changes in their family systems.*

“Although some therapists escape this trap,” says Lerner, “everything in their training and their social background tends to press in this direction.”

## PSYCHOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGHS

OK, but here is the good news: some folks in the psychology field do escape this “psychological trap.” Look around the room today and you will see several people working in the field who are trying to make a real breakthrough and rise to Martin Luther King’s challenge to foster creative maladjustment in themselves and others. The people and presentations at this conference are great examples of breakthroughs in the field of psychology. However, let me share one other good example with you from my own professional life.

Next fall, in my course on “Organizing Social Movements and Campaigns,” I am going to assign my students a new activist manual edited by Dr. Rachel MacNair and several members of Psychologists for Social Responsibility. This anthology is called *Working for Peace: A Handbook of Practical Psychology and Other Tools*. If you haven’t read it yet, I encourage you to do so soon. The stated goal of the book is to provide a useful handbook of practical psychological tools and insights for anyone “who wants to find better ways to work for peace or otherwise improve the world.” In essence, the authors of this anthology are trying to help people become ever more creatively maladjusted to a militaristic world gone mad.

The introduction of the book offers a great snapshot of the kinds of psychological insights and tools that can help citizen activists in their work. For example, the authors write “if you are feeling overwhelmed” go to chapters X, Y, Z; “if you are wanting to improve your personal effectiveness” go to chapters A, B, C; “if you are wanting to help your local group work better” go to chapters L, M, N; “if you are having trouble dealing with one or more members of your group” go to chapters Q, R, S; “if you are having trouble communicating your message to the public” go to chapters E, F, G; “if you are looking for ideas on how to make greater impact” go to chapters H, I, J; “if you are looking for ideas about conflict resolution and/or nonviolent action” go to chapters U, V, W.

The 34 essays in the rest of the book then deliver excellent tools and insights that can help people solve many common problems facing citizen activists working for peace and other important causes. I’m very proud that Susan Hawes, one of my colleagues at Antioch who works in our Clinical Psychology

Department, has an essay in this important book. Her piece is called “Dialogues Across Difference.” I’ve told Susan, but I want to tell you all too, that most of the activists I know—and all the effective ones—are incredibly grateful for this kind of help from the field of psychology.

#### A SUBTLE STICKING POINT

However, I do hear many activists complain that even well-meaning, pro-activist psychologists still often fall into a very unhelpful psychological trap. This needs to be addressed before we can move forward together. Let me give you one very specific example of this unhelpful perspective. I found this example in the Psychologists for Social Responsibility book I just mentioned. In it, there is a very interesting, but confusing piece by Dr. Christina Michaelson, a clinical psychologist who practices and teaches in Syracuse, New York.

Michaelson’s research interests include Eastern psychology, meditation, and inner peace and her essay in the book is called “Cultivating Inner Peace.” There is so much that is useful in this essay, so let’s start with that. First, there is absolutely no question that Michaelson is maladjusted to the world of violence and imperial war. In her essay, she also lauds all peace activists who “invest tremendous amounts of time, talent, energy, and resources into changing the world.” She also wisely claims that this work can be made even more effective, and more soul-satisfying, if peace activists cultivate their own inner peace through such methods as meditation, nature experiences, counseling, and prayer. I am completely with her on all of this.

Yet, in just her second paragraph, Michaelson says something I think we need to question. According to Michaelson:

*If you’re to bring peace to others, then you must first manifest peace in your own life. Your peace work in the world should begin with cultivating an inner state of peacefulness and then you truly can offer peace to others. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” If you want to see peace in the world, then you must “be” peace in the world.”*

Now this all sounds pretty good on the surface, but I sense in her repetitive first/then formulation that she is actually counseling would-be peace activists to delay their outward social activism until they have cultivated a deep inner peace. She explicitly says it twice and implies it a third time in just this one brief passage. Her advice to her readers seems to be: first cultivate inner psychological peace and then, and only then, think about investing your “time, talent, energy, and resources into changing the world.”

If this is true, then Michaelson's linear "personal growth first and then activism" idea is not only a serious misreading of Gandhi's strategy for ending British imperialism, but is also an unconscious call to social passivity and foregoing outward activism until some unspecified future. This is just not helpful. As Paul Rogat Loeb notes in his book *Soul of a Citizen*, many people already hold back from becoming engaged activists because they believe that they have to be saints before they begin. As he says:

*Many of us have developed what I call the perfect standard: Before we will allow ourselves to take action on an issue, we must be convinced not only that the issue is the world's most important, but that we have perfect understanding of it, perfect moral consistency in our character, and that we will be able to express our views with perfect eloquence... Whatever the issue, whatever the approach, we never feel we have enough knowledge or standing. If we do speak out, someone might challenge us, might find an error in our thinking or an inconsistency—what they might call a hypocrisy—in our lives.*

As a result of believing in Michaelson's version of "the perfect standard," many people I know either turn away from activism altogether or work endlessly in personal growth workshops to prepare themselves for a day that rarely comes--when they finally feel that they have met the perfect standard and can actually become activists out in the world. This is disheartening to me because I haven't seen much evidence that this approach does all that much to help people move towards greater empowerment and wholeness in their lives. I also can't think of a time in history when it has ever led to social movement success. Time and time again, effective social movements have been made by people who don't wait on perfection, but who just get active by hook or crook.

## MARTIN LUTHER KING'S MESSY JOURNEY TO ACTIVISM

Martin Luther King's journey to activism is a great example of this. On December 1, 1955, King was 26 years old and still new to town. He didn't know Rosa Parks and his church was one of the smallest, wealthiest, and most conservative of the two-dozen Black churches in Montgomery, Alabama. His only professional ambitions at the time were to run a solid church program, be well paid for it, have a nice house for his growing family, perhaps write some theology pieces for his denomination's magazine, and do a bit of adjunct teaching at a nearby college once he was better established. King's long-term career goal was to become a college president someday. King was surprisingly well-adjusted to his social world at this point in his life.

King certainly never imagined himself as the most prominent activist leader in Montgomery, let alone in America. Sure, he had experienced racism, and hated



it, but all black folks in America had experienced racism and hated it. He had also read a bit of Gandhi and Marx at Boston University and written several thoughtful papers about theologians of the social gospel movement who challenged the Church to take up the fight for social justice. Yet, in December 1955, all these ideas were mostly “back burner” concerns for King. Indeed, his only act of social activism up to this point had been to write a letter to the editor at the Atlanta Constitution--and that was back when he was seventeen years old.

It is a little hard to imagine now, but if it had been left up to King’s initiative, the Montgomery Bus Boycott would never have happened. One of the main organizers of this effort was E.D. Nixon, an experienced civil rights and labor activist who recruited King and other ministers to the cause and helped launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott within the first four days after Rosa Parks’ arrest for refusing to move to the back of the bus. As the president of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, Nixon knew Parks well. She had worked as his volunteer secretary at the NAACP office for over 12 years. He also knew most of the city’s black clergy, a couple of reasonably sympathetic white journalists, and all of the local black activists, including folks from his union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

After bailing Rosa Parks out of jail, Nixon and she talked together and decided to launch a city-wide boycott of the bus system until the city desegregated the service. Nixon then went home and started calling local ministers to line up their support for the idea. As Nixon explained to one interviewer: “I recorded quite a few names... The first man I called was Reverend Ralph Abernathy. He said, ‘Yes, Brother Nixon, I’ll go along. I think it’s a good thing.’ The second person I called was the late Reverend H.H. Hubbard. He said, ‘Yes, I’ll go along with you.’ And then I called Rev. King, who was number three on my list, and he said, ‘Brother Nixon, let me think about it awhile, and call you back.’”

When King finally agreed to at least come to a meeting to discuss the boycott idea, Nixon chuckled and told King, “I’m glad you agreed, because I already set up the first meeting at your church.” At the meeting, King was very nervous about Nixon’s and Parks’ boycott proposal and several other ministers soon began to side with King against the boycott idea. In his own memoir of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King recalls how Nixon finally exploded towards the end of the meeting and shouted that the ministers would have to decide if they were going to continue to act like scared little boys or if they were going to stand up like grown men and take a strong public stand against segregation.

King’s pride was so hurt, he shouted back that nobody could call him a coward. Then, to prove his courage, King immediately agreed to Nixon’s plan for an aggressive, community organizing campaign to build up the boycott. The other ministers soon agreed as well. With that decision made, the group began to discuss who should lead this effort. Everyone present had expected Nixon to

become the president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association. But when he was asked about serving, Nixon answered, "Naw, not unless'n you all don't accept my man." When asked whom he was nominating, Nixon said, "Martin Luther King." Having just loudly declared his courage to the whole group, King felt that he had to agree to take on this responsibility. Then, Nixon told King he would have to give the main address at the mass rally scheduled for that very night to announce the boycott plan to Montgomery's black community.

King rose to Nixon's challenge. Serving as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott for the next twelve months profoundly changed King. Watching 42,000 poor and working-class black people stay organized and do without public transportation for a year, he discovered things about the courage and capacity of ordinary people to resist oppression and move toward freedom. Watching the conservative, rightwing city government finally cave in to the boycott, he discovered the power of mass nonviolent direct action campaigns to win real victories--even when they are opposed by powerful interests. By seeing his own power to inspire people to become active citizens for a noble cause, King also discovered just what kind of leader he wanted to be in this life. He now fully embraced his new mission as an activist leader for fundamental social change in America.

I tell this story in such detail because there is an important lesson here for all of us. We don't have to be born leaders. We don't have to attain perfect inner peace and wisdom before we become active. We don't even have to know everything we need to know before we get started. We just have to get started. Even though we still have much to learn, there is tremendous power for both individual and social transformation by just engaging in the experimental world of social movement activism right now.

To her credit, even Michaelson seems a little skeptical of her rigidly linear "first personal growth/then activism" framework. Just a little later in the essay she seems to be searching for a more integrated and holistic perspective. Her argument here is that there are many entry points into both activism and inner peace--and both can feed off each other in a variety of creative and reciprocal ways. As she notes, "Your thoughts, emotions, physical functioning, and behavior are interrelated, and changes in one area affect the other areas in continuous feedback." If we adopt this second, more holistic framework of Michaelson's, I believe that we will all be in a much better position to figure out how to share psychological insights and tools with other activists so we can build the effective social movements we need to successfully defend nature, our public health, and achieve global sustainability.

## TOWARDS PSYCHOLOGICALLY-SMART ACTIVISM

To help make the whole concept of psychologically-smart activism more vivid, let me tell you two stories I often share with my students. My first story is from Lois Gibbs. For those of you who don't know about Gibbs, she was a highschool-educated mother living in a working class neighborhood of Love Canal, New York, back in the 1980s. She had never been an activist before, but to her horror she discovered that much of her neighborhood was built on a toxic dumpsite and that the left-behind chemicals were poisoning her and her neighbors' children.

After many trail and error attempts, Gibbs found enough inner courage to start recruiting many neighbors and outside allies to help her solve the horrendous toxic pollution problem at Love Canal. This local campaign was ultimately successful and it also ended up pushing the federal government to create the national Superfund program, based on the polluter-pays principle.

Interestingly, Gibbs didn't stop her activism after the Love Canal organizing campaign. She went on to create the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. In the past two decades, this group has provided technical assistance to over 10,000 local anti-toxic groups across the country. Gibbs has literally helped thousands of people, particularly working-class women, become creatively and effectively maladjusted to their unhealthy circumstances.

OK, that's the background. Here's the story she told our Environmental Studies students when she last came to speak at Antioch University New England. As she explained, Gibbs was hanging out a bar one night with a small group of women after she had just finished a three-day training program with them. These women opposed the building of an incinerator in their town. They believed this incinerator would add too much to the toxic chemical body burden of the all the people in the town, with particularly damaging effects on the children living closest to the facility.

While in the bar, however, all of the women start complaining to Gibbs about how they had no luck in recruiting any new members to their group in the last twelve months. As one woman put it, "We have talked at everybody until we are blue in the face, but nobody seems to care." From this remark, Gibbs suspected that these activists weren't very savvy yet about how to interact with people in order to become good recruiters for their cause. To shake them up, and help make them explore other options in this teachable moment, Gibbs offered to make a bet with them. She said "I bet you all 50 bucks that I can recruit anybody you pick in this bar." The women were stunned, but they took the bet and picked a scruffy guy sitting alone down at the far end of the bar.

Gibbs got up and sat down next to the guy and spent a little time with normal pleasantries just in order to make a connection. As the guy got more

comfortable, she then asked even more elicitive questions to get to know the guy better and learn about the things he cared about.

It turned out the guy was an independent trucker who owned his own rig, but had a pretty narrow profit margin every year. She then asked if he drove much on Route 10, where the incinerator was going to be built. He said he drove that way all the time. She also asked if the town and county were good about keeping the roads in good shape. The guy laughed bitterly and started complaining about how much money he loses every year when he has to make expensive repairs to his rig because the roads he travels on are in such bad shape. Gibbs then asked if it worried him that there will be about a hundred extra trucks a week on that road if the new incinerator gets built. The trucker groaned, and blurted out, “My repair bills will go through the roof!”

It was only at this point that Gibbs said, “You know I came here tonight with those women over there. They are trying to put together a citizens group to stop the incinerator. They don’t have your problem. They are mostly into stopping the incinerator because they are worried about their children’s health. The kind of incinerator the city is planning to put in really kicks out lots of pollution. But I bet they could really use your help. You both have good reasons to be opposed to the incinerator. It doesn’t sound good for the town for a lot of reasons.” She then asked the guy if he wanted to come over and have a beer with the women. He said, “Sure,” and went over and sat down. The guy soon became an active member of the group.

There is so much about this interaction that is similar to a good therapeutic relationship. Gibbs gets that you have to build rapport with people. She gets that you have to give them real attention and listen deeply to them rather than lecturing at them about how they ought to behave and why. She also understands the power of elicitive questions and the power of respecting how people define their own goals and self-interests. Once knowing these things, she then offers action options that might help improve the person’s life. She gently encourages, but does not force the person to take these action steps. This is psychologically-smart recruiting.

Let me now give you an example of psychologically-smart political education—an activity that often comes before people are even ready to be recruited to help a specific activist effort. The guiding assumption behind political education is that for most people to break out of denial and learned helplessness, they have to develop what sociologists with a background in cognitive psychology call a “collective action frame.”

David Snow and Robert Benford are just two of the researchers who argue that it is foolish to view the ideas and belief systems needed to energize movement participation as springing “almost immanently from the events and objects with which they are associated.” They go on to argue that rather than being

“nonproblematic constants,” the interpretive frames of potential movement participants are actually varied, mutable, and socially contested.

Sociologist Bob Edwards adds to this the idea that a cognitive frame that is most likely to inspire collection action includes “interpretations of the injustice or immorality of specific social conditions, an attribution of blame for them, some kind of action agenda for solving them, and a motivation for taking that action.” The challenge for citizen activists, then, is to engage with people in such a way that the cognitive frames people construct to understand the world develop over time into more mature collective action frames. When this happens people are much more likely to become recruits to citizen activism and start working with others to change their life circumstances in effective ways.

With that background, I want to relay a story from Katherine Hyndman, a gutsy movement elder who became a labor activist in the 1930s. I first learned about Hyndman in the film *Union Maids* and then read her story in Alice and Staughton Lynd’s oral history book *Rank and File*. This particular story is worth quoting at length because it provides a great example of psychologically-smart political education. In it, Hyndman tells of a life-changing conversation she had as a young teenager with an older labor organizer who boarded with her family. Here’s her story:

*One summer day I was reading a book in the shade of the grape arbor. I wore glasses, the same glasses I had worn since I was about nine years old. Marko came and sat across the table from me. He was interested in what I was reading and was very much impressed that it was a history book. He spoke words of encouragement about studying. This was the first bit of interest I had evoked in anyone about my dreams and hopes for an education. Here for the first time was someone who valued and respected books.*

*He told me he noticed that I needed new glasses. That opened the door to the resentment against my father, which was hidden deep inside. I unburdened myself of all the bitterness I felt at being cheated of education.*

*Then slowly, skillfully he picked up the pieces and put each into its proper light and perspective. First he took up the question of the glasses. He explained that he understood the glasses were important to me, but had I talked to my father about my need for new glasses. No, I hadn’t. He showed how it was that my father, a man who had never gone to school, a man harassed by economic worries, a long strike the previous year, could not be*

*expected to know and understand what went on in my mind unless I talked to him.*

*Then, most importantly of all, he took up the issue of higher education. Deftly, he asked one question after another. My answers to each of his questions cast a light on who was to blame for my broken dreams. Up to then my father was the culprit. It was he who stood in my way. It was he who had ruined my life.*

*Marko asked how many students had been in my graduating class. I told him. How many of them had gone to high school? Two. Who were they? Elizabeth Mills and Billy Robinson. Were there fathers coal miners? No. What did their families do for a living? Mr. Mills was manager of the company store. Billy was a nephew of the mine superintendent, his mother a clerk in the company store. Had any son or daughter of a coal miner in Rathburn, ever gone to high school? No. Did I believe that all coal miners were cruel and deliberately prevented their children from getting an education? No. Are there any rich coal miners in Rathburn? No. How far is it to the nearest high school? Centerville, about eight miles. Is there free transportation to school? No. Does the student have to buy his own books? Yes. Is there a tuition? Yes.*

*I was ashamed of myself for thinking such terrible thoughts about my father. Marko talked some more. He didn't preach, but in clear and simple terms explained why it was impossible for a coal miner to be rich, to give his children an education, to take care of their health properly. I saw things as I had never seen them before.*

This is one of the most beautiful stories of one-on-one political education I have ever heard. Again, the parallels with a good therapeutic relationship are striking. To do political education work effectively, activists need to approach people respectfully, listen to their concerns, encourage them to reflect more deeply on their own experience, and, when appropriate, offer missing information and perspectives for the other person to consider.

Such interactions can literally change people's lives. As Katherine Hyndman said, "I saw things as I had never seen them before." In this case, her conversation with Marko increased the compassion she felt for her father and prepared the ground for her to become a creatively maladjusted labor activist later on in her life.

I tell these two stories today because I want all of us to understand just how important psychologically-smart activism is to the effectiveness of our social movements. My hope is that these stories can also help everyone here think

more deeply about how a politically-smart psychology profession could do more to aid citizen movements pushing for needed changes in the circumstances of our social and ecological lives.

## THE LEARNING NEEDS OF ACTIVISTS

My own experience of innovation within my field might be relevant here. About eight years ago I started asking myself how I, as an environmental studies educator, could help increase the effectiveness of social movements and citizen activists. Focusing on this important question sent me on a three-year journey that ultimately led to the creation of Antioch University New England's unusual master's program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing.

Yet, this same question of how can I help increase the effectiveness of activists and social movements has not stopped beating in my heart since I set up the Environmental Advocacy and Organizing Program at Antioch. This question still pushes me to improve and refine my work in our activist training program as well as work with other academics to expand university education on community change activism and organizer training. The question has just never ceased to inspire and guide my work. I therefore hope that all of you will continue to ask yourselves just what you can do within your own sphere of influence within the field of psychology that could help increase the effectiveness of needed social movements and citizen activism.

Like all good questions, however, this question can lead to others. A big one for me when I was designing the advocacy and organizing program was, "What do sustainability activists need to know in order to be effective?" For my curriculum action research on this question, which is described in more detail in my dissertation, I decided that there were at least three paths to finding an answer. The first path was to reflect on my own years as a participant-observer in many different activist efforts. The second research path was to analyze what social movement scholars have identified as the core wisdom, knowledge, and skills most essential for effective activism. The final path I hit on was to read the results of several published interviews and surveys of activists who were asked to reflect on their own learning needs.

Most important among these activist reflections for me was *Technical Assistance & Progressive Organizations for Social Change in Communities of Color*. This report was commissioned by the New York Funding Exchange and was written by Luz Guerra in 1999. In this research, Guerra first asked the members of the Funding Exchange's Saguaro Grantmaking Board what they saw as the most needed areas of training and technical assistance for grassroots social movement organizations. She then interviewed the activists in the Exchange's grantee groups on these same topics.

Two other activist-based reports were also very helpful to me. One was *The Listening Project: A National Dialogue on Progressive Movement-Building*, which reported on interviews conducted in 1999 by the Peace Development Fund with over sixty community organizers from around the United States. The third report, which was explicitly focused on environmental activists, was the Conservation Foundation's 1984 study *Training for Environmental Groups*, which analyzed interviews and surveys with executive directors and staff of over 100 environmental advocacy organizations.

Using this basic research strategy, I was able to discern important patterns and I ultimately identified four core proficiency areas that are necessary to all effective social movement advocacy and organizing—and an additional one specifically needed for environmental and sustainability activists. The first core proficiency area is what I call social action skills, or what Guerra in the Funding Exchange study calls “the skills needed for the day-to-day realization of the program work of our progressive organizations.” Such skills include political education, recruiting people, choosing issues, selecting targets, planning action strategies, running media campaigns, Internet activism, lobbying, electoral work, nonviolent direct action, community organizing, networking with sympathetic allies in the public and private sectors, participating effectively in public hearings, community-based action research, building coalitions, collaborative problem solving, and a wide variety of cultural preparation work. There is a wide repertoire of potential social action options available to today's advocates and organizers. (For example, in his classic book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Gene Sharp lists over 180 different nonviolent direct action tactics alone.)

The second key proficiency area is organization-building and leadership skills. When Luz Guerra asked the members of the Funding Exchange's Saguario Grantmaking Board what they saw as the most needed area of training and technical assistance for grassroots social movement organizations, the answers she received were the “types of assistance/training that help an organization strengthen and develop as a nonprofit entity: board development, obtaining and fulfilling the requirements of 501(c)(3) status, and fundraising skills.” Essentially, these funders were thinking of activist applications of the nonprofit organizational training that is routine in continuing education and graduate nonprofit management programs.

When she asked many of the grassroots activists who had received grants from the Funding Exchange, their answers were similar, but somewhat deeper. They too talked about the need for “technical assistance in the business of running an activist organization... [and] managing a progressive nonprofit.” Yet, according to Guerra, this group came up with a longer list of organization-building skills than the grantmakers. The grassroots activists' list included creating revenue generation projects; fundraising; fiscal management; office administration; volunteer and staff recruitment, supervision and training, but it



also included diversity management; action research, long-range planning; organizational communications; meeting facilitation; democratic group process; and conflict resolution.

A third proficiency area identified by the activists interviewed in the Funding Exchange study is big picture power analysis, vision, and strategy. A vast majority of the respondents in the study expressed a strong desire for help in developing a more seasoned or mature political consciousness. As Guerra reports, they were eager for more political education “in critical political/social/economic analysis, and strategic movement building.” They also wanted more big picture information “to carry forward our anti-oppression work on racism, internalized oppression, sexism, classism, and homophobia.” I, of course, would also add anthropocentrism to this list.

The value of developing “big picture” political understandings was also the central lesson that emerged from *The Listening Project: A National Dialogue on Progressive Movement-Building*. When asked open-ended questions about the biggest barriers to effective movement-building, most respondents voiced “a strong critique of ‘politics-free’ organizing.” The idea here is that having an understanding of a single issue is just not sufficient and that effective activists need to develop a more integrated sense of the underlying social system, the political economy, and the dynamics of social movement history and strategy.

As one of the activists interviewed said, “If we are not developing people’s critical consciousness and analysis of the systems, institutions, and culture that create unjust societal relationships... what is the purpose of our organizing?” These activist interviewees stressed time and again that there was an urgent need “to increase local activists’ capacity to frame their work within a larger context” and move beyond single-issue thinking.

As we’ve seen from some of the stories I’ve told today, many of the activities in these three core proficiency areas—social action skills, organizational building, and big picture political thinking—can be carried out in psychologically-smart or psychologically-stupid ways. It is important then for each of you to think about how you can contribute your psychological research, insights, and practical tools to help increase the effectiveness of community organizing and other political initiatives.

There is still another important contribution that can be made. In the background of both the practitioner and scholarly literature I studied, there were strong hints of a fourth core competency area—what we might call “emotional competence” or “self-care and personal growth.” Looked at negatively, the central focus in this core proficiency area is developing the personal qualities, wisdom, and skills needed to avoid burnout or burdening one’s organization with unresolved personal problems. Looked at positively, the focus is on developing the personal qualities, wisdom, and skills to lead

satisfying and energetic lives amidst the frequent chaos and stresses involved in organizing--and thereby adding to the spirit of stability, humor, good cheer, and mutual respect in our social movement organizations.

Guerra reports that several of her interviewees worried some about their physical, emotional, and spiritual health in the face of the frequent reality that “activists are overworked, underpaid, and highly stressed.” One activist even claimed, we are “suffering in ways we don’t know how to name.” The activists interviewed by the Peace Development Fund also highlighted this area of concern: “Many asked how we can better nurture the people engaged in the struggle.” Indeed, as the authors of the report note, “There was a strongly expressed belief that many progressive activists and organizations ignore or underemphasize attention to internal work.”

Activist training theorist Randy Schutt is very adamant on the danger of this under-emphasis. As he points out, a good society--and certainly an effective movement--“cannot exist if everyone suffers from emotional trauma and regularly acts out in inappropriate ways.” He thus believes that any comprehensive program to help activists become more effective “must include ways for people to learn how to stop inflicting their dysfunctional behavior on others and help them learn means to interrupt other’s inappropriate behavior.” He also adds that many activists can use help in learning how “to develop the determination and self-discipline necessary to bring about significant positive change.”

The deep importance of such “internal” work comes into even clearer focus when we look at the key personal qualities that make a person a good organizer. As Si Kahn notes in *Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders*, an effective organizer likes people; builds trust and friendships easily; has a sense of humor; listens well; helps people believe in themselves; can let others take the credit; works hard; is self-disciplined, mature, and able to set limits; doesn’t get discouraged too often; has a solid sense of identity and personal vision; is flexible and open to new ideas; and is honest and courageous even in the face of stress and fear.

All of these positive personal qualities need to be cultivated and all of them can be compromised when people are in the grip of burnout, spiritual despair, or personal neglect. As Luz Guerra notes at the close of her study:

*One truth rang clear in all of the stories I heard. There are gaping needs and open wounds in our organizations, in our organizational capacity, and in our social movements. If we do not respond to them with all the resources at our command, then the results will be the continued floundering, stagnation, and decline of the groups we have entrusted with carrying our movements forward.*

This should not come as a surprise. Even though activists have moved farther towards “creative maladjustment” than their more passive neighbors, that does not mean that they have freed themselves from all denial, distorted thinking, and learned helplessness that weighs people down in this society. The feelings, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors of activists are still often misshaped by some of the worst features of our culture—especially by what Michael Lerner calls “surplus powerlessness.” This then is an area where politically-savvy psychologists could share their best insights and tools in creative ways with social movement activists to increase the effectiveness of our social movements. The possibilities are nearly endless if done with respect, compassion, and political insight.

### SUSTAINABILITY: THE EXPANDED MORAL CHALLENGE TODAY

Hopefully, describing these four core proficiency areas will help all of us here focus our thinking about how we each might better assist needed social movements to become more effective. Yet, to more fully ground this discussion in the core themes of this conference, I think we need to get back in our time machine and travel forward through the last four decades since Martin Luther King made his speech to the APA in 1967. It is not that the peace and social justice concerns championed by King are any less relevant in 2007. While the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960s won several incredibly important victories, many of these issues are still with us. However, in addition to King’s powerful peace and justice concerns, we now also need to move onto the very urgent issue of ecological sustainability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some have even described our current environmental situation as a “planetary emergency.”

To help sustainability activists become even more effective will mean developing a fifth core proficiency—a grounded sense of ecological literacy and consciousness. In my own thinking about this fifth core competency, I have probably been most influenced by the thinking of David Orr, the author of the books *Ecological Literacy* and *Earth in Mind*.

For starters, I strongly agree with Orr that it is beneficial for sustainability activists to develop “an understanding of concepts such as carrying capacity, overshoot, Liebig’s Law of the minimum, thermodynamics, trophic levels, energetics, and succession” as well as “our place in the story of evolution.” Related to this, I also agree that “ecological literacy is to know something of the speed of the crisis that is upon us... to know magnitudes, rates, and trends of population growth, species extinction, soil loss, deforestation, desertification, climate change, ozone depletion, resource exhaustion, air and water pollution, toxic and radioactive contamination, resource and energy use—in short, the vital signs of the planet and its ecosystems.”

Orr also claims that ecological literacy and consciousness has a second component. One of his most passionate claims is that ecological consciousness requires more than book learning, and should also be cultivated by “direct experience in the natural world.” For this reason, Orr emphasizes that to be ecologically literate, people need exposure to the study of natural history where they get outside and are encouraged to pay close attention to the other living beings with which we share the planet. As Orr puts it,

*In contrast with most academic studies, which are abstract indoor activities, natural history is concrete and requires direct involvement in nature. It requires first hand knowledge of trees, animals, plant life, birds, aquatic life, marine biology, and geology. It is an antidote to the excessively abstract, overly quantified and computerized, as well as the romantic view of nature derived from armchair ecologists. Natural history forces us to deal with nature on nature's terms. It also promotes the capacity not only to see, but to observe with care, understanding, and, above all else, with pleasure.*

I believe that this direct knowledge and appreciation of the natural world can also help sustainability activists move beyond the purely anthropocentric stance of most progressive activists, including even many environmental activists. This is important to me because I firmly believe that we must also become creatively maladjusted to a purely utilitarian approach to nature and expand our circle of direct moral concern to the more-than-human world as well as other human beings.

Like Orr, I also see a third dimension of ecological literacy that can increase the effectiveness of sustainability activists. The need here is to move beyond only focusing on the vital signs of the planet and begin to focus on the underlying social causes of the environmental crisis as well. According to Orr, “The ecologically literate person will appreciate something of how social structures, religion, science, politics, technology, patriarchy, culture, agriculture, and human cussedness combine as causes of our predicament.” As a corollary, the ecologically literate person also needs to have at least some understanding of how each of these areas of human social life can be transformed and, thus, become key resources in the transition to a just, democratic, and green society. As Orr notes, “The study of environmental problems is an exercise in despair unless it is regarded as only a preface to the study, design, and implementation of solutions.”

This expansion of the “Beloved Community” agenda beyond what King talked about in 1967 may sound daunting, but I already see several hopeful signs that popular ecological consciousness is expanding in this way. For example, how many of you have seen Al Gore’s movie “An Inconvenient Truth?” If you raised your hand, you are not alone. Millions of people have seen this movie, which is

really not much more than a long PowerPoint lecture about the scientific reality of global warming. How did this become a hit movie in the United States of America?

I think the success of this movie is a great example of how a once vacillating politician, a talented documentary filmmaker, some good scientific advisors, and a group of activist sympathizers pushing online and word of mouth advertising can work together to create a breakthrough in the organized system of social denial that has sought to suppress public concerns about global warming in this country for decades.

For me, watching Al Gore's movie "An Inconvenient Truth" reminded me of a scene in a cheesy Hollywood blockbuster a few years back. It was a military courtroom drama called "A Few Good Men." In one climactic scene, Tom Cruise turns to Jack Nicholson, who is on the witness stand, and shouts, "Just tell me the truth." Nicholson's character jumps up in all his "Jack-ness" and shouts back, "The truth? The truth? You can't handle the truth!"

Yet, just one academy award later, I see more and more people working hard to handle the inconvenient truth of this movie--that, because of our massive burning of fossil fuels over the last century, we are now in an accelerating and very dangerous period of global climate change. I'm not even sure the phrases global warming or global climate change can do justice to this situation. What we are really talking about is worldwide local climate disruption, with increasingly severe and almost unimaginable consequences for both people and planet.

As Al Gore suggests in this movie, if we are really going to handle this hard truth, we are going to have to help our households, our businesses, our governments, and the international community adopt an ambitious new set of policies and practices. First, we need to implement policies at the local, regional, national, and global level that will result in the highest levels of energy conservation and efficiency. Second, we'll need to implement policies at all levels that will result in a rapid shift away from fossil fuels towards safe and renewable energy sources. Finally, we will need to implement a variety of policies that strengthen our emergency preparedness and redesign our public and private infrastructure in order to minimize the damage and death toll when severe weather events or other kinds of climate disruptions do occur. We just have to do better than the Bush Administration did in preparing for and responding to the very predictable disasters of Hurricane Katrina and Rita.

The magnitude of all these needed policy changes is a bit staggering, but people are more and more getting it. One of the more visible examples is the Step It Up 2007 national day of climate action this took place on April 14. Hundreds of thousands of people in 1,400 communities around the country came together in a myriad of creative ways to call on Congress to pass

legislation that would cut carbon emissions 80 percent by 2050. Events like this didn't happen even a year or two ago. The entire system of climate change denial is now breaking down rapidly. This process is even farther along in many other countries.

One of the great things about the Gore movie is that it went beyond talking about the science of global warming and started to make the case for more citizen activism. Unfortunately, as refreshing as this part of the movie was, I think the documentary actually soft-peddled a very hard truth about what we need to do to end our industrial addiction to fossil fuels. I, at least, sensed some timidity in the movie during the closing credits. As much as I liked all the personal life style changes suggested at the end of the movie, I'm absolutely convinced that just switching to energy-efficient light bulbs, buying local food more often, and walking and riding our bikes more is not going to get us all the way to where we need to go. Even the couple of suggestions the movie makes about voting regularly or writing letters to our elective officials is not going to be enough—especially when not all of our votes are counted and thousands of people of color are repeatedly pushed off the voting rolls in states like Florida and Ohio.

The other inconvenient truth hiding in the wings of this movie is that we don't just need a power shift away from fossil fuels to renewables. We also need a power shift away from a government that has become a corrupt, elitist, corpocracy and move instead toward one that is genuinely of, by, and for the people—and has a meaningful vision of the common good. By the word “corpocracy,” I mean a government that is increasingly of, by, and for corporations, and especially dominated by Big Oil, Big Coal, and the Military-Industrial Complex that President Dwight Eisenhower warned us about 50 years ago. As long as corporate giants like Exxon-Mobil write our nation's energy policy, bribe our elected officials, pay for their electoral campaigns, and spend millions in a cynical PR effort to make people doubt the factual case for climate change, we will be inhibited from making many of the long-term reforms and policy changes needed to address global climate disruption.

To address this side of the struggle for sustainability. we will also have to confront a government that has been captured by powerful corporate interests, many of whom will do everything in their power to resist a positive policy approach to global climate change. Life style changes, cultivating new kinds of ecological consciousness, voting every four years, and writing letters to our representatives are all very needed, but these basic acts of civic virtue are not enough. To deal with this particularly urgent situation, many more of us need to become intensely politically active, volunteer with progressive activist organizations, experiment with new strategies, and build a social movement even more powerful than Gandhi's Independence Movement in India, or the US Civil Rights Movement, or even the Polish Solidarity Movement that helped

bring down the authoritarian Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. I believe that the task ahead will be of this magnitude.

If what I am saying is true, we will need a psychology profession that is much more politically savvy than it is today and a sustainability movement that is much more psychologically smart. What choices we each make now, and in the years ahead, will make a very material difference in the relative effectiveness and power of our movements for peace, justice, democracy, and sustainability. I urge each of you, as I urge myself, to become a more engaged citizen activist yourself. I also urge you all to contribute the best insights and tools of your profession to the movements we need to heal the world.

## IN CLOSING

I opened today's talk with some words from Martin Luther King's 1967 speech to the American Psychological Association. Let me close with some words from another 1967 speech of his--the one where he ended his own vacillating and finally came out publicly against the brutal US invasion and occupation of Vietnam. With just a few changes of words, King could be speaking to us all of us from the grave today. As he said in his dramatic, April 4<sup>th</sup> 1967 speech, "*Beyond Vietnam:*"

*If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.*

*Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter -- but beautiful -- struggle for a new world.... Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell [ourselves] the struggle is too hard?... Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with [our own] yearnings, of commitment to the cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history.*

The future is in our hands, folks. Let's go for it.

Thank you all very much!

## ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Steve Chase, Ph.D. is the founding director of Antioch University New England's groundbreaking master's program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing. He teaches courses in environmental activism, organizing social movements and campaigns, organizational leadership, and environmental justice. His dissertation is entitled *Activist Training in the Academy* and he now edits "The Well-Trained Activist" blog. Chase has also just been named the coordinator of Antioch University's new faculty interest group on academic education for community change activism and organizing. This new university-wide working group's goal is to help nurture the emerging academic field of activist and organizer training at Antioch University and other institutions of higher education.

Back in the 1990s, Chase edited a book on the commonalities and differences between social and deep ecology entitled *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*. The book also includes his integrative introductory essay "Whither the Radical Ecology Movement?" He has also published several articles in journals and anthologies, including "Changing the Nature of Environmental Studies: Teaching Environmental Justice to 'Mainstream' Students," which is included in the University of Arizona Press anthology called *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* and edited by Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein.

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To learn more about the EAOP, you can also check out the dissertation *Activist Training in the Academy: Developing a Master's Program in Environmental Advocacy and Organizing* at:

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