

Self Care for Activists

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The great illusion of leadership is to think that someone can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.

— Henri J.M. Nouwen

Invitation to Worship: Lao-Tse

If there is to be peace in the world,

There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations,

There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities,

There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors,

There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home,

There must be peace in the heart.

Ancient Witness: Luke 4:16-24

We live in a time when the world is in desperate need of healing. These are the days in which it is absolutely crucial for us to be active.

In this nation we are facing massive inequality and unbridled corporate greed; we are facing an attack on the poor and the dismantling institutions that exist for the common good—education, social security, food stamps, childcare and the like; we are facing the destruction of democracy itself and rampant political corruption; we are facing the reality of endless warfare and a bloated military economy; but finally, we are facing the undeniable cataclysm of global warming and the urgency of weaning ourselves off from fossil fuels for the very viability of the planet for the next generation. I shutter when I think of the world that we are leaving for our children.

If ever there was a time for activism, it is now. We need activists! And when I say activism, what do I mean?

First, that *we use our minds*. As activists we see that healing is not just an individual thing; it is social. We pay attention, read the news, continually learn and educate ourselves. Now, more than ever, with the proliferation of propaganda and misleading disinformation, being an informed citizen takes a lot of effort in our complicated world. We have to spend at least as much time informing ourselves as watching sports or entertainment. Because frankly, as a nation, we are amusing ourselves to death. The greatest enemies of a democratic society are ignorance and apathy.

Second, when I talk about activism, I mean that *we use our voices* to speak up, to take a stand, to advocate, to protest, to participate in the conversation that is democracy.

And finally, when I talk about activism I mean that *we use our bodies* to participate in the political process. Yes, we vote, but at a time when the power of the wealthy wants to make our votes irrelevant, when millions are removed from the voting roles, when voters are being suppressed and discouraged—it is important for us to help and encourage and protect the votes of others! It means that we engage and call and write and organize.

For the sake of our communities, our nation and our planet, it is imperative that more and more of us get off the sidelines and enter the fray with passion and commitment, becoming activists. For this particular congregation, this is not a controversial thing to say. We know here that God calls us to compassion, to work for justice, to activism. When it comes to activism that is so needed in our world today, churches like this one are absolutely vital!

For those of you who fly a lot, maybe you remember the preflight instructions. You know, when they talk about your seat cushions that can function as a flotation device, and they point to where you can calmly exit the plane here, here and here. And there's this part that they go over when losing air pressure and the oxygen masks come down from the ceiling. And the attendant says to put your mask on first before you put one on your child or a loved one.

As a parent this seems counter intuitive because we usually want to put the well being of our children first. But in this emergency situation you won't be able to help the other until you help yourself first. Often people of faith believe that they should always put others first, but sometimes that's not true. Sometimes we need to put ourselves first. Today, I want to talk about this—the importance of healing ourselves.

Today's ancient witness was a part from the New Testament where Jesus is being criticized for being too inclusive, for helping and healing outsiders and non-Jews. Jesus' critics didn't like the fact that Jesus was working healing among those despised outsiders on the other side of the border, and they let him know. He said, "You doubtless will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician heal yourself.'" They were saying, "Jesus, how come you don't help people in your own hometown? Your own kind?" They were essentially saying, "Jesus, look, charity begins at home!"

And so it sounds like the critics were using this ancient proverb to chastise Jesus' inclination to help the outsider, to break the boundaries. They were misusing the proverb to suit their own insider status. How often we can see today people misuse the Bible and ancient wisdom to suit their own purposes! This is an age-old problem. But this misuse doesn't mean that there isn't some wisdom in the proverb itself.

Here's a more healthy statement of the proverb: "Don't go off saving and fixing others without saving and fixing yourself. You can't be a healer unless you can be healed yourself." The church, it seems to me, needs to hear this. We as individuals, need to hear this. Heal others? Sure, great. But don't forget to heal yourself! Put on that oxygen mask.

Jesus, of course, actually was trying to heal the people of his hometown, by the way. He was trying to heal them by helping them to see that God's love extends beyond their borders. He was trying to soften and heal their stone cold hearts. The problem was not that Jesus didn't care about them. It was that they didn't want the kind of healing that Jesus was offering them. To be healed is sometimes to be confronted and challenged with some unpleasant truths about ourselves.

And Jesus attended to his own healing, often withdrawing to "a lonely place" to be alone. He went into the wilderness to pray. He put on that oxygen mask.

Because activists need to take of themselves! The healer also needs healing.

The activist monk, Thomas Merton, once wrote:

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.
(*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*)

So how, then, do we heal ourselves? Well the first hurdle is to admit that we need it! Sometimes the response is: "What do you mean, heal myself! How dare you!" Sometimes people think that churches are for perfect people, people who don't struggle and have their act together, people who don't really need any healing or transformation at all. Sometimes it's much easier to help others than acknowledge that we need healing and help ourselves. Sometimes in churches we are so busy showing God and others how good we are, how invulnerable we are, when we should be doing the exact opposite.

I love that song by Bob Gibson that became kind of the anthem for Alcoholics Anonymous and the recovering community:

*And though this journey is my own,
I need not travel it alone.
By sharing faith with broken friends,
A broken pilgrim slowly mends.*

We heal ourselves when we can accept our own vulnerabilities and when we can be vulnerable with other seekers.

In his classic book, *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen wrote that it is precisely through our own woundedness that we are able to help heal others.

Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The main question is not, "How can we hide our wounds?" so we don't have to be embarrassed, but "How can we put our woundedness

in the service of other?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

Here's the thing: Healers know they need healing. A healer is someone not who has their act perfectly together. You're not going to help heal anyone's soul if you're perfect. The disasters in our lives—the injuries and afflictions—can help wake us up to a reality and experience of wholeness we never knew. It reminds of of the beautiful Leonard Cohen song, "Suzanne," that goes:

*Jesus was a sailor
when he walked upon the water.
He spent a long time watching
from a lonely wooden tower.
And when he knew for certain
that only drowning men could see him,
he said all men should be sailors then
until the sea shall free them.*

So it is in our drowning that we can truly see and by our wounds that we can be freed and experience true healing.

And so as activists, this is what we need from a community. We need a place to develop our inner life—spiritual teachings, worship and prayer—that help us put in the effort for our spiritual journey, like the great activists such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King. We also need the church to truly be a healing community, a place of support to embrace our vulnerability and woundedness.

So that as spiritual activists we may
heal the planet,
heal the nation,
heal our community, and
heal ourselves.