

Politics, Activism and Awakening

Politics is usually a hot-button subject, one that can trigger bitter arguments, end marriages, ruin family dinners, drive apart loved ones, and lead to wars and genocides. It is one of the main realms in human life where it becomes crystal clear that no two people are seeing exactly the same movie of waking life.

Politics is about how we organize and function together in communities—locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Politics deals with things that matter to our everyday survival: jobs, healthcare, education, civil liberties, criminal justice, the well-being of the planet and the eco-system (including clean water, clean air and a livable climate), war and peace—issues that can easily trigger our strongest and most basic survival instincts, the pre-rational ones rooted in the lizard brain.

And to each of us, our current viewpoint—our current movie of waking life—seems irrefutably real. We are all convinced that the way we see things is the way they really are. The illusory appearance that consciousness creates is, after all, very convincing! And yet, no two of us see everything in exactly the same way, and some of us see things in completely opposite and utterly irreconcilable ways.

And most of us have seen things in quite different (often opposite) ways over the course of a lifetime, but our own changes in perspective and opinion feel like simply course corrections in which we've moved from a mistaken view to a correct one, whereas the dissonance between what we see now and what others see is quite upsetting and easily brings forth anger, frustration, explosive arguments, bitter divorces and bloody wars.

Deeper down, this dissonance also triggers a deep-seated fear in us, one that may not even be noticed amidst the fire-storm of anger and the drama of divorce, all of which may be a way of keeping this fear out of sight. It is a fear that arises because everything we think and believe and take to be real is thrown into question. The fact that others see things so differently undermines our whole sense of reality. It occurs to us, if only in a quickly suppressed flash, that everything we see, and everything we think we know may all be illusory. And perhaps this sudden and disorienting sense of groundlessness, along with our survival instinct, is at the root of why we get so angry and fight so hard for our positions. We are holding on for dear life, trying to survive as this form called “me.”

In my lifetime, I have gone from right to left, from far left to less extreme left, from political activism to spiritual awakening—including a passage through liberation theology and engaged Buddhism. In past decades, I've been involved in many political movements including feminism, socialism, gay liberation, disability rights, anti-war, Central America solidary work, and anti-imperialism. At different times in my life, I've supported figures as diverse as Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater on one side, and Malcolm X, Ho Chi Minh, Ralph Nader and Bernie Sanders on the other. There have been years where I tuned the News out, and years where I was swimming in the News. At one point, my life was almost entirely about political activism. But over time, my focus has shifted more and more to spirituality and awakening. I now feel that waking up may truly be the greatest gift anyone can offer to the world.

For many years, I was easily outraged by injustices, embroiled in political arguments, and

heartbroken by all the cruelty and human-induced suffering in the world. When I'd hear eastern teachings about the world being an illusion, I'd feel furious and argumentative (perhaps a clue that something unreal was being threatened by something real). In recent years, this has been shifting. It's not that I no longer care, but there is no longer the same sense of horror I once felt or the belief that all the horrors and injustices can and must be stopped. I see now that human activity is the activity of nature as a whole, and even more deeply, that it is all a dance of consciousness. I see that we don't know how it all goes together. We may need the grit to create the pearl, or the suffering to bring forth liberation, and the resurrection may be impossible without the crucifixion. I have come to recognize that the light and the dark are inseparable, that there is no lotus without the mud, and that the manifestation can only appear in duality, in polarities. Imagining that we can rid the world of darkness and have only light is a fantasy based on not seeing how the world actually is.

Over many years, I began to trust in the wholeness that will be here even after the whole universe is no more. And I began to question, how solid or substantial are all the events going on in the world? As I began to sense more and more deeply that all of it was a kind of dream-like appearance, I began to feel how fluid and pliant and malleable it all is, how full of infinite potential. I came to see that the world isn't actually "out there," set in stone, as I had assumed and believed and felt it was. I remembered the biologist Rupert Sheldrake talking about how laws of nature may be more like habit patterns than laws, and I began to question in a whole new way how the world actually changes. How much impact does one person's awakening have on the whole universe? Maybe much more than I ever imagined.

What actually ends human suffering? Do we stop it with hatred? Rage? Violence? Can we bomb it out of existence? In my experience, no. Maybe opposition and resistance is not the best way to go. I'm not saying there is no place for peaceful protest—certainly there is—and maybe there are times when violence is the only way, whether for an individual defending themselves from a would-be murderer or rapist, or a nation defending itself from a violent threat of invasion, or to stop a genocide, or as a people trying to liberate a country from tyranny. Maybe sometimes violence is the only way to stop violence. I don't know. But I do know that if that violence comes from hatred and blame, in my experience, it will only lead to more and more violence.

How many revolutions that began with the best intentions have ended up being oppressive? How many people and groups who have been the victims of injustice have turned into perpetrators once they got some power? How many soldiers, suffering the PTSD from war, have brought the wars home with them?

Bullies and tyrants may be deeply wounded people who are covering up a huge hole of fear, doubt and vulnerability by acting in the ways they do. In my own experience, when I've had furious anger, I've been told that I look powerful and scary and threatening, but my internal experience in such moments is one of feeling powerless, wounded and discounted in some way. I don't behave in an aggressive or violent way from a place of genuine self-assurance, peace of mind, inner confidence, and real happiness.

What happens within each of us when we are behaving badly (as we all do at times) and someone reacts by coming at us with judgement, anger, hatred and violence (whether actual or verbal)? How do we react when someone makes it clear that they despise us and consider us to be scum? What reaction does this bring forth in us? In my experience, it usually makes us tighten up and get even more hardened into our positions and hateful of the perceived "other."

But what happens when we are met at such a moment with genuine (not fake or manipulative, but genuine) love and compassion by someone who sees beyond our surface behavior to the light inside of us, however buried it may be? In my experience, when we are met in that way, we are much more likely to melt, to let go, to see what we're doing, to wake up. Will such love be enough to stop every tyrant in his tracks or put an end to every genocide? Perhaps not. But the truth is, we're not really separate.

And whose vision for the world is the "right" one? The person you see as a terrorist, I may see as a freedom fighter, and vice versa. To one person, legalized abortion may be the legalization of murdering unborn people, while to another, it may represent women's reproductive freedom and the prevention of unsafe, backroom, coat-hanger abortions. To some, Donald Trump is a savior, to others he is a destructive mad man. Who has it right? Things are rarely entirely black and white. Usually, there is some truth on different sides. And inevitably, our perspective is shaped by our life experiences, by who we identify with, by who or what different people and situations remind us of or trigger in us. Very often, we are battling against phantoms and defending ghosts. And inevitably, we all believe an immense amount of second-hand information that we get from parents, teachers, friends, the media, the internet, social media. And there is really no such thing as an objective report on reality. Everyone sees a unique movie of waking life. What we each see is undeniable in one sense, but our mistake lies in the conceptual overlay that is added on to our bare perceptions (the meanings and interpretations), and in our deeply-held assumption that what we are seeing is an observer-independent reality that is "out there" as some kind of objective fact, and in our identification with what is seen.

I've witnessed some moving political activism during my lifetime, moving from my point of view, that is. Martin Luther King, for example, showed a very positive, loving, non-violent way of standing up for social justice. And I have personally benefited tremendously from the women's movement, the LGBTQI movement, and the disability rights movement, all of which have made my life as a gender-fluid, bi-sexual, lesbian woman with a disability much less painful and less difficult. So, this post is not meant to disparage political activism. I simply find that I'm no longer moved to engage in it. But I'm glad others are doing this work. I'm glad that people are moved to respond constructively to the many situations in the world that are calling for change and healing.

But maybe we shouldn't underestimate the power of awakening, of being present in this moment, of discovering our true nature and moving from identity as a separate person to a knowingness of being boundless awareness. Maybe disengaging from the News from time to time, or at least consuming less of it, and focusing our energies instead on other things, or on simply being awake Here-Now, is not a bad idea. Maybe seeing the dream-like nature of this world is not an act of ignoring suffering, but an act of being liberated from it.

Humanity seems poised to self-destruct either through nuclear weapons or unchecked climate change—and even if we don't do the job ourselves, many natural events could also wipe out life on earth. And in fact, although we often think otherwise, humans are part of nature. Our bombs and skyscrapers are truly no less natural than bee stings and ant hills. And the earth itself is a finite planet with a finite sun. All form is impermanent. When everything perceivable and conceivable is removed, what remains?

An Advaita sage was once asked if the starving refugees (or whatever suffering beings you care deeply about) are real. Are the suffering beings in this world real? The Advaita sage replied, they're as real as you are.

I've always loved this exchange because it leaves us with a wonderful question to explore: How real am I? What is real about me and what isn't? To what am I actually referring when I use the word "I"? Without referring to thought or memory, what am I right now? And without referring to thought or memory, what is this present experiencing (this hearing, seeing, tasting, sensing, perceiving) that I call "the world"? What is real?

Much of what we think of as "me" we have learned: our name, our gender, our nationality, our age, our race. We can change our name, our gender, our nationality, our clothing, our hair style. Many other things that feel like "me" can and often do change over time: political leanings, spiritual leanings, sexual preferences, tastes in music and food, fashion preferences, appearance, abilities and disabilities, occupations, friends and partners. The bodymind is actually nothing but continuous change, all of it inseparable from the so-called "environment" and "others" around it—one undivided seamless happening.

Even that first bare impersonal sense of being present and aware—what is often called the I Am—even this vanishes every night in deep sleep, under anesthesia, and presumably at the moment of death. What remains? What is real Here / Now?

This is not a question to answer with the correct word or with second-hand information. It's a question to dive into and explore directly, not by thinking about it, but by feeling into it, opening to it, dissolving in it.

From this awake presence Here / Now, intelligent action flows. But really, if you look very closely, is anything actually happening?

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