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# GROWING POLITICAL ACTIVISM: ONE JOURNEY

VICTORIA ROSS

Let's define activism as being a change agent. Being a change agent came naturally to me, mostly because my older sister was a paraplegic. Doing things for her and acting on her behalf, with a deep awareness of the inequity so present in our lives and our world, made me more of a "do-er". Our younger brother and sister's coming along made me even more of a helper, key for supporting our mother. Being a generally high-energy person added to that drive to make things better for people.

Our father was a German Jew, a Holocaust survivor who was run out of Munich, Germany in 1933 as a 15-year-old. A rebel, he'd: beaten up a Hitler Youth leader; refused to Heil-Hitler when receiving a prize at his school's Sports Day; pointedly held up a Zionist newspaper in the front seat of a bus; whistled a different tune, digging his hands into his pockets while his class sang a Nazi anthem and some on each side repeatedly pulled his hands out. He became a kibbutznik in then-Palestine and eventually

joined the British Army to fight the Nazis. Justice and integrity was paramount to him.

Our mother was a peacemaker. She applied for early admission to Swarthmore College, the Quaker school, knowing in adolescence where she wanted to go. She would go to any lengths to get people to end a conflict and make peace with each other.

My political awakening occurred gradually. I understood there was a big world out there from an early age, due to our dad's being "a foreigner" and a frequent world traveler. War, injustice, racism, and the international arena loomed large in my mind, as did compassion and the need to help each other.

That compassion which inspires political activism drove my work in every arena (in turn nurses' aid, paralegal, banking, and social work/mobile therapy) even though I was not yet politically active; while I was increasingly alarmed by national politics. My older sister became active in disability and access issues.

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And from 1989, my younger sister was a political activist, intent on justice. However, I was afraid if I let more of the political issues in into my brain, that I would never have any peace from worrying about it. Turned out, happily, I was right.

My entry into real political activism came during the first 9/11 anniversary, with the U.S. immersed in a drumbeat to war on Iraq. This was obvious manipulation, with the media featuring propaganda and the government warped by ulterior motives. I was in a performance art piece in Scranton in which I played a Woman In Black (WIB). This is when I first heard of the group, started by Israeli and Palestinian women who banded together to stand on street corners in silent vigil with signs about stopping the violence. They didn't want to lose any more family, friends, community members. (We have a chapter of WIB in Buffalo, meeting every Saturday Noon-1pm at Bidwell & Elmwood. Sign are on hand and all are welcome!)

I was eager to do what I could to stop the misguided, disingenuous march to war. I could see that George Bush and the neo-cons were angling for more money for Halliburton and other war profiteers. It was also a means for giving the executive branch the increased power and popularity attainable by a "War President," allowing suppression of our civil liberties on a new scale (all as specified in "the Project for a New

American Century"). It angered me so much that I almost signed up to be a "human shield." However, as I explored it, I wondered whether we might be "human magnets"; George Bush et al might have found it highly convenient if peace activists could be quickly disposed of, while in a war zone.

If I'd signed on as a human shield, I would have met Kathy Kelly and other Catholic Workers and international peace activists a bit sooner. Having been ready to risk my life, going all out for local and regional peace and political activism seemed the least I could do. And so I did – fielding and publicizing antiwar activities from Wilkes-Barre, PA, to Binghamton, NY, to Sullivan County and even NYC and DC on occasion. Activism became my passion and my obsession. I spent virtually all my time (when not working as a mobile therapist) agitating against war, then for impeaching President Bush (after two stolen elections), and, as I prepared to move to Buffalo, against fracking. (Susquehanna County, where I lived, was the hub of U.S. fracking activity.)

I worked for the WNY Peace Center (WNYPC) from 2008, teaching "Peaceful Conflict Resolution" through experiential learning, and doing community-building work. I quickly saw that extreme racism and economic injustice were deeply entrenched locally, and I've always believed in the adage, "Think globally, act locally."

The WNYPC had traditionally been an antiwar, antimilitarism group. It was started in 1967 as part of Rev. Dr. King's Clergy and Laity Concerned [about War]. The WNYPC has a history of working hard against nuclear weapons, for "Peace through Justice at home and abroad" (its mission statement), and working in the schools helping to spread peaceful conflict resolution skills. I proudly continued that work. However, the WNYPC was a mostly white, middle class group, despite stellar intentions and being located deep in Buffalo's East side.

In the community building work I did, I concentrated on being a good ally, and getting involved in our local racial, criminal justice, economic, educational, and environmental issues. It seemed an important part of our evolution to a higher level in serving the local community. That has been key to much of my work there, including later as Executive Director (2015-21) and Board Chair (2022-current). The interns, staff, board members, and membership have become more diverse by race, ethnicity, gender and age.

My stepping aside in 2021 so we could hire our then-Office Manager, lifetime Buffalonian Activist Deidra EmEl as Executive Director was a big step forward. It was clear to me, that position needed to be filled by someone with more experience of marginalization than I have, and Deidra doing a wonderful

job, serving the community and following the principles and the spirit of Peace through Justice so desperately needed now. She has focused on education, especially of children and youth, and on having people tell their own story. She's worked on peace on all the levels, including sharing mind-body skills for our own self-care (also key to activism!). Her "grace and dignity ... moral integrity and universal solidarity," in the words of Dr. Cornel West, make her the leader we need today.

Kathy Kelly has also had a great influence on me and my activism. She is a person of great compassion, clarity, and courage. She's been arrested more than 60 times, and has been jailed in the U.S. for protesting. She has fearlessly stood up to the U.S. war machine, to the drone program in particular, and worked tirelessly for children and all others in harm's way in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Gaza. I first met her in Scranton, PA, at a Fellowship Of Reconciliation event, and we stayed in touch.

Following Kathy's lead, I joined her in becoming one of Hancock 38 in April 2011 in Syracuse. This was civil resistance – an attempt to get the U.S. government to follow the law (rather than civil disobedience – i.e., breaking an unjust law). Our die-in and resulting arrests was useful in awakening the U.S. populace to the dangers and illegality of the U.S.'s drone program's extrajudicial assassination and terrorizing of communities.

I was arrested yet again the following year outside Hancock Air National Guard Base. Putting one's body and freedom on the line puts our activism at another level (although due to the grave risks involved, it should always be part of a well-thought-out plan).

Integrity and consensus are required to make necessary changes for genuine justice and to grapple with the challenges we face. Governmental push to control, intimidate, incarcerate, and even kill has gotten the lion's share of resources (locally and nationally), while nurturing, educating, healing, and fulfilling basic human needs subsist on bake sales. We struggle to make sure that people and the planet are put first. That will take communication, cooperation, and, when the powerful won't cooperate, courage.

Political activism is a call to the heart of those who feel deep compassion and commitment to the well-being of the majority, and who also see it will benefit us all to do so. The arenas and opportunities are many. And never give up on someone's becoming a political activist just because they're not there yet. You never know when a small chink will appear, opening the floodgates of a lifetime obsession with working for the common good. Onward!!

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