

TESTIMONY OF A COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

AM I AN ACTIVIST?

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I recently helped to organize a Truth and Reckoning event for Nature and the Great Lakes. We invited people to give testimony from lived experience and knowledge about various topics related to our current culture and how each impacts the Great Lakes and Nature as a whole. We heard from a Catholic nun, a college professor, a medical doctor, a journalist, an environmental lawyer, a former EPA contractor as well as many others including Indigenous people, college students, and community members too. It was an impactful day, listening to their truths, hearing about their part in the system and culture that we have all been born into, and ultimately how to reckon with those truths.

That day wasn't about blame, but about taking responsibility. If we continue to blame others, then we find ourselves always trying to educate and plead with others to make change for us. But what if we started with

recognizing the change closer than that? Those who spoke provided amazing testimony filled with heartfelt honesty including internal struggles on reconciling how the dominant system forces us to choose between things like having a job and feeding our families at the expense of harming nature.

I've found myself being inspired to deal with a variety of truths since then. So that's why I'm taking the opportunity now to provide written testimony of my truth and reckoning as a "community activist".

Am I an "activist"?

If anyone would have asked me this question a year ago, I would have quickly replied "yes". Ask me today and I might say no. We live in a time where there is more chaos and less order than when I was a younger woman or at least that is how it seems looking back and through the lens of my personal reality.

Maybe reading this, some of my words will resonate with you, maybe they won't. And that's ok. That is one of many recent lessons I have learned.

The label "activist" is applied broadly to many people and organizations in conversations, in the news and on social media. So I decided to start with the dictionary definition to see how our culture actually defines an activist.

According to Britannica Dictionary:

: a person who uses or supports strong actions (such as public protests) to help make changes in politics or society.

According to Merriam-Webster:

: one who advocates or practices activism : a person who uses or supports strong actions (such as public protests) in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue

And according to Cambridge Dictionary:

: a person who believes strongly in political or social change and takes part in activities such as public protests to try to make this happen

There is a pattern here which doesn't align with my lived experience and my truth as an activist for community rights and rights of nature. Part of my truth is that for much of my life, I did believe that marching in protests

was activism. It is what we are taught, it is what we see on TV, in print and at the movies. This is how our culture portrays activism. So when it comes to the needed systemic change, where has protesting collectively brought us?

My Truth

Thirteen years ago urban drilling for oil/gas came to my community and many others around Ohio. So I did what many have done and went to protest marches and even spoke at some of them. I was an "anti-fracking activist". But what I soon discovered was that no matter how many protest marches I attended, it wasn't stopping the advance of fracking in my community.

Along my journey to try and stop fracking, I encountered CELDF (Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund) and saw "activism" through a new lens. Instead of protesting what is, what if the people got together and wrote a law for what should be, which for my community was about stopping the drilling and recognizing rights for nature not to be harmed by the destructive process of fracking? With CELDF's guidance we did just that.

This form of activism seemed much more empowering to me. The people practicing direct democracy where they lived. Of course, the drilling corporations didn't think this was an acceptable form of activism and so they

filed a lawsuit against the community and our new law. The courts, unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, agreed with the drillers. But, despite what appeared to be defeats, these were actually victories in peeling back the inner workings of a faulty system. What if we could get more and more communities to engage in this form of activism instead of shaming, blaming and pleading through protests?

I spent the next decade assisting other communities to practice this form of activism. As more communities attempted to empower themselves, to practice democracy, to create the communities they envisioned, the system of government and the courts began to squash the people's efforts one by one.

Then the pandemic hit and things changed dramatically with "activism". Protests in the streets came to a stand still as people were told to stay home and lock down. For "activists" it became a time of endless Zoom meetings and webinars. The pandemic, however you may have related to it, altered and changed our culture and how we each relate to the world around us.

Synchronistically, part of my reflections over this time period, working with my friends at CELDF were also focused on how to change culture. How do people's mindsets shift about relationships, language, governmental

structures and institutions, etc.? Do laws change culture or does culture change the laws?

So much of my so-labeled "activism" was centered around educating community members about how the system functioned so they could then draft their own laws and either pass those with direct initiatives on the ballot or try to convince elected officials to pass these laws for them. This form of activism was still centered on a belief that if the people simply followed the "rules" of the system, they could achieve the results they wanted—stopping harms and creating healthier communities.

But that isn't how it played out. Coming back to my community's story, where the court eventually overturned the law passed by the people, I realized that the problem with making effective change landed back in the laps of my neighbors and me. Even though we now understood about the dangers of fracking, had done the hard work to pass a law, and then experienced the court overturning that law...many weren't willing to do anything more to confront the clear dangers. From what I can tell, they simply accepted that this is how the system works. It was a "you can't fight city hall" reality.

This has happened in many communities since then. So of course my question is, why? What will it take for people to not just read

articles, write letters, sign a petition, go to a march, trust in the system, etc. All the things that “activists” are known to do. What is needed, for a very long time now, is a mass cultural shift in thinking. This means shifting the focus from the few that hold positions of authority in our community to focusing on the many who live there as having authority.

My Reckoning

I can't help but wonder, reflecting on my past work as an “activist”, if I haven't been leading people right down a “cattle chute” of sorts. I had learned through my own experience in my community that at the end of the system's options, democracy by the people was just talk...an illusion that our culture paints for us and yet can be stripped away at any corporation and judge's whim. That when the powerful have the ability to create a system that benefits and protects the powerful's authority, you can't really make it work for the people or nature - no matter how strong your belief is or how active you think you are. By assisting communities to draft laws and tell them to work within the existing system to get them passed, was I just helping the system by giving it more credibility and leading more people into it and believing that this is where the authority lies?

How do I, as a community activist, help to shift our cultural mindset that the residents within a community, including the trees and

the animals and the rivers, not only have to be part of the community decision making process, but also have the authority to be decision makers. Protests automatically divide the community. You are either with the protesters or against them. But, in reality being part of a community is about bringing people together around shared values and having dialog with other community members.

Again, back to my community. Some people supported fracking because they were benefitting with royalty checks. Others weren't. But what we all shared in common was that no one wanted the air to be polluted or the water poisoned or to have an explosion next to the school because like it or not, we all shared this physical place together.

Maybe instead of being so quick to label our neighbors, what if we could sit down with a few of them and try to get to know them better and see if we can find common ground together and build from there.

Right Relationship

Part I of the event I helped organize in October, will continue with Part II next April 2024. With truths told, others to come, and all of us being witness to those truths and reckoning with them, the objective for coming together in the spring is to explore and discover how we get in “Right

Relationship” with Nature and the Great Lakes.

To be honest, I don't know what will come out of the April gathering. But, what I do know is that we have to all start from a place of truth and sometimes grapple with hard questions that come out of those truths and be open to hearing other people's perspectives and knowledge too. Perhaps we'll find some shared values that will begin conversations about changes that have to happen in our culture and our form of governance and decision making in order to truly protect nature and the Great Lakes.

Maybe a new definition of what an activist is will emerge as well....I know it already has for me.



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