

# Sacred activism

By Victor Bremson  
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Both liberals and conservatives agree that this world is a mess and that we must take urgent action to prevent great catastrophes. Sadly, there is no real debate on how this should best be carried out. Instead, the two sides simply talk past each other without real engagement. Instead of seeking collaboration and common ground, the different factions indulge in name-calling, dehumanization and a smug complacency in their own righteousness. The result is that our major problems will be solved much later, if at all, and only after great suffering.

I was sitting in a Jacuzzi in Hawaii recently with a group of successful, intelligent people whom I had just met. We began talking about global warming and I was stunned that not one of these people believed that this was a serious problem. They called it a fraud. They saw no need for significant personal or systemic changes.

Some of my liberal friends likewise seem to march in knee-jerk procession about criticizing the reasons given for the war in Iraq. They articulate wonderfully constructed conspiracies about why we are fighting in Iraq, but I have not heard one of them articulate a cogent solution for dealing with the real dangers of Islamic extremism. More often than not, they simply say the war was the wrong way.

So, instead of hearing people meaningfully discuss global warming and Islamic extremism, I hear anger, ignorance and disengagement. It seems that the separation people are having over culturally divisive concerns such as homosexuality, intelligent design and abortion is carrying over to other issues dealing with our very existence on this planet.

Few people seem willing to collaborate for the best possible solutions. The corporate media seem devoted only to higher ratings and profits. Instead of sincere discourse, we are given attractive news readers or controversial, blood-boiling debates. It should be clear to all of us that our grandchildren's futures are more important than Nielsen ratings. And so-called entertainment news long ago stopped being entertaining.

I recently met with a Catholic nun who had just returned from El Salvador. She had traveled the country with a retired U.S. Army general who had advised El Salvador's military on how to fight the insurgency during the 1980s. Several of this nun's sisters had been brutalized and killed by government supporters during that war.

The general and nun engaged each other about those events and some significant reconciliation occurred. The story reminded me of what has happened in other places around the world, like South Africa and Chile, when people engaged each other in the work of reconciliation. Instead of more revenge and more suffering, people created stronger community bonds and together are facing the future with a new resolve.

This, of course, is about much more than simple compromise and just being civil to each other. My friend, Alan Alhadeff, teaches fellow attorneys and others how to become better mediators by understanding that compromise is never really a good solution. Everyone in a compromise ends up losing something. Alan challenges them to find true collaboration or unity in which everyone feels he or she has won. This can be a challenging assignment, but the result is worth the effort. Evolutionary biologist Dr. Elisabeth Sahtouris describes patterns in nature that consistently push complex organisms toward greater maturity. She illustrates this process as a circle or a loop in which organisms move from unity, to diversification, to conflict, to negotiation, to resolution, to cooperation, and back to unity. It is not hard to see that we humans are stuck in conflict and need to move on to the next steps.

I am proposing that a significant group of us begin a new kind of "sacred activism" that stresses engagement and reconciliation. I call it sacred activism because it is based on the best teachings from all of our faith and knowledge traditions, including those of indigenous peoples, ancient and modern spiritual teachers, philosophers, and physical and social scientists.

Sacred activists seek a major transformation in the way our society deals with the future. They share a common value that focuses on the long-term well-being of future generations. And the issue of generational responsibility is the key that can bring us to engagement, reconciliation and the will to solve our problems. The Iroquois Confederacy instructs its chiefs to consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation when deliberating on the serious matters of the council. Contrast this with our culture that demands instantaneous gratification.

Being a transformational leader can be lonely and difficult work. Sacred activists need to overcome their fear of looking weak, of being wrong and of being ostracized by their communities. They can begin engaging each other by simply sharing their stories and dreams in ways that will cause them to grow together into a stronger community.

Carl Anthony of the Ford Foundation teaches that the primary way to create successful change within a community is to bring all the factions together to simply share their individual stories. I have experienced this creation of strong bonding between people through the sharing of stories. In one group, we shared stories about people we knew who had demonstrated life-sustaining

leadership. People shared stories of teachers, parents, military leaders, activists and bosses. As we listened to each other's stories, a connection grew within the group and we became a family. We started deeply listening to each other's stories instead of each other's opinions. Being listened to is a basic human need. We are much more willing to join in the search for truth once we believe that we are being listened to.

Our world is rich with trainers who are teaching engagement and reconciliation tools that can help us get through the fractionalization of our times. In Israel, there is a cooperative village called Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam (Oasis of Peace) that has been functioning for nearly 35 years. Some 50 Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish families live there in a totally egalitarian way. They have facilitated reconciliation encounters for more than 35,000 Arab and Jewish high-school students. People who have visited this village have been greatly moved by the hope that they find there. The Compassionate Listening Project, a U.S.-based nonprofit, has facilitated many similar encounters around the world. Here in the Northwest, it created some understanding between Native Americans wishing to do ritual whale hunting and environmentalists concerned about the possible extinction of whales if the hunting were allowed. Project organizers began by simply allowing both sides to tell their stories without interruption.

In Seattle, the Northwest Interfaith Community Outreach started as a group of four diverse religious communities with the goal of breaking down barriers and building connections among themselves. They are studying each other's traditions and joining together for social outreach. They now want to share their model of hope with other communities.

Sacred activists also need to learn how to heal the deep wounds that have arisen during the conflict phase in order to get on with the work of engagement and reconciliation. We are a wounded and fractured people and we are not going to be able to deal with our problems by ignoring these wounds. There are many methods for letting go of our anger — and teachers to show us how.

The payoff for all this hard work comes in the form of creating stronger communities and more-easily implemented solutions for the major crises of our time. We can do this because we are not spending all our energies fighting each other's politics.

We have incredible knowledge and potential to solve our problems. Product designers like Dr. William McDonough tell us, for example, that we can design products that create no solid waste. McDonough says we have the capability of making all waste products the food for some other species. His mission statement is simply that the products we design should show "our love for all children, of all species, for all times."

We don't all have the amazing courage of a Rosa Parks or the Chinese student who stood in front of tanks at Tiananmen Square. However, I think courage today has much more to do with the willingness to compassionately engage, and reconcile with those who don't agree with us, on life-sustaining issues. It is still critically important to speak our truth, but I believe that we must learn

to do it without creating so much separation. I suspect if we do we will find out that we are not that far apart.

Some commentators have reflected publicly on the fact that our knowledge is growing faster than our wisdom. Reversing this trend is the sacred activism that is needed for the 21st century.

*Victor Bremson of Seattle is a corporate turnaround consultant and former CEO. He recently received a doctor of ministry degree from Wisdom University, founded by former Dominican priest and spirituality teacher Matthew Fox. Bremson is planning a conference on sacred activism at the Lynnwood Convention Center on May 11-14; visit [www.wisdomuniversity.org](http://www.wisdomuniversity.org) for more information.*