

Fight or Detach?

Rev. Gabi

Where do you see yourself - do you rather fight, or do you detach? The initial reaction of most of you is probably, "but of course, we have to fight". I mostly agree, but both the labor movement and our efforts to reverse climate change are fights that last decades, at least. No single person can do that.

Whether you talk about hurricanes Harvey or Sandy; or Chicago in 1887, or sweatshops in Asia or minimum wage here in the USA today, even the smallest victory takes many years of struggles and fight. The labor movement is officially defined in two parts:

#1-An organized effort on the part of workers to improve their economic and social status by united action through the medium of labor unions

#2-The activities of labor unions to further the cause of organized labor

Looking at that definition, maybe you can detect a point where it is possible for the individual "fighter" to detach. Namely, if your goal is to improve the life and the circumstances of working people, you can fight for that with your whole being; but start to detach once you have been successful in establishing labor unions. In other words, you have made it possible to create a system that will continue doing your work.

Wouldn't that be nice?

It is such a complex question: is there ever a time to stop fighting for a just cause? Is there ever a time when attachment to a just cause is harmful for you? I don't even want to go into the next question, "What is a just cause?". Or, in other words, what if a "just cause" is just for you but not for somebody else? That's another sermon.....

Another point that might make you decide to detach: When we're talking about disasters like Harvey or Sandy, there's absolutely nothing we can do immediately to prevent this from happening again. We are at a point in our uphill battle for change where the building of dams or the strengthening of the building structure is not going to make a difference anymore. We are also at a point where the destruction of the environment is so significant that there is no one solution anymore.

Comparing it with the struggle for fair labor conditions, and what has been gained in this country; the Paris Accord is the closest to a victory. And we have found out recently how meaningless it is for some Americans. So - do we continue to fight? We know that even if we ever get everybody on board with real change-making, it would take 20 or 50 years to see significant results; plus there still would be an infinite number of disasters before we have repaired the worst of the damage we have done to the planet. And the minimum wage may be raised by a buck or two - it still won't help most people to make a decent living. We know now that already some of the environmental damage is beyond repair; and that hurricanes and earthquakes and other disasters will

be part of the picture for humans on this planet forever. Wouldn't it be understandable if we detach and stop fighting?

So let's go back to the question: how - if ever - to detach, to stop fighting.....The Buddha taught about detachment, or "non-attachment", for a very good reason. Whenever you attach too much to anything or anyone, you are more likely to get hurt, to suffer. As the first Noble Truth of Buddhism says: There is suffering in life. And the second Noble Truth tells you that suffering is caused by cravings, or extreme attachment. But, we learn in the third Noble Truth that we can avoid suffering if we avoid cravings. It is important, in my opinion, to use the translation of "craving" instead of the often used translation "desire". You see, there is nothing wrong with desire!

Going back to our causes: the labor movement, or the destruction of our environment and the climate change that causes so many natural disasters: we have a strong desire to try to change this! In the last century, the focus was on creating strong unions which could then pick up the fight and make it their ongoing mission to ensure the protection of all laborers. In this century, there still has to be a strong desire to fight for the causes of poor people: namely, people who are paid minimum wages or less. People who have to work several jobs in order to make ends meet, without ever being able to reach a standard of living that we would call acceptable, without worries, without too much stress, with reasonable hope for better days, better times.

When it comes to climate change, we also have to have a strong desire to change what is possible, what causes people - especially so often innocent people - to suffer from the abuse of our planet's resources. So, yes, we have to have a strong desire to fight against injustice, against the ongoing destruction of the environment. But, there is a point where we have to stop fighting - or at least slow down - significantly: a point that is different for each person!

When our desire to fight against injustice and for change becomes a craving, a craving to a point that we are in danger of burning out or breaking down, we may have reached that point. For our own sake, and for the sake of the cause, we have to acknowledge when we reach that point. We have to accept that there is only so much we can do.

However, don't get me wrong, detachment does not mean giving up! It might just mean taking a break, stepping away for a short time. Stepping away can help you by simply giving you a different angle, a different viewpoint on an issue. It might make it possible for you to evaluate your approach, and to diagnose the reason for your exhaustion, for your breakdown.

In the 14+ years of my ministry, I have seen two different scenarios: folks who were very involved in fighting against racism, or against environmental destruction, burned out. In some cases, unfortunately they left not only the social justice groups with which they were working, but also their congregation. But in at least one other case I

remember, the person took a short break, reassessed her abilities and passions, and then returned as a mentor for new members of the congregation who were interested in social justice work. She also took it upon herself, at age 84, to learn Facebook and became an avid “poster” of social justice news on behalf of the congregation!!

There’s one more problem when healthy and necessary desire turns into unhealthy and dangerous craving, and we see it often. Some folks who have fought peacefully, in non-violent ways for years or even decades, eventually become frustrated beyond reason and become violent in their actions, in their fight. And we know, don’t we, that violence never helps. It only turns the people who might have been neutral until now into potential enemies.

I would like to close today’s musings with another insight, a brand new one! Amazon just delivered a book I ordered to my mailbox on Friday. It is called Recovery-the Sacred Art by Rami Shapiro. He explores 12-step programs through the lens of different world religions. As I was casually leafing through it, the word “attachment” jumped out at me. Coincidence? The chapter on those pages references the Bhagavad Gita, one of the Hindu scriptures. Shapiro writes, *“Most of us act from a desire to control, to achieve some desired result; the action is a means to an end, and it is the end on which we are focused. Karma Yoga (the Hindu spiritual practice) suggests a different approach: since we cannot be certain of what ends might arise from our actions, we are better served, and the world is better served, if we focus not on the ends, but on the means - on the actions themselves. We do not act in order to achieve a certain result, we act because action is unavoidable. We do not act in a healthy way in order to control the world and achieve a certain desired outcome, we act in a healthy way because we realize that sane action- action that is compassionate and just and supportive of the welfare of both self and the other - is the most appropriate action in the situation at hand.”* We cannot control the results of our actions, only the actions themselves. Acting in this way is called: “sacrificing the fruits of our action”. It is how Gita understands powerlessness.

The Gita is an incredible teaching tool, but it takes time and patience to figure out what it is teaching you. You see, for me, the next question is, if we’re powerless, how can we work towards social and environmental justice? I leave you with this question. For me, I’m looking forward to finding the answer in the following pages of my new book.