

several times with my Dad over Skype from his hospital room, and had reached a point where I could get through it without reminders. I did usually like public speaking. But the thought of the live webcast was making me feel unsteady, and I had an emergency index card with headings folded up in my back pocket in case I lost my way.

I didn't need it. Once my name was called, once I walked onto the stage and got over the awkwardness of the first few words, I took in the room in front of me, and realised that I had spoken to larger audiences before. And this one would be friendly. They weren't experts in my topic who'd be pulling angry or agonised faces when they thought I was off-point; they were interested members of the public who wanted me to do well. This was TEDx Westminster, one of many spin-off events from the original TED talks, and I was in a conference room in the heart of Whitehall. And the words were coming. Of course they were. This was what I had worked on for most of a decade. The video shows me leaning forward earnestly as I explained how banks headquartered in London were ripping off the people of impoverished countries by accepting, into the accounts of their rulers, corruptly obtained funds that should have been in public budgets. I was describing the creation of poverty by some of the most powerful institutions in the world, and what should be done about it. I knew what I was talking about because I had been investigating it myself, and I really cared. 'You smashed it,' was the gleeful response when I returned to the office of the anti-corruption campaign group I worked at, where several of my team had been watching online. I was told, too, by colleagues there, that it was a minor hit in Nigeria, one of the countries whose pilfered oil revenues I'd been talking about. And the numbers of views online ticked up over the next few days.

Why, then, did I feel so flat? I couldn't quite understand my gloom, but I sensed it was something connected to what I *wasn't* able to say. Because I was representing the organisation for which I was a campaigns director, I needed to keep within the lines of our campaigning 'asks': the changes that we viewed as necessary and that we were agitating for. Those 'asks', which on this topic I had devised myself, were that banks be properly regulated to prevent them fuelling corruption and the hollowing-out of public funds. And I still stand by the changes that I was recommending in that talk.

Banks do need to be carefully regulated to prevent them fuelling corruption and tax evasion. It is because they are still not regulated appropriately that new examples of the financial and legal sectors' contribution to poverty and the degradation of the public sphere keep emerging with each new leak of data from a whistleblower, even as the examples I gave from our investigations up to 2014 are now beginning to age. So what was it that I couldn't say?

Here's what I was starting to see, but couldn't say. 'We need an economic system that isn't based on economic growth, one that puts care at the heart of everything. We must regulate banks, sure, but we also need to alter the way that money is created and used. We need to live in a way that isn't so dependent on extraction from other people and other places, and if we don't find a way to do these things, worsening ecological destruction and worsening injustice are guaranteed...' But because I was only starting to see the depth of the problems we face, I couldn't craft these despairing feelings into a 'clear message' with a positive pay-off. Even if I had been able to, these points did not relate to my work on the specific campaign about which I had been offered a platform at that event. Perhaps the hovering presence of this unspoken material is why my talk never really took off online like some TED talks do. An acquaintance who works in communications offered the frank feedback that I hadn't done what the really successful talks do. They make it clear right from the top that there is something that can be done differently, a positive vision which is then woven through the discussion of the problem. I had started with the problem, described it clearly and passionately. And then I'd put some suggestions for change – in this case, 'more regulation' – at the end. I sort of knew it wasn't top-notch campaigning. That feedback, which I welcomed, wasn't a huge shock. But the reason I'd put my proposals for change at the end, rather than foregrounding them, was because I had become so painfully aware, despite their necessity, of their insufficiency. And that felt very uncomfortable. Activism doesn't really work if we're not fully behind what we're saying.

What do I mean by 'activism'? I am talking about efforts to turn the world towards what I regard as justice, equality, peace and ecological sanity, though of course the word is not owned by those who work for these goals

On all of these scales, I was an activist. As a chosen identity, I liked the fuck-you approach to those in power that it seemed to convey. I wore that identity as armour and behaved accordingly, comfortable with the idea of campaigning as combat. As an attempt to make things better, there was nothing else I wanted to do. As a mindset, there was no question: of course I should try to improve the world. And as a tactic of speaking up and confronting, that was who I was. I had been confronting and arguing since I was a child. My parents would be torn: between glee at my brutally articulate, vicious shredding of anyone exhibiting pomposity, lack of analysis or right-wing views at their dinner table, and exhaustion and defensiveness at my attacks on their own right-wing views. In practical terms, I had a professional job as a campaigner for a decade and a half, at organisations both well known and unknown. I worked, on staff, freelance or sometimes as a volunteer, for Amnesty International, Landmine Action, the International Action Network on Small Arms, Christian Aid and Global Witness, as well as at an undercover research agency that investigates the arms trade for human rights campaigners, a UN disarmament agency and a small child-protection charity in Sierra Leone that has since closed. I did research, writing, strategy planning, coalition building, political lobbying and press liaison.

I worked on campaigns that resulted in a treaty to limit international weapons sales and the treaty that banned cluster bombs. I gave testimony to a US congressional inquiry and submitted evidence to a parliamentary inquiry in the UK. I launched a campaign to tear down laws allowing secret company ownership in tax havens and major financial centres, that has resulted in changes to the law in – so far – 81 countries.<sup>13</sup> I became a campaigns director, a portentous-sounding title for a job that entailed responsibility for a fairly generous budget and a team of 20 investigators and campaigners who were publishing relentlessly defamatory material about the facilitation of grand corruption and ecological devastation by oil and mining companies, banks and tax havens. The task was a mixture of strategy, editorial, whistleblower-management, source-protection, motivation and agony aunt. I had to keep everyone safe while on undercover exploits, out of the libel courts, and in the pages of the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* where our investigations and recommendations would be seen by those in charge.

Joanna Macy, a philosopher, activist and trainer, sees an ecology of change-making activity in which there are three types of interventions necessary to bring about the 'great turning' towards justice and ecological sanity. Opposing abusive power directly is the first: the 'holding action' to prevent further harm. This is the classic oppositional 'no!' of activism, the one that is most obvious to the outside observer. Second is the work to create new alternatives, and third is the 'inner' transformation necessary to envisage a world not built on violent domination.<sup>14</sup> I was in the thick of the 'holding actions', and for many years this work felt good. I was using the journalism skills I had originally trained in. It felt more effective than going on marches (though I did those too), like the huge anti-Iraq war one in March 2003 that was so roundly ignored by the warmongers in Downing Street. I was working on something I cared about, the responsibility of companies and banks, headquartered on my doorstep in London, for the awful state of economies that were dependent on natural resource revenues. This felt especially important after living in Sierra Leone for six months, working for a small aid agency in the aftermath of a recently ended civil war that had been fuelled by the diamond trade.

At Global Witness in particular, there was a rough glamour to the scene that appealed to the side of me that had, before I turned away from newspaper journalism, aspired to be a foreign correspondent. It started from the moment I was 'interviewed' for a job by a dishevelled, cowboy-booted enthusiast who appreciated my tales of trying to outwit National Rifle Association lobbyists in the corridors of the UN in New York during negotiations towards a (failed) agreement to control the second-hand gun trade. We ranted about the ghastliness of various arms dealers whose efforts we had tracked, and traded stories about unpleasant members of the *Blood Diamond* film production crew whom we had each encountered in Freetown. After a couple of hours of this I was offered a job investigating the role of banks in facilitating conflict and grand corruption. (Recruitment processes improved slightly in the years after that.)

I spent months talking to policemen (for they were all men), anti-corruption investigators, lawyers, money-laundering experts, journalists, authors, spooks, ex-spooks, corporate intelligence spooks, mercenaries, academics, peddlars of offshore finance, sanctions administrators, UN human rights

That was when I hit the wall with a form of campaigning that, for years, I had seen as an extension of myself. It wasn't only the straightforward exhaustion that comes from hard work, although goodness knows, I now understood just what it took to get even one law changed. It was something deeper. The investigations I had done on banking and secret company ownership had radicalised me. I had always known there was something wrong with the global economy, but now it felt that I could see into the very heart of it. I could see that it could never be anything but extractive and predatory. There were no natural resource contracts that didn't involve some form of corrupt influence, even if the law didn't designate it as such. There were no people or species who were immune from a system – capitalism – that was designed to turn living things into money. The financial system itself was systemically criminogenic, a fact that has now been compellingly written up by the journalist Oliver Bullough in his book *Moneyland*. There are many people who, through living in a class, or a racialised identity or a geography that has been subordinated by capitalism, have always known some version of this. But I was white and middle class and from the southeast of England and had reacted against my family to become an activist. I knew there was something wrong with the world system and that it needed changing. But it was new to me to acknowledge this quite so explicitly: that extractive capitalism in the form we knew it was essentially unreformable.

And now here I was, doing a TEDx talk on behalf of the organisation I worked for, an organisation that operated, although we wouldn't have said so explicitly, on the basis of *reforming* capitalism.<sup>16</sup> We were engaged in the first of Macy's three interventions: a holding action, of sorts, to stop capitalism being quite so abusive. We called for new laws, new international agreements, for punishment of offenders. I had even achieved some new laws. We talked about making the system work for the poor: if natural resource revenues could only be transparently handled, then the countries involved would benefit. Our willingness to name and shame the companies doing wrong, to risk the draconian English libel laws that could shut us down, made us feel we were ever so radical – and compared to our peers in the NGO world who were quiet on the causes of poverty while continuing to hand out aid, perhaps we were. But fiddling with the superstructure of capitalism while it continues to consume the earth and its people was

not radical, in that word's true meaning of getting to the roots, and now I knew it. And I no longer believed that the 'solutions' I was parroting – regulating this, regulating that – were enough, when the mindset of relentless extraction was going unquestioned. I could no longer live with the cognitive dissonance of talking about a small part of the solution without openly acknowledging that it was only a small piece of what was needed. I left my job a few months later.

I wasn't only tired of proposing changes to our economic system that didn't take account of the fact that our economy is a subset of our biosphere. I was tired, too, of arguing aggressively, with men, about things that their privilege, position and role made it so hard for them to contemplate, and tired of being so patronised by them. ('If you were an economist, Anthca, you would know that what you are suggesting is impossible.' Though what I was suggesting is now law in dozens of countries.) I was tired of trying to tweak a system that systematically left the family, the social, and women's childbearing role out of economic calculations – a system that had, in Katrine Marçal's excellent book title, forgotten 'Who cooked Adam Smith's dinner?'<sup>17</sup> (It was his mum.) I was tired of putting carefully sourced, carefully checked facts in front of policymakers and expecting them to respond rationally. It seemed redolent of the rational-actor assumptions behind the flawed *homo economicus* model at the centre of the economic thinking I wanted to undermine. This was before the Brexit and Trump elections of 2016 that revealed, unequivocally, the limits of assuming that people made decisions through rational thinking. I was also tired of the relentless treadmill of activity, of always taking on more than we could handle, of leaning into the media noise, because it was all so urgent. I was tired of a culture of feeling superior to other campaigners with different tactical approaches. I was tired of having to be so sure I knew the answer. I wasn't suffering the form of 'burnout' that looks like total physical exhaustion and illness, which was something that had happened to me years earlier when I was a journalist. But I was perhaps experiencing one of the earlier, subtler symptoms: that nagging message from within that something needs to change.

I was tired, too, of demonising the other side. Our unofficial motto was that we were going to 'get the bastards'. I did have colleagues with a more

inclusive, participatory sense of the task, one perhaps more grounded in experience of the struggles of our collaborators in countries affected by corruption, who didn't feel so comfortable with that phrase. But some of us did like it. I liked the idea of 'getting the bastards' because it fitted with my punchy understanding of what activism was about, as well as with my journalist's sensibility. I was taught at journalism college that reporters must ask themselves: 'why is this bastard lying to me?' I'd even had thrilling little moments of acknowledgement, from some of the bastards themselves, no less, that we might be getting to them. On one of these occasions, a lawyer, a paid representative of offshore tax havens, invited us to his office for lunch so he and several colleagues could grill us about our campaign (which was starting to be noticed and would soon be acted on) by MPs and Downing Street (for an open register of who owns companies in every country. The meeting went on for hours. 'Can I ask something?' I eventually said. 'You're probably all on several hundred pounds an hour, so we've taken a few thousand pounds of your time already. Why are those who pay you willing to spend that?' 'Because,' he replied, with a sudden show of rather unlawyverly anger, 'what you are calling for will cost our clients a lot of money.' And there, he said it, what so often stayed hidden: that we would impede their profits if we won.<sup>48</sup> (This sentiment was more usually expressed blandly and without mentioning money, by saying that their clients would find whatever we were proposing 'difficult'.) So if I was now getting tired of painting the 'other side' as the bastards, it wasn't because the people and companies we were investigating had stopped doing awful things. They hadn't. In fact, the more we investigated, the worse we realised it all was. But after participating in it for so long — this denunciation of what and who was wrong — I started to feel this was an empty ritual, one that might also be obscuring other truths, including about ourselves.

Donella Meadows, a systems thinking expert and author of the Club of Rome's 1972 *Limits to Growth* report, observed: 'Psychologically and politically we would much rather assume that the cause of a problem is "out there", rather than "in here"'. It's almost irresistible to blame something or someone else, to shift responsibility away from ourselves, and to look for the control knob, the product, the pill, the technical fix that will make a problem go away.<sup>49</sup> It can be irresistible, too, for activism to see the problem as those bad guys over there, or that faulty legislation over here,

and to seek to pull levers of power and influence to stop the bad guys and fix the faults, without looking at ourselves and what is known about human nature. If we looked at ourselves, we would have to acknowledge that many of us, as activists, are as damaged by the unhealthy human culture we live in as the people we want to change.

The very idea that the only problem is 'those bastards' who are 'over there' emerges from the same form of thinking that created the problems we are trying to tackle: the extractivism, at the heart of the economy, that says we can obtain resources or labour or dump waste 'over there' – anywhere but here. As activists trying to tackle the 'over there-ness' of an abusive economic system, we are prone to thinking in 'over there' terms about those who are responsible for it and those who benefit from it. 'Over there' thinking also contributes to the saviour syndrome, in which those who are being 'saved' or 'helped' are made the repository of projections and assumptions from those doing the 'helping', denying them their humanity and agency.

When activists do not see that we are part of what we are trying to change, it is hard for us to see the ways in which the problems that we are trying to tackle end up manifesting, too, in us. We can see that the logic of endless economic growth is not good for the biosphere and we are busy arguing for alternatives, but it is harder to see the connection to our own logic of endless activity that leads to frequent burnout. We can see the urgent necessity of protecting people from conflict, violence and human rights abuses and are working at some cost to ourselves to try to do so. It is harder to see, however, that the conflicts we have with our colleagues and collaborators, the divisive barriers we unwittingly erect around our activist identity, may share psychological roots with the abuses we are fighting. We can see the centuries of damage and horror caused by colonialism and enslavement and are working to overturn these histories and their current manifestations in inequality, poverty and racist policing and border policies. But for those who have benefited from these histories, it is harder to see how the racist and hierarchical thinking may be manifesting in our own interactions with the people we think we are trying to help – or, indeed, that the entire frame of 'helping' is suffused with unhelpful notions. We have developed the sharp eye to observe abuses of power wherever we look, yet do not want to see the internal forces that drive our own will to control.

And if activists cannot see that the problem we are trying to solve runs in us, then we cannot see the extent of the problem. When we understand the extent to which we are entangled, the real task of activism comes into view: to change not just the rules of the system, but the perceptions and thinking behind the system. Unless we can 'see' this perception and thinking, and get a handle on it, we remain in its thrall, seeing 'through' it, as a lens colouring our vision. As long as we continue to insist that 'the system' - whatever is 'out there' - is what needs changing, we turn away from seeing the perceptions that we still share with the people who run it: that we are above nature, that rational analysis is the only tool we need, that control is the answer, that anything we do can have simple cause and effect.

'Over there' thinking affects our dealings with the bastards, the people we think we are trying to help, and even the people who are mostly like us but who don't seem to appreciate the issue as well as we think we do. 'Over there' thinking is, perhaps, what is going on when people who are campaigning in support of the identity rights of others (i.e., we are campaigning in solidarity, rather than for our own identity to be recognised) become vociferously focused on the wrongs of others *like us* who haven't yet learned what we have learned. It can be easier, as a white person doing anti-racist activism, to get noisily angry at other white people who are being obviously racist, than to do the quiet and difficult work of acknowledging our own ongoing implicit racism. It can be easier, as a cis person supporting the rights of trans people, to weigh in against the views we don't like of other cis people, than to acknowledge just how recently we might have come to our own views. 'Over there' thinking of any kind makes it all too easy, when we are dealing with the nasty things that the 'other side' does - however we are conceiving of the other side - to forget that everyone is capable of it, in ways that start to break down the very distinction between 'us' and the 'other side'.

'Over there' thinking emerges from the human tendency to split ourselves and project the features of ourselves that we don't like onto others; to try to control others as a way of feeling psychologically safe; to create walls around our identity that give us that lovely group feeling but prevent effective communication with those outside the group. While these habits emerge from our human condition, there are ways - with experience,

guidance and much practice – to tame them, opening the door to more peaceful relations with each other. In a healthy culture that offered support and role models for this learning, these habits would not be such invisibly inevitable ways of structuring communication and relations in the shared public realm. But we are not in a healthy culture; we are entangled in the damaged and damaging culture that we are trying to change, and these habitual ways of seeing and behaving help to shape what we think activism ought to be. So we hold back from challenging ourselves in case we are the ones who are found wanting. We sound extremely certain about the people who we think are getting it wrong, because it feels that the worst thing, for an activist, would be to sound not quite sure. It was no longer being sure about the sufficiency of what I had for so long presented as a solution that led to my discomfort after doing that TEDx talk.

An alternative to 'over there' thinking is to attend to ourselves. But that doesn't often feel like the right thing for activists to do, as the next chapter explores.