10 Reaching over the gap

IT'S NOT that activists don't appreciate the workings of dualities that separate some humans from other humans, our minds from our bodies, humans from nature. But without awareness of how deep these splits run, it is hard to prevent ourselves acting from them. It was my own growing awareness of these splits as they manifested in me that caused me to start questioning the ways in which I was fighting as a campaigner for new laws. This awareness was seeded in me when, in the years before my children were born, I would go camping, hill-walking, rock-climbing and river-swimming almost every weekend to recover from the campaigning work I was doing during the week. I began to notice that I was a different self in the wild. Weekdays were dominated by a thinking, arguing, hurling myself around the world on aeroplanes self that felt as if it operated from the upper reaches of my skull and left the rest of me desiccated, stiff-necked and migrainous. In the wild, at weekends, I was a porous, mossy, expansive, soft, bodily self. It's not that I stopped thinking. But I was also delighting in green river water and reeds stroking my skin as I swam; in gusts of cold air and hard, sharp edges of rock under my scoured fingertips as I picked my way, swearing, up a vertical limestone crag; in the enormity of widened and softened perception that can be experienced on a mountain ridge under a huge sky towards the end of several hours of quiet walking. In experiencing how whole it was possible to feel, I was noticing how disembodied I was feeling the rest of the time. I was, I realised, a physical creature, and the boundary between me and the non-human world was not so firm as I had thought. I was experiencing an awareness of my own split between mind and body, between psyche and nature, a split that seemed related to the gap between the restricted form of consciousness that I brought to work and the more expansive consciousness that was brought forth when I was in the hills. I reached for books, fiction and non-fiction, that made sense of it – this split of modernity, and arguably a split that is much older, that separated humans from the matrix of existence. I inhaled Natalie Merchant's ecofeminist classic *The Death of Nature*, and fell for D.H. Lawrence's observation about love in *The Rainbow*:

> Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made personal, merely personal feeling. This is what is the matter with us:

> we are bleeding at the roots because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars. Love has become a grinning mockery because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the Tree of Life and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilised vase on the table.

My being drawn to that green door of awareness was a pull away from a mode of consciousness that helped to create the problems I was fighting: a dry, rationalistic, atomistic approach that counts only the things that can be counted and sees the economic bottom line as the 'real' world.[270]

I started, dimly, to intuit that my replication of this mode of consciousness in my work to undermine these economic systems was less than optimal. But instead of following the glimmering thread of this intuition – which was rather fainter than my observations of the more practical ways in which our tactics were mirroring the systems we wanted to change – I got excited about what I was only just beginning to learn, and raced straight into ownership of it. Instead of building on the transformative state that I had been cultivating in the wild, participating in the ancient pan-cultural understanding that meditating and sleeping out alone on mountaintops will bring visions (and not always benign ones), I turned away and dived into action.[271] The conditioning was strong, for sure. Delighted with my new knowledge, but without having fully taken on the extent of my ongoing deep entanglement in split, dualistic thinking – including, of course, the very possibility that I could consider such knowledge 'mine' – I went back into campaigner mode. I condemned this dualism that was causing us to stand by while we destroyed the basis of life on earth. What we need is more connection with nature! More connection with our feelings! More connection with each other! All of which is true. But an unthinking condemnation of dualism can, like so much activism that unthinkingly condemns an ideology, start to sound forced and strident.

There is a subtlety here: to recognise that the desire to fight a polarity without mitigating for the impact of our own internally polarised way of understanding the world leaves us reaching across the gap, forcefully. We recognise, as we start to wake up, those of us who have been asleep, that the problem – we are split – must be fixed. But we may not immediately recognise that our internalisation of the split in our culture unconsciously shapes *how* we might to try to heal that split. When we reach across the gap

It is starting to get a bit repetitive now.
→ is there a need to keep saying " as we internalise split affects how we do split ".

forcefully – the gap between how things are and how we want them to be, as well as the gap that we perceive between those of us who see that things could be different, and those who seem not to see it – we can overreach. When we lean across the gap forcefully, we can entrench the difference. This is to say, in different terms, what I was suggesting in Chapter 4: that activists who speak about and to their opponents in projective ways will magnify the gap between them. All of this is hard to perceive, however, when we are overreaching out of a habit of trying-too-hard or of fight-and-control that feels normal, or that has become a way of surviving. It is hard to perceive, too, when we are up against people and forces that do need opposing. Power never gives up its privileges without a fight, and frightening social forces do not feel too far away. The point is not to avoid confrontation, resistance and opposition, as they are an inevitable part of activism, but to look at the nature of the forcefulness we are bringing to them.[272]

In a conversation with one of my former colleagues, Annie Dunnebacke, described what would happen to her when she was 'on' as a campaigner.

> I would get louder, shutting off from myself, not looking at the connection between how I was acting and how I felt, cutting off from a relationship with the person in front of me. More argumentative, more confident, more certain, probably fake. In this mode, there was a risk of asserting things far more strongly than the facts – or my true feelings – warranted. It's such an awful feeling: complete dissonance. There's something very masculine about the persona I felt I had to create. I felt it very acutely when I was the only woman and had to negotiate agreements round a tableful of men. If I became unsure of myself for any reason I would veer back into that masculine stuff.

In speaking so forcefully in these situations, in trying to take on what she was seeing as the prevalent male way of speaking, Dunnebacke was reinforcing the gap between herself as an activist and the others round the table who were representing existing structures of 'power'. She was also reinforcing the gap between herself as a woman, and all of those men. By the time we had this conversation, she had become so uncomfortable with the performance of that certainty that she had stepped away from that form of activism.

MAFS AU → Tyson only talking To/ About John.

'In almost all forums there's an implicit expectation that the male voice has authority. Wherever you start from, you'll have absorbed that in your cells. Most women entering male territory will feel they are on the back foot because they are a woman,' says Judith Seelig, who I will describe as a spiritual teacher of exceptional depth and insight, but who wouldn't dream of labelling herself as such. Women activists who want to change patriarchal structures, she is saying, often try to compensate. We assert strongly, become strident, especially when that back-footedness is compounded by our activist status, our sense of being external to power structures. The stridency costs us valuable energy, and can leave us feeling that we are not being 'ourselves'. It also means we are not well heard, and we amplify the gap between ourselves and our audience. 'I'm talking about the back foot, but it's literal,' says Seelig:

perhaps some of how TERFism manifests.

> It's like medieval warfare, there's a ditch, an embankment between you. Lots of women lean forward. They lean forward over the gap. If you're going to be a woman speaking, you mustn't be the supplicant, or you're already less-than. If you're not going to be strident, you've got to find some neutral self-authority that says, 'this is what I have to say'. From a place of stillness, and the security of being powered by whatever it is that funds and nourishes you. That's not so easy to push to one side.[273]

This insight, I think, is applicable to any activist who feels, for whatever reason, on the back foot.

Opposition that is fuelled by a forceful approach feels like force to those receiving it, even if it is not physically violent. Nadine Andrews, a psychosocial researcher who uses cognitive linguistics as part of her work, is interested in the meaning of 'direct action' contained in the etymology of the word 'activist'.[274] In activist terminology 'direct action' refers to physically blocking public space, or physically entering corporate or government space. It's 'direct' because it is putting activist bodies directly in the way of business as usual; it's not the more roundabout method of trying to engage power in conversation, such as the policy advocacy that many of the well-known NGOs do. But the 'directness' that interests Andrews, as a practitioner of Taoist physical arts, is at the level of force meeting force and,

in this sense, what she says can apply to many other forms of activism than the variety that activists call direct action. 'If you meet force with force, it takes up a lot of energy, and you can't do that forever without something having to give, which is burnout,' she says. And on the recipient's side, that force is received as something requiring a defensive reaction. Andrews notes that 'duality in Taoism is not about absolutes, it's about the interplay between the opposites. So it's a different way of thinking about duality than in the West, which tends to be either this, or that.' She is suggesting that resistance does not have to be forceful, as well as that a duality does not have to become polarised. The problem is that our imaginary tends to see dualities that way, and this encourages our habitual way of responding to them with forcefulness.

Dunnebacke's description suggests another reason why activists are leaning across the gap forcefully. It's not just because we might, like many people in our culture, be stuck in the heightened nervous system state that helps to structure our imaginary, in which we keep ourselves feeling safe through keeping busy or keeping on top. Nor is it just because we are caught in a way of thinking: the everything-is-knowable, polarised subject-and-object, doer and done-to terms that are at the heart of the individualistic liberal imaginary. It is that we feel we *have* to know, which in itself can be a product of these other reasons for leaning across the gap. Knowing and being certain are a defence, a way of feeling safe and in control when our nervous system is aroused. Our dualistic epistemology, meanwhile, casts us as the 'knower' and those with other epistemologies – or indeed, sometimes just different views – as the not-knowing 'other'. Dunnebacke describes it as:

> the difference between lobbying someone when you're trying to impose a viewpoint you're convinced of – there's a forcefulness, righteousness – as opposed to coming to a conversation with actual true openness. You may have strong feelings but you are completely open to different truths or what someone else might feel. But there's so little space for uncertainty. Why are we attached to what we think needs to happen? Are we certain it does? How can we move forward and act even though we're beset by uncertainty and panic? How can we move forward even if we haven't got a clue? These are the

> questions, and we don't have the answers. Why do we find it so hard to accept that we don't have the answers?[275]

'The problem of how to find a voice that has credibility on the topic of uncertainty is enough to keep a person up at night,' writes the filmmaker and author Nora Bateson.[276] A willingness to acknowledge uncertainty is missing from our imaginary, demonstrably missing from our politics, and is almost inevitably, therefore, missing from activism. The need for openness to what is not known, a willingness to be more uncertain, came up frequently in my interviews with activists. Men and women spoke about it, some but not all making an explicit connection to the missing quality of the 'feminine'. Those who made a connection to the 'feminine' were doing so in an archetypal sense, as a way of describing a quality that is present in both women and men. I don't want to get too stuck on this being an attribute of the feminine because it can be inflammatory, either to those whose feminism has worked for decades to escape determinist attributions about what being female or feminine is, or to those whose activism is now working to escape binary determinations at all. The point remains that there is a quality of uncertainty that is missing in our public and interior lives. This missing quality of not-knowing is Keats's 'negative capability', where, he said, 'a Man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[277] I've tried to bear this in mind throughout the process of writing this book; to hold at arm's length my activist tendency to have to sound entirely certain, while remaining clear enough to convey what I – at this point – understand.

There's another reason why we sometimes lean across the gap so forcefully, and why we think we have to know the answer. It's that we're so desperate for the sense of meaning that activism is giving us. The need for meaning is human, and in some accounts stands at the very core of us. The mythologist and wilderness guide Martin Shaw suggests that 'as we age, the desire for meaningful work can descend on us almost as strongly as romantic love. The soul reveals the desire for significance, for heft, for some psychic resonance over and over, and will crash our lives against the rocks until we take notice.'[278] Viktor Frankl, the psychologist and Holocaust survivor whose description of his experience of the concentration camps stands alongside Primo Levi's, took from the horror that meaning, and our free

choice in how to find it, is the one thing that cannot be taken away from us.[279] 'Terror management' theory, built on the foundations laid by anthropologist Ernest Becker in his book *Denial of Death*, suggests that humans are the only animal with conscious awareness that we will inevitably die, and that the strategies we have developed to avoid thinking about this fact revolve around cultural meaning-making.[280] But while the need for meaning is part of what defines us as humans, one of the defining features of the modern imaginary is its sense of alienation from meaning. This alienation is not just in Marxist terms, where we are disconnected from what we are producing and consuming (although that is part of it), but is in the broader meaning of a spiritual crisis. The crisis is that we no longer know how to relate to the world around us and to feel that we have a meaningful place in it. We don't know what our purpose is or where we belong. Modernity's disenchanting of the world began with the Copernican revolution and accelerated with the death of God, through the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. The author and broadcaster Mark Vernon illustrates this shift with a 16th-century illustration of the Copernican universe, the sun enthroned in its new place at the centre with planets circling around. Outside of that circle, in the corners created by the circular universe placed within a rectangular picture frame, are people. We had become separate observers, outside the universe, separated from everything else that is.[281] Processes of 19th-century urbanisation and industrialisation were followed by late 20th-century and 21st-century de-industrialisation and casualisation of labour, which undermined even the communities of solidarity and meaning that had formed around work in the industrialised world.

In this alienated context, our need for meaning has been cleverly co-opted and fulfilled by consumer capitalism and its endless quest for growth, and this is part of what activists are reacting against when we become activists. We're not only reacting to the deleterious practical impacts of capitalism's excesses, but to its implicit assertion that this is all that life should be about. Activism is a massive great meaning generator for those who do it. It's a way of re-embedding ourselves in a community, in a society, in the world. It provides purpose, fellowship, solidarity, position and voice. The risk, however, is that this is so very appealing, in a world of alienation and lack of

meaning, that we over-do it. We are coming from this place of desperate thirst in an unhealthy culture whose public imperatives and institutions don't support us to find good meaning, and we find, in activism, a way of making meaning. We are trying to make up for so much that the effort can make us strident. We overreach, shout ourselves hoarse and burn out. Our desperate need for a meaningful life gets woven, too, into the other status-chasing and identity-policing aspects of activism, as well as into the anger and projections onto those we're battling with. The author and activist Jonathan Smucker suggests that activists who retreat into the carefully defended identities of subgroups are trying, desperately, to regain the 'psychic completion' that participation in a revitalised lifeworld of intact community – even if it is a small marginal one – offers.[282] → NTD.

Our reaching over the gap, between how things are and how we want them to be, can also come from a displacement of our desperate desire to solve something that cannot be solved in our own lives. We take on these huge tasks, like halting the arms trade, shutting down the oil industry, changing the voting system, or reforming the tax regime, and many people we meet who are not activists feel that these are incomprehensible choices: why would we make life so difficult for ourselves? But these intractable problems can seem more bearable and easier to face than the prospect of mending the wound in ourselves or in our difficult relation with a family member. Our own hurt may not be exactly the same as the hurt 'in the world' that we are trying to fix, but the enormity of the task that we have taken on for ourselves can match the depth of the hurt and the sadness within us. The 'wounded healer' is a term that we might already be familiar with, but I'm wondering if we should become more familiar with the idea of the 'wounded activist'. If we can acknowledge that we are part of the unhealthy system we are trying to fix, we can acknowledge that we have been hurt by it, too. And there is a gift, of sorts, in that. The sensitivity that comes with our awareness of how we have been wounded by the system allows us to understand the extent of the problem. We're not always going to solve the personal problem *before* we can work on the external problem, but it helps to reduce our striving and forcefulness to at least acknowledge both the connections and the differences.

The point, then, is not to avoid bringing any force to activism. Bad things are happening and activists want to resist them, and when we do so, we may encounter counter-resistance in turn from those who want to keep things the way they are. Resistance requires some force, in the sense of energy and strength applied in a particular direction. We can't just go floppy and acquiescent. But nor do we want to hurl ourselves against it in fear and fury. We need to be able to think clearly to make good decisions and use our limited resources well. The forcefulness we want to avoid is the forcefulness that comes from bringing all of our own desperate needs to our activism. Just as we may need to burn down our anger about the issue into a steady flame that can fuel us without rasping our throats and burning us out, we may also need to burn down our need for meaning, our need to reach over the split that we sense within us and within our culture, our need to solve, to know and to control, and to assuage our own hurt.