

Part 3

Starting in a different place

11 Learning to sing again

IN MARCH 2015 John Ashton, a former UK diplomat to the international climate talks, gave an extraordinary speech to an energy conference. It took the form of an open letter to the CEO of Shell, Ben van Beurden, who the previous month had explicitly rejected calls for a transformation to a low- or no-carbon economy. You can see the practised diplomat at work. Ashton recognised that people in the oil industry must feel unappreciated by those whose lives still depend on oil yet who heap ‘the sins of the world at your door’. He honoured van Beurden’s work in providing fuel for an energy-hungry world. Then, gently, he started to unpick the oil man’s resistance. He pointed out the difference between the ‘mask’ that van Beurden wore in his CEO role, and the real face underneath. The mask emits positive noises about the industry’s ‘moral obligation’ but concludes that fossil fuels will be needed for decades. The face underneath tells a different story: fear of change. If van Beurden could accept that the old business model is dying, and manage its decline while building a new one, then, Ashton suggested, ‘there would be no need for a mask. The face could look the world in the eye and see itself reflected back.’²⁸³

The letter was published in *The Guardian* and was shared on one of the campaigners’ mailing lists I subscribe to, and I was astounded. I had recently stepped away from my ‘getting the bastards’ job, and this was the first time I had noticed an activist trying to stand in the shoes of the person they were criticising when asking them to do something different. Ashton didn’t hold back: he wondered whether he was seeing a ‘touch of narcissism, a touch of paranoia, a touch of psychopathy’. Re-reading it now, I suspect some readers may have found his tone patronising. But he was not doing that outright dismissal of the opponent’s viewpoint and inner life that so often happens when campaigners complain about someone’s actions and call on them to act differently – as I had so often done. He was acknowledging that there might be reasons for van Beurden’s stance, that his job might put him in conflict with his real self, but that the times were overtaking him and he nonetheless needed to shift. Van Beurden did not respond and Shell is still drilling for oil, so I obviously cannot hold this up, on its own, as a success story. Yet it is interesting – a glimpse of doing it differently. I had a conversation with Ashton when I first started researching

this book because I was intrigued to hear the story behind his approach. He'd left the diplomatic service in 2012 'without a plan' and for similar reasons, he said, to the ones that had driven me out of campaigning NGOs. His view of the changes that were needed was becoming more radical, and when he wrote that speech he was gradually coming to the view 'that we need to learn to sing again. We can talk about how to do that, what should the song be and what should the notes be ... But what's much harder is to sing at all.'

Why might activists not be able to 'sing'? Why might our voices not ring true, nor easy or clear to hear? What constrained my voice in that TEDx talk that made me so uncomfortable? As I have argued throughout this book, we are unable 'to sing' because we are not acknowledging our entanglements. We are not speaking the whole story when we project all wrongdoing onto the other side and do not acknowledge our own complicity in the systems we want to change. We are not being entirely true when the intensity driving our speech is rooted in what we are hiding from in ourselves: our need to be right, to be in charge, to be the saviour, to be heard. Our voices can crack when we are striving to reach over the gap that has held us back, trying to find meaning in a world that is lacking it. Our voices can break when we are hurt by our entanglements in a system that for so long has caused trauma. We might be tensed and running on fear, of the outside world or of not being enough in ourselves. We might be too numb to feel the impact of our words and actions, or too numb to act effectively. When we do these things, and live from these constrictions, it can be heard in our voices. I mean this both metaphorically and literally. Literally because, if we are splitting off part of ourselves, striving too hard, living in our minds to avoid feeling what is in our body, the very resonance of our voice is altered.

My friend Briony Greenhill is – among many talents – a musician who teaches vocal improvisation. Her students are amateurs and those using voice to explore self-development, as well as professional singers who are more accustomed to singing notes already composed. When confronted with the prospect of extemporised singing, many students experience fear, alarm and, for some, involuntary constrictions in the body that restrict the

Navara Media Interview
with Linnéa Cronshaw



voice. What suppresses the voice? 'I would say it's part of this whole suppression of the heart and the body in white culture,' Greenhill says.

The thing about truth and the true voice is you need a kind of alignment of logos, mythos and eros, of the mind, heart and body. You feel it in your body, it feels true in your heart, you believe it with your mind, it comes out of your voice and it rings true because you're aligned behind it. I think when we enter into ourselves, our sensations, our voices, our bodies, a lot of what can constrict is either present fear, fear deriving from past trauma, or a terror of what we might reveal should we open the Pandora's box of our inner life and broadcast it via a free voice. When you explore your shadow you might find your own violence, your own greed, your own limitations, fear, incompetence, your own place in a long lineage and large system of violence.²⁸⁴

The self-compassion that we have to cultivate for our own healing, she is suggesting, leads not only to a clearer voice for those wanting to improvise in song, but becomes the foundation of the compassion that allows us to speak as an activist without dehumanising our opponent, for instance, the fearful human who wears the mask of the CEO. The Quakers would call it 'answering that of God in everyone'.²⁸⁵ Finding that compassion is a form of growing up, too, that will help us in our developmental task, as Robert Kegan puts it, of 'developing an empathy for the coherence of the other's position and the costs that leaving it might entail ... in fashioning a bridge that is more respectfully anchored on both sides of the chasm, instead of assuming that such a bridge already exists and wondering why the other has not long ago walked over it.'²⁸⁶

I have been thinking about what may have got in the way of my voice sounding clearly; what may have been behind my stridency. The conversations I've had while writing this book, with activists, scholars, psychologists and therapists, have helped to surface in me an acknowledgement of what had long been an 'unthought known', to use Christopher Bollas' resonant term from psychoanalysis.²⁸⁷ In seeking to persuade all of the targets of my activism of my point of view, I was also seeking to persuade my own father. I was never going to change his values;

he was comfortable in his economically right-wing outlook and saw no reason to alter it. But maybe I could instead persuade some of the right-wing men who ran banks, companies and other institutions of power to do what I was demanding. In the absence of explicit approval of my worldview from my Dad, any changes I was able to make in the outside world would constitute an implicit form of approval, from men (for it was nearly always men) with similar views, for my opinions, values and chosen identity. This does not mean that the specifics of what I was doing were misplaced, or that my critique of the shadow financial system was not sound.²⁸⁸ The laws that I helped to get changed still needed changing. I was standing on the broad shoulders of those who had worked on it before I did,²⁸⁹ and what I was saying has been amplified and vindicated many times since I started working on the issue.²⁹⁰ But there was an extra component to what I was doing, an intensity, forcefulness and drivenness that might have been felt by those who experienced my campaigning, even if it couldn't be explained.

In the light of this realisation, there is also probably no coincidence in the timing of my personal motivation for this enquiry. My questions about the activism I was doing had long been present, but I suppressed them until, I later realised, the time when Dad was dying. He had a form of cystic fibrosis, and by late summer of 2014 we knew his time was running out. He died a year later. I now wonder if his long death was releasing me from my impossible task of trying to gain an approval that – he would have said – was already implicitly given. The reasons for me to have been seeking approval in this way, inasmuch as I currently understand them, are beyond the scope of this book. But the release from that powerful form of approval-seeking left a space in which I could look at activism with a widened perspective. It offered an opportunity to start reconciling my powerful sense of the need and potential for change with a realisation of my own entanglements in activism. Perhaps, too, I was being released from a reactivity-to-his-views in which I would always take the reactive position of standing against, rather than the potentially more generative position of *standing for*. In discussions within our family I would adopt the 'against' position and, locked into it by habit, I would find it hard to perceive that there could be an alternative approach. The alternative was, and is, to stand on my own ground, stand for what I believe in and resist what I don't, but

that NM
AS+KC interview!



without my actions and speech being shaped by my *reactivity* against what I am resisting.

We are entangled, then, in an imaginary that says we are separate from everyone and everything else: *an imaginary that insists we are not entangled*. No wonder it can be so hard to see our predicament. And even if we do see it, is there anything we can do about it? Alain Touraine, a French scholar of social movements, thought that activists had to ‘deintegrate’ from society in order to see its hold on them. Debra King’s study of emotions in activist movements observed the cognitive and emotional dissonance that this deintegration creates for activists. We try to disengage from aspects of the world we live in, yet are not able to fully reconstitute ourselves in the world that we are trying to create.²⁹¹ What I have seen through this enquiry is that to whatever extent activists are at all able to ‘deintegrate’ ourselves in order to ‘see’ what we want to change, it is only in a way that is partial and uneven. We remain held by some aspects of the imaginary while developing clear critiques of others.

I have seen, too, how this partial and uneven process is structured by our personal stories and psychologies; by our responses to our own and collective traumas; by our positions, anger and defences in relation to traumatic political histories. All of these factors affect our epistemologies, our allergies, our unacknowledged habits. They trip us up as we try to identify and avoid the master’s tools. This uneven gaining of perspective on the imaginary helps to explain a phenomenon that can look like culture wars *within* activism. It helps to explain the polarisation that can occur between those committed to personal improvement and those who are chained to the railings: the many competitions for purest status that take place; the way that some white middle-class campaigners will insist that the urgency of ‘climate’ outranks the urgency of the social justice questions that are, for many people, so obviously and utterly entangled with our shared climate catastrophe.

These entanglements go so deep that it would be easy to become discouraged and step away, despairing at how existing forms of power will always infect our efforts. But to recognise our entanglement, to see that the master’s tools are everywhere, is not the same as turning away. Nor is it an invitation – as it can sometimes seem – to turn away. Yes, we participate in

and are partly made by the system we try to change. But we are not performing, here, the solely dismantling move of the ‘deconstructive’ or ‘anti-modern’ postmodernist who sees that they are always a ‘participant observer’, and who stops after unpacking the impossibility of finding any un-influenced ground from which to understand any phenomenon. I am not saying there is no point trying to change anything. At the end of Chapter 8 I was suggesting that we can transcend the limitations of modernity by putting its thinking on an equal footing with other ways of thinking and knowing, and Chapter 9 showed how, for some people, this task may require a difficult reckoning with their embodied selves and with what they may have hidden and projected. Now, in facing up to our entanglement, we are faced with the classic limitation of postmodernity – a potential cul-de-sac in which we cannot reach a clear perspective from which to understand, nor clear ground from which to act because we are so entangled.²⁹² But we can transcend the potential limitation of this way of thinking on our actions, by acknowledging our entanglement and *then starting from a different place*. We are not stepping away. Yet nor are we under the illusion that it is possible to disentangle ourselves from our context. Indeed, if we think we *can* disentangle ourselves, then we’re probably still entangled in modernity’s delusion: in the very idea that we can be separate from everyone and everything else that is.

There is a constructive way forward. But it requires getting real about entanglement; about where we’re starting from and what we’re bringing, and where anybody else might be coming from. And this can be painful to acknowledge. One long-standing activist told me that she had had to grieve when she let go of the hope that she would ever find an organisation or group or movement that is free of mirroring the unhealthy systems it wants to change. We might need to grieve, in such realisations – and some of us might need to apologise – for all the difficulty and pain that is caused when activism reinforces problems while trying to solve them. But perhaps we are also grieving for the loss of certainty of what we had always been told was our place in the world: the idea that we are an independent actor, free of constraints. Where *are* we starting from, then? The starting place becomes a different place when we approach it differently.

1. Knowing ourselves

One of the features of this different starting place is that we are open to knowing ourselves better. If the injunction for healers is ‘physician, heal thyself’, then the injunction for activists should perhaps, like that for philosophers, be ‘activist, know thyself’. Therapists who are trying to heal people must, in addition to training, undergo therapy themselves, so that they can recognise when their own issues are arising in the interaction with their patient. Social researchers who are trying to understand the world must investigate and account for their own position and assumptions. But activists who want to understand and heal the problems of the world often just dive in. I’m not suggesting that everyone wanting to do some activism should embark on years of therapy, which can be hard to access and expensive. Many activists are young people with energy, time and freedom from responsibilities, who understand the urgency of the moment and want to act. The gaining of understanding about our own shadows, meanwhile, is a slow process that can take a lifetime.

I am suggesting, however, that activist organisations and movements could explicitly develop cultures of reflection in which – alongside the planning for action – we can talk openly about the ways in which we can be part of the problem ourselves. About our anger and our desire for control and status and saviourhood and being right and everything else that we are seeking. Activist organisations and movements could explicitly develop cultures that normalise checking in and support in terms of what we are bringing of ourselves to the tasks in the outside world, that develop our capacities to relate to each other across difference, without trying to assimilate everyone to our own point of view. They could develop cultures that encourage activists to relinquish as well as reclaim. Relinquish, for some, the need to know best, or to be right; while others relinquish their silence. Reclaim, for some, the humility that would allow them to risk sharing their vulnerability, so that the silence around it becomes neither armour nor complicity; while others reclaim their power.

2. Thinking is not enough

Another characteristic, then, of this different place from which we are starting, is that thinking is not enough. We can convince ourselves of

anything if we cut ourselves off from the information and empathy that comes from our body through our feelings, and that comes through our intuition when we practise stillness. Of course reason is necessary. This is not a baby-and-bathwater move of chucking out 300 years of Enlightenment influence. But in entanglement terms, activism that claims to operate *only* on reason is caught in the liberal imaginary. We need this 'something' that we sense is missing. This was one of Martin Luther King Jr's insights when he was forming his outlook and methods.²⁹³ It was obvious to him that reason on its own could lead to atrocities, and his response was that reason needed to be tempered with faith. In the communities he was working in, Christian faith was a key bond and a moral orientation. Decades later and in more diverse contexts, shared faith cannot be relied upon in the same way. But there are many other possible counterweights to the dubious power of thinking alone. (Many of them, as keen observers note, have become more popular in the absence of religion.) There is turning to the wisdom of the body, as some activists are starting to see, through trauma, healing and shared ritual, music and dancing. There is turning to the power of contemplative stillness, as practitioners of meditation and activists on behalf of meditation's benefits know. Meditative traditions offer the stillness in which we can begin to notice our feelings, intuitions, connections to other beings – everything that our reasoning mind finds hard to fathom.

3. Activism as a practice not a goal

Spiritual approaches to activism suggest that it is best pursued as a practice and not a goal, and this, too, creates a very different starting place. 'I am 81, and I don't feel any lack of enthusiasm, any lack of energy, any burnout or anything of that kind which many people suffer,' says Satish Kumar, a long-standing peace and environmental activist and magazine editor.

If you ask me what sustains you, without feeling frustrated or disappointed or despondent, I would say that for me, activism is not about achieving results, activism is about being engaged in the process, because process itself has its own value. There is no utopia out there which we can establish. It's always a process of living. Every day, we have to shower – there's no utopia that you can have

Focus to that's good.

c.f. - Le Guin, The Dispossessed

one shower and the rest of your life you are clean. Every day you get hungry, and there is no utopia that one day you eat, and for the rest of your life you are not hungry. It's a process. Activism is every day doing something that is worth doing.²⁹⁴

This may be the only way to keep going when we realise that – in the Nigerian philosopher Bayo Akomolafe's words – 'there is no *there* there. We are not going to go the whole way. We are not going to get there. Activism needs to leave the age of mastery.'²⁹⁵ We are not going to fix everything. We may have as much impact on the world by raising a child, or sitting at our grandmother's feet, he suggests. This may well be true, particularly in the light of attachment theory, although Akomolafe is not speaking about what he calls 'post-activism' in such instrumental terms. But realising there is no achievable 'there' to aim for can also be the point at which activists give up entirely. Hearing Satish Kumar say it is 'not about achieving results' can be very hard to hear. I still find it hard to hear, at the same time as I recognise the truth in it. This may say something about where I still am. Attachment to outcome can be an attachment to the importance of our own role in the process. If activists are invested in being able to do it ourselves, and then realise that the problems are too deep and we cannot solve them, even in our lifetime, this can be a bad ego blow. It might be more comfortable to turn away.

This is the other 'getting real' sequence, which we need to understand once we've done the initial 'getting real' of acknowledging that we are entangled. Here's how this one goes: activists are told by our opponents to 'get real', in the sense of 'there is no alternative'. 'Do stop being fanciful, it's time to be realistic,' we are told, often by those who are invested in things staying as they are, and almost as often by people who can't bear to think about it at all. Activists respond, in turn, 'No! We reject your "getting real"; people suffer from your views about what has to be real (a world based only on profit values, let's say), and it's in our power to change what is seen as realistic.' But deep underneath all that, there is another form of *getting real* for activists. When we realise the depth of the problems, and that we are ourselves deeply implicated, we start to see how long it might take. It might take longer than our lifetimes. And it might never happen. There really might be no 'there' there, as Akomolafe puts it. This had already come as a

Asad Johnson "be reasonable and clever not the impossible now"

devastating realisation for activists who are invested in the idea of our own agency and effectiveness, and now, in the light of carbon deadlines and potential systemic global collapse, it is even worse. We really might run out of time. We really might be up against adaptation to collapse, as indeed many people in the world already are. Awareness of death can be helpful in cutting to the chase about what is important, as the evolving public conversation during the Covid-19 pandemic has shown. As Jamie Kelsey-Fry, an activist and journalist puts it, “The only chance our species has got is a revolution in our answer to the question: “What the fuck are we here for?”²⁹⁶

But still, the hardest thing is to keep going when it is not clear what the outcome of your efforts will be. *That* is really getting real, and that is where seeing activism as a practice helps. Activists who have had to struggle for their own existence, in the dailiness of facing obstacles, have a longer experience of it than those who discover it by running into the wall while trying to help. Vanessa Faloye, a facilitator and trainer for activist organisations, said she has had

a very deep grieving and awakening in understanding that I will not achieve my big dreams of collective liberation in my lifetime. It is capitalism – quick fix, everything as quick as possible – that taught me to believe that it was actually possible to solve the world’s problems by the time I was 33. ... tapping into my ancestral lineage and knowing that I work on the shoulders of giants, on the shoulders of ancestors who fought for their dreams and my liberation, has been the quiet assurance I’ve needed to know that I am working for a liberatory future that I can’t see now, or even imagine right now, and that’s ok. Activism, for me, has been redefined as trying everything in my power to sit in the tension of living that future now, and knowing that I will never see that future.²⁹⁷

We must let go of one vision of progress, then, while holding on to the one we are fighting for. The one we must let go of has ourselves at its heart, as causal agents, participating in a grand narrative of progress by helping to bring some of it about. When we are attached to the idea that we will create progress, we make ourselves more prone to burnout at the many times when

we are not experiencing forward movement on the things we are working on.²⁹⁸ Yet letting go of this attachment is hard, because at the same time, we are motivated to make things better. We *can* imagine something better, and we refuse to let go of that possibility. It's why we are doing activism rather than watching TV. When I got arrested with Extinction Rebellion with no clear idea of whether it would work, that lack of clarity felt something of a relief after so many years of having to justify the likelihood of success of my interventions to my NGOs' funders. When we stop trying to save the world, we become substantially freer to do something that could be useful.²⁹⁹ The decision to take part in activism, in this light, is one of virtue ethics, where the important thing is doing it because it is the right thing to do, not because we think it will or will not work. Questions of what will or won't work are necessary but second order, in the realm of strategy.

It is ~~not~~ that the practice of activism without attachment to outcome will itself prevent us replicating what we seek to change. It is more that in order to detach ourselves from outcomes – which is a subversive and difficult move in our instrumentally focused imaginary – it helps to become aware of the beyond-the-issue factors that have been driving us and helping to make us so attached to outcomes in the first place. These beyond-the-issue factors can be personal shadows or societal ones or both, and an appreciation of entanglements can help us to identify them. This is where my personal enquiry into my hectic and strident activist persona meets the story of entanglements that I have been following. I feel substantially if not entirely freed from the drivenness, forcefulness and need for control that used to characterise my activism – my acting from the heightened place. (I must admit, I am still learning – and regularly failing – how not to act from that place when my children are doing my head in.) Much of that freedom comes from starting to understand that these behaviours were rarely to do with my commitment to the issues I was working on.

4. Not starting with ourselves

The biggest difference in terms of starting point is that we don't start with ourselves: another subversive act in an imaginary centred on the individual. In her work on 'doer and done-to' dynamics, Jessica Benjamin proposes a radical surrender of our attachment to the centrality of ourself, 'a certain

Direct contrast
to "Effective Altruism"
+ Pincher.

letting go of the self' that 'also implies the ability to take in the other's point of view or reality'.³⁰⁰ This is a precondition for developing epistemic humility: acknowledging other ways of knowing the world.³⁰¹ And if we have the privilege of choosing where to intervene with our activism, we can approach, as the facilitator Kat Wall suggests, with the question 'what service can I give' and not 'what's *my thing* going to be?' Surrender, then, is a good description of how activists can be truly alongside those we are trying to help as well as those we are trying to change. And we cannot be truly alongside others, or approach activism as a practice rather than something we personally have to win for it to be worthwhile, unless we *get over ourselves*. And all of these differences in where we start have implications for how we shape and run our activist organisations and movements.

It seems a paradox. We must start with ourselves and yet not start with ourselves. We must start with ourselves, in the sense that we cannot pretend the problem is nothing to do with us, and we cannot pretend that we are always only speaking about the problem. We must turn to ourselves in order to acknowledge our own entanglements, our own hidden longings, needs and troubles that we are bringing to our activism, and which will get us into difficulties if we let them run us. But starting with ourselves in that sense is only the first step towards the transformation that might really change our activism, and maybe everything else. As we turn to the activism we are doing, whatever that work is, not starting with ourselves is the difference in how we can proceed. Not starting with ourselves gives us a chance of breaking the bonds of our entanglement in the dominant culture's habits of exceptionalism, extraction and assuming that we are the subject and everyone else is object. Not starting with ourselves means surrendering our need to know, in order to listen to the knowledge and experience and plans of those whom we want to help. Surrendering our need to be right, so that we can acknowledge the viewpoint and humanity of everyone we're dealing with. Surrendering our need to put ourselves at the centre. Both aspects of this double move are necessary. We have to be able to acknowledge ourselves and our needs and position in order to then put ourselves to one side and offer service. Otherwise, we risk being the narcissist who needily covers their own vulnerability by acting in a way that claims to be helping,

but whose purpose is to attract attention that deflects from what we want to hide.

I have been learning about not starting with myself (and my teacher, Judith Seelig, might say that I have a lot to learn) in an intentional group where we practise, through speaking honestly about what we feel, relating to each other as equals and not beginning with ourselves when we speak. Some of it is done by email and some when we meet a few times a year. It is sometimes difficult because we are so unpractised. But the 'alongsidedness', which is what we call the feeling that emerges from this practice, is never less than glorious and delightful. It feels genuinely and joyfully revolutionary, even if the material being discussed is sometimes difficult, and I understand that feeling to be the opposite of the individualist habit of trying to be the subject at the expense of everyone else. Bringing joy into activism matters; without it, one campaigner warned me, 'only the self-flagellating will want to be involved'. The point is, getting over ourselves is best practised with others – including by doing activism, in the broadest possible application of that word. So, too, is singing clearly. 'You're in a field you share with others, you're in a collective life field and so truth isn't only your own,' says Greenhill, the vocal improvisation teacher. 'You're seeing a piece of something bigger and you're giving voice to the piece you can see.'³⁰²

We can practise bringing to activism, too, the states that can help us go beyond our thinking, rationalising ways of being – let's invoke T.S. Eliot and call them the stillness and the dancing.³⁰³ The stillness of contemplation, meditation or time sitting in nature, that may be required for us to recognise our entanglements and interconnections with all other people and life forms. The dancing of ritual, music and embodiment that can help wake us from the emotional numbness that has been part of the problem. My contention is that these states are not only useful for the practice of activism. I do appreciate the irony of my instrumental approach here, but they are also useful to help us better appreciate some of the lessons of activist entanglement, and become more conscious of what we are bringing to our task. I am suggesting that even activism itself offers opportunities to practise ways of being that can teach us, in turn, to approach activism differently; that can help us to start it from a different place. We don't need to run away and sort ourselves out. We can learn on the job. Both the stillness and the

↳ the paralysis bit on that. "I'm not ready, I'm not good enough

but again, what is being argued ← yet, I have all this shit to
for is (not) throwing yourself in at the fucking ^{front} of it → Go to a fucking
meetings.

dancing can bring us to a point where we understand, in our bodies as well as our minds, that we are not separate from everyone and everything else. This can be the starting point for any form of activism. We can see that we are not trying to save a world that is over there, but are engaged in the business of life in a world that is right here, in us as well as outside of us.

What does this look like in practice? It is one thing to read or hear about something and understand it mentally, another to experience it. There are activist cultures that are already trying to put some of these principles into action, and circles of campaigners getting together to think about the shadows they may be bringing to their work. There are training courses that are starting to weave, into their teaching of political tactics, opportunities for deep personal reflection and for experiencing the emotions attached to those things that activists have found hard to think about.³⁰⁴ There are networks of practitioners of 'inner' development and healing and 'contemplative activism' who are offering their skills to activist organisations, teaching them the value of stillness before even thinking about action. There are activists talking about 'unlearning' the deep ways of being that create the problem. This can involve turning to our bodies, and starting to recognise the sensations that tell us our nervous systems are aroused and we are becoming uncomfortable. It can involve learning to recognise, as Sophy Banks and others are teaching, that discomfort – in our bodies, or in a group's dynamics – can be a feedback loop providing information that we need to do something differently. Some of this work has been going on for a while, and some of it is new, and to showcase specific examples of it is beyond the scope of this book. But a process of emergence is underway, in the sense of emergence as a principle by which something novel arises from the whole that is not present in any of its constituent parts. What is emerging from the combination of these flowerings is activism that is aware of itself, and the potential of that is only just unfolding.

Writing this book has changed me. My political and ecological outlook, and my commitment to social and ecological justice have not swerved, only deepened and formed more connections. But the quality of drive I apply to whatever I'm doing feels different, as do the feelings I experience about people who are not doing activism. I am still regularly baffled by people's choices, but I feel less judgemental, less likely to indulge in ideological

descriptions of my opponents or targets or audience. I can think that somebody is wrong without dehumanising them. All right, let's be honest: when I am triggered to anger by someone's behaviour, my first reaction is still to think they're an arsehole. But my immediate second reaction is to wonder why they behaved as they did; perhaps they are defending themselves, or perhaps they got triggered too, by something I said, and they have not been supported to acquire the skills to respond differently. I am more likely to acknowledge, in situations where previously I would have rushed to judgement, that there are ways in which I am not so different. And I am more likely to acknowledge that sometimes I can't face it. That I want to turn away, too. That I don't want to think about my own complicity. Gandhi is not without his problems, but re-reading him, I found an observation that I wish I had framed on my NGO desk: 'It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself.'³⁰⁵ I wish, too, that I had worked some of this out before my Dad died and I could have created a new stage of my relationship with him in which I was not casting myself as the 'activist', and casting him, whenever we had political conversations, as the 'not-activist' who was wrong. I wish that there had been some other catalyst for this shift than his death.

I don't yet know what kind of activism I will do next, though I do know that this is not a time to be falling asleep.³⁰⁶ My experience of raising children so far is that I can do only two big things well. Looking after children in their pre-school years has, up until now, been one of them. The work of writing this book has, for a while, been the other. Whatever I get involved in will be an opportunity to put into practice some of what I have learned. For now I am talking to people, cooking ideas and stirring a few pots. But my sense of what constitutes activism has widened. It is now much clearer: anything that helps to alter the imaginary is activism. Anything that helps to heal the dominant culture as well as those whom it hurts is activism, including work to heal the brittleness and exceptionalism of those of us who are hiding our vulnerability behind privilege and power within it.

I am still full of respect for the people who are doing the types of activism that I was doing before: investigating the things that are going wrong, working in the thick of policy fires, running in and out of radio and TV

*My own stuff has taken
credibility - mine and
my mums.*

interviews all day. Anything I have said in this book about what I was doing when I was in those kinds of organisations isn't a dig at those organisations or anyone who works for them. The same problems emerge across many forms of activism, and I am using my experiences in them only as examples. And the work they are doing still needs doing, even if they sometimes need to approach it differently. The reporting on the terrible things that happen to people who are trying to defend their homes and land. The naming and holding to account of those who misuse power. The analysis of policy and its gaps and the suggestions of what is needed instead – even if new policies won't solve the whole problem on their own. It is by no means guaranteed, but I might even find myself doing some version of those tasks again one day, if I can see an intervention that makes systemic sense. That would certainly be a test of what I have learned. Would I be able to do investigative reporting, which can be so full of hero vibes, without succumbing to the temptation of getting heroic about my findings? Could I point out abuses of power without making 'us and them' distinctions and projecting my own shadows onto the people who are most directly responsible? How would I support the work of other activists in solidarity, without any personal agenda? Whatever I end up doing next, it will be with a sense of the 'movement ecology' of which I am a part. I will have the awareness that whatever I am doing is a small piece of the puzzle and not the entire answer, which means that what everyone else is doing is contributing to the puzzle too.

And of course, I'll not escape my entanglements entirely. My old patterns are a hungry ghost who is never very far away. While there's part of me that has enjoyed stepping back and being reflective about activism, there's another part of me that reads something outrageous in the news and still wants to get the bastards, and I email my friends and collaborators who I suspect may already be devising plans to do so. (They often are.) I enjoy being able to put what I have learned into words, yet at the same time I know that intellectualising and word-smithing is my own ongoing entanglement in a culture that has devalued feeling and sensing to catastrophic effect, as well as a strategy to avoid my own painful feelings. Part of me senses that I may be offering something of intrinsic value to the world to come, and another part of me still cares about what other activists

might think of me, and whether by thinking, and trying to share my thinking, I have been 'doing enough' for a world that is in trouble.

I'm still sometimes caught between my old idea of what an activist is, my old way of understanding activism as only action, and the more capacious sense of activism that has been forming throughout the writing of this book, that includes reflection as well as action. I'm in regular conversations about these questions with at least three groups of people who do activism in the broadest sense of the term, and perhaps in another five years I would write a different book. This book is where I've got to now. I am writing these words during a week in 2020 when the June temperature in Siberia has reached 38 degrees, and the streets and social media are full of anti-racist activism along with criticism of how it is being done. The work continues ... and so will this conversation.

Fucking.

Great Book overall.

Want to review it.

Fuck.