5 Common habits of entangled activists

During the few weeks between handing in my notice and leaving Amnesty International's London headquarters where I worked for just over a year in my late twenties, I had a conversation in the windowless room that contained the printers and photocopiers for my floor. It was with a woman senior to me, who had run many teams and campaigns. She had heard I was leaving and asked why. I summarised the difficulties of working for my boss, who was a dedicated campaigner and delightful person but a capricious manager; who generated chaos and anger on a regular basis, and left junior staff, including but not only me, to clear up. 'Well,' she said, not disputing my assessment of this person, 'those of us who really care about human rights, we put up with all that kind of stuff.'

Here was someone almost incapacitated by repetitive strain injuries that may well have had something to do with 'all that stuff'. Her body was stiff and immobile. She took frequent time off and needed someone to type for her as using the keyboard had become too painful. She was operating on a fraction of the energy that might have been available for her to dedicate to human rights, had this way of defending them not made her so ill. As an unarguable physical complaint, repetitive strain injury was one of the only acceptable ways for stress and burnout to manifest itself at Amnesty's headquarters at that time, which is probably why so many people in that building had it. A massage therapist I know offered to come in with his portable massage chair to give stiff-necked workers a 15-minute break, but was informed that they couldn't countenance such indulgence when the people they were trying to get out of prison were suffering so much. An exhausted researcher went to their senior manager in distress, and was told, point blank, 'if you don't like the heat, get out of the fire'. Amnesty has undergone many internal changes, yet a decade and a half later, monstrous workloads and senior staff who ignored the pleas of those struggling under them featured prominently in a report it commissioned into its toxic culture after two staff members committed suicide.[110] A separate investigation found that serious failures at Amnesty had contributed to one of the deaths.[111]

Just as the assumption of superiority over people who are not activists that I examined in the previous chapter is a classic activist habit, so is treating your own people badly while trying to help others. Such habits can seem like the usual quirks and annoyances of activism. That's how activism is, we say: whether critically, from the outside, or resignedly, from the inside. Explanations can focus, in psychoanalytical terms, on the operations of our shadow. In this case, human rights defenders are so intent on being 'good' and helping others, so invested in that version of themselves, that they can't acknowledge the parts of themselves that are not – the parts of themselves that are unsympathetic to colleagues' distress, and capable of bullying – and they split them off. Under stress, these 'not good' parts erupt out at those nearest them.

But while the shadow is certainly part of what's going on here, I do not think it is the only factor. As well as being entangled with those we are trying to influence, as we saw in the previous chapter, activists are entangled, too,

in the culture that produces the problems we are trying to change. The actions of a manager at Amnesty who puts a fellow campaigner under intolerable pressure – and, too, the actions of a campaigner who works under such pressure – are guided by stories in our culture about sacrifice, about being a saviour or a hero, and about attaining status from work. They are guided by stories that encourage extraction of every last possible drop of the resource in question (in this case, energy for work and for a cause), and stories about individualism, how we are all alone and separate from everyone else, and so must shoulder our burdens ourselves.

Activists have traits and habits that may be symptoms of our culture. Activists do what the culture does, even – perhaps particularly – when we think we are not doing so. I began the previous chapter with some of the activist traits that are most noticeable or bothersome to people who are not doing activism: the righteousness and the anger. This chapter begins with noticeable and bothersome traits that *activists themselves* identified in our conversations – although these traits are often noticed and criticised from the outside too. They include the kind of sacrificial behaviour raised by the Amnesty story I opened with, and the pressure to shoulder the burden individually. Then there is the saviour complex, and status-chasing.

Carrying the world on our shoulders

A story that repeatedly emerged in my conversations with activists was that they had to do it all themselves, in a way that felt sacrificial. Professor Jem Bendell is a scholar and activist whose career researching sustainable business and alternative currencies and consulting for the UN and NGOs changed direction when he published his 'Deep Adaptation' paper on climate change and likely civilisational collapse in July 2018.[112] It was downloaded hundreds of thousands of times within a few months and he now works on deep adaptation as a 'philosophy, framework and range of initiatives aimed at reducing harm in the face of societal collapse'.[113] When I spoke to him a few months before he published that paper, we talked about the process of becoming an activist. He described how deciding to be an activist in his teens 'subsumed my life into a discourse of sacrifice to a cause', and created a sense of self-worth as someone who helps others.

'Even if I wasn't taking on everything the religion of my culture was saying – I thought I was interpreting it for myself – I still inherited the notion of struggling to be good and needing to be good,' he says. 'You're not already fully worthy as you are .... We have to be unique and self-authored and have huge responsibility, to be good and do good, and because we're so separate, we have to do it all.'

Bendell is picking up, here, on the way that activists can feel that we have to prove ourselves, and the only way to do this is through our work. It is not obvious that we can separate this pressure to prove ourselves from the sense of duty and wanting to help that led us into the job in the first place. For those who are working late into the night to get somebody out of prison, like the people at Amnesty, who will do it if we don't? If an MP has offered us a chance to give input on a piece of forthcoming legislation that will improve lives on the issue we work on, the opportunity will disappear if we don't take it now. And yet, Bendell's description suggests how our striving can also derive from an ambient cultural Protestantism – a faith that is based on its adherents demonstrating they are God's elect by repeated and ongoing good works – as well as from the broader notion of sacrifice which is at the very heart of Christianity. These notions underpin the work of some campaigning groups, and not only the explicitly Christian ones. Stephen Hopgood's anthropological study of the culture at Amnesty's London secretariat, which he was researching when I was there in the early noughties, described the movement's view of itself as a 'secular religion', upholding strict moral values and aspects of a monastic life of difficult toil for its staff.[14] There's a sense in Bendell's description of his younger self, too, of the approach to activism being shaped by the individualism of our culture. To many activists, individualism underlies the problem we are trying to tackle, since we connect it, correctly, with the socially atomising and ecologically disastrous effects of capitalism. Yet here it is, moulding an approach to being an activist, telling the activist that we have to do it all ourselves.

Iris Andrews is a former climate change campaigner, who worked for years at Greenpeace and other environmental organisations. She had long been interested in justice, and by the time she was 18 she was volunteering on peace campaigns while at art school. Her mother had just died, she says, and

'I made the decision that my art practice was pointless and I needed to go and save the world. Campaigning work was more outer-directed, thinking about the outer world and other suffering put my suffering in context of the bigger suffering, and I felt better.' Talking about it in retrospect, her passion for the issue of climate change and grasp of its importance is undimmed. But she can now see how much her own needs were also involved and intertwined. She was 'deriving vast amounts of identity from this story of doing good work' and using campaigning to mitigate anxiety and doubts about her worth. 'The story about how I'm doing good work in the world became very important. The sense that my generation has to tackle climate change, it consumed me. It felt like there was potential to do big stuff, a sense that it was winnable,' she said. This was before the failed Copenhagen climate summit in 2009.[115] She was doing carbon policy work, on the basis that 'we just needed legislation to suck carbon out of the atmosphere', even though she was conscious that it didn't suit her temperament. 'It was a terrible fit for my personality. I was self-flagellating about how I didn't like it, but it was important so I had to do it. I was destroying myself for this story. I also knew I was exhausted, anxious.' The atmosphere at work was unpleasant, too, 'so many people are working themselves to the bone, getting angry'. For a while, this sacrifice of her health and peace of mind seemed justifiable: when set, ostensibly, against the challenge of climate change, and also, less obviously, while it was meeting some of her inner purposes. Eventually, however, she was able to gain some perspective about the limits of the individual contribution she could make on climate change, especially if it was burning her out, and moved into attempts to use art and culture to do environmental consciousness-raising.

Sacrifice can be necessary for activism. It can be a decision to make oneself uncomfortable for the benefit of a wider good, and in this light, it is inherent in attempts to change the world, most of which involve discomfort. It is not comfortable to immerse ourselves in stories about the worst things that people can do to people, as the human rights defenders at Amnesty and other organisations do. When I worked at Amnesty I had frequent nightmares about the material we were dealing with – these horrific things that had been done, by real people, to real people and their children – and I know other people who worked there who were badly affected by it.[116] I have great respect for those who can find a way to live

with this, to hear these stories from those who suffered them, tell them to the world as witness, and to keep doing so for the long term. Activism of all kinds is full of people making themselves more uncomfortable than they might have been otherwise: by speaking out in their communities, by using their time outside of work and family responsibilities to organise rather than relax, even by putting their bodies on the line in direct protest. Such actions can reasonably be described as sacrifices of some kind: of time, comfort, sometimes security. Taken to extremes – as they were being taken at Amnesty – they can become martyrdom: a feeling that we must suffer ourselves in order to be alongside the suffering of others. For activists who are martyring themselves, or activist cultures that are encouraging it, empathy – appreciating the gravity of someone's experience or feeling, without having personally experienced it – seems insufficient.

I think it's also a barrier.

And so there are two things to tease out here: sacrifice, and feeling that you have to do it all yourself. They are not quite the same thing, though they get tangled. Not all of the people making activist sacrifices are driven by a feeling that they have to do it all themselves. It's the individualistic shouldering of the burden that turns necessary sacrifice into something that looks rather like the systems we think we want to change. Having to do everything ourselves is part of the problem that activists are trying to tackle: it's what becomes necessary when the social fabric and shared safety nets are eroded by structuring society around market forces. It can be hard to see the individualism at work here, since activist sacrifices being made by multiple individuals who feel they have to do it all themselves can, paradoxically, bring a feeling of group identity and belonging. A group identity can form around those who are making these sacrifices alongside each other. I have experienced this in both NGOs and community campaigning where everyone is overworking towards a common goal, where the internal discourse is anchored in a shared narrative about how busy and stretched we all are.

This narrative of busyness and overstretch frames the decisions – often poor ones – that are made by individuals and the organisation about how much more work to take on. While these sacrifices are being made by more than one person, they are sacrifices that are being made only alongside others, as toddlers at a playgroup will play alongside their peers but not, yet,

truly with them. There is still, in these situations, a strong flavour of each member being that striving individual, toiling away at being a hero. 'Over time it became more about my need to be validated, more than the actual issue of climate change,' says Andrews of her time campaigning in NGOs. Eventually, despite the pressure she was putting on herself to keep going, she says, 'I became less and less able to convince myself that I as a single individual had to do it all on my own'. Indeed, sometimes the sacrifices are not only being made alongside others, but in direct competition with them: look who can sacrifice the most, work the longest hours, cause themselves the most discomfort.

There are several problems with having to do it all ourselves. One problem is that such stories tie our self-worth to our success. But what is success for a campaigner? If the activism we are doing is not succeeding in its goals – which, realistically, is a lot of the time – then we cannot derive a sense of success, nor therefore worth, from results. We feel we must try to obtain it, instead, from the amount of work we put in. This is a sure recipe for burnout. Awareness of burnout is becoming more visible in campaigning organisations than it was 15 years ago and, in some, support structures are in place. But these are better at picking up the pieces when it happens than preventing it through awareness of the root causes; the culture of martyrdom persists.[117]

Another problem with needing to do it all ourselves is that it is a selfish endeavour: in the sense that it keeps the attention focused on the self. It keeps an activist's attention focused on what 'I' am doing to solve the problem, on questions about whether 'I' have been successful. It can be, as Andrews acknowledged above, about '*my* need'. That need might be to shore up a sense of self-worth that feels lacking. It might be to build a sense of identity that is lacking by adopting the powerful and particular identity of 'activist'. Doing-it-all-ourselves can be a lifelong survival technique against feelings of scarcity, that something is lacking. Having to figure it all out on our own, to have our own backs, not trusting that we will be supported by others if we allow ourselves to lean on them: these can all be practices we learned in childhood because we had to. We perhaps needed them because we were not sufficiently nurtured, or because we were raised by parents who prioritised their child's independence over their sense of

security. By the time we reach adulthood such go-it-alone practices are ingrained habits that would require support to change. It may not even feel safe to do so. These practices are entirely normalised, too, by the culture of individualism in which we live. In trying to do it all ourselves in our activism, therefore, we are sacrificing some of our basic needs – perhaps for a healthy balance of work, rest and play – in order to meet these other deep needs. But whatever need of our own we are fulfilling by carrying the world on our shoulders, the result is that we can make our activism about ourselves, not about those human or non-human others we think we're trying to help. The beam of our attention is focused, busily and noisily, outwards. This can be a good way to avoid noticing what we're up to; to avoid noticing that we are, in some way, feeding ourselves. It also makes us less likely to notice when our campaigning strategies are constructed with ourselves at some imaginary centre, with our intended effects rippling outwards. And it's a convenient way of avoiding thinking about whether we are actually being effective. Jim Coe, who supports campaigning groups in planning and evaluating their strategies, calls it the Ptolemaic worldview. This is the tendency of campaigners to put their own campaign at the centre of their mental model and to think in terms of how its effects will ripple outwards, rather than beginning with their target and working out what it would take to create the necessary change. He warns that this habit creates a distorted and solipsistic view for campaigners of their place and importance in the world.[118]

Jem Bendell points out that climate change poses the ultimate challenge to the activist's sense that we, personally, have to solve the problem. In his view we are no longer in a time of prevention, but of 'deep adaptation' to what is already happening. In these terms, nobody is going to be 'solving' the problem, least of all us personally. In a list of suggestions for 'living beyond collapse-denial', he notes that resistance to information about catastrophe 'may come from what you have been consciously or subconsciously telling yourself about your own self-worth, purpose and meaning … If you are a mission-driven professional in fields related to environment or social justice then expect that you may be driven to rebuild a sense of self-worth and that this need of the ego, while natural and potentially useful, could become a frantic distraction.' If trying to save the world has been meeting our own needs, in other words, then the grief that comes with understanding that

the world cannot be saved in its current form is not just grief about what is happening to the world and its ability to support humans and other species. It is grief about the loss of what we thought was our purpose.[119]

Doing it all ourselves is also a form of extraction. When we do this as activists we are treating ourselves as bottomless resources, in the same way as the economic systems we are criticising, which relentlessly extract wealth from the lives and lands of other people. We are not running a healthy economy of the self.[120] We are expecting our physical and mental resources to remain available even though we are failing to replenish them through a balanced cycle of activity, rest and nourishment. This increases the chance that we will burn out, as I know too well from my own experience as a young journalist. But it becomes a problem for others too. By keeping the tempo of the work at a constantly frantic pace, we treat our colleagues and collaborators as bottomless resources too. We spread the burnout culture, the extraction culture. Furthermore, having to do it all ourselves can become our organisation or team having to do it all, which means having to grab turf – tasks, airtime, funding – from others. So activists who try to do it all ourselves risk excluding the voices and agency of others, including, sometimes, the voices and agency of those we are trying to help. By doing so, we are perpetuating the colonial dynamics that have given rise to the global inequality that we are working to alleviate.[121]

Being the saviour

An appealing aspect of doing it all yourself is that you get to be the hero. The hero's journey is a very old story, as old as culture, as old as humanity. It is as attractive to activists as it is to everyone else. If activism is ultimately a performance, both in the sense that it is in being seen that it has its effect, and in that it is creating a storyline out of opposition, then it will often feel like it needs a hero. And what do heroes do? They save the day. It is very easy for a hero story to become a saviour story, especially if our ears are tuned to the idea of a saviour by ambient cultural Christianity. Saviour stories can run deep in our personal lives, too. Stephen Karpman's 'Drama Triangle' is a model of interpersonal roles derived from transactional analysis.[122] This is a psychoanalytic theory and practice developed by Eric

Berne in the 1950s that focuses on how people relate to each other. It soon escaped the consulting room into the workplace and management training courses, which is where some people may have come across it. Karpman's triangle explains the interdependence of the commonly adopted roles of 'victim', 'rescuer' and 'persecutor', which for many people are learned in childhood through the workings of their family dynamics. The model is not static and the people involved can 'switch' positions: a victim can become a persecutor and a rescuer can become a victim. Karpman used fairy stories in his original paper, which is available on his website, to illustrate how this can happen.[123] The drama triangle does not map directly onto activist dynamics since the position of 'victim' in particular was intended to suggest someone who is, in psychological terms, choosing to take the victim position in an interaction, even if that 'choice' is made subconsciously. This is obviously not the same as being the actual victim of an oppression or marginalisation, one that is the subject of activism. And nor is it inevitable that experiencing oppression or marginalisation necessarily turns us into a victim; one of the problems with rescuers is their tendency to push people into a victim role they do not wish to occupy.

Karpman's model is, however, suggestive for activism that is being done on behalf of others. It can help us to see what can happen if the activist is not conscious about their own need to occupy the saviour role, perhaps if they are occupying this role to avoid feeling like a victim themselves. If activists are adopting a 'rescuer' position for unconscious reasons connected to their own needs and their own interpersonal history, they may ultimately need the person or groups they are rescuing to remain 'victim', as they will need someone to keep rescuing. Tangled together with the ongoing colonial assumptions of agency and voice that I described above, this would create a powerful incentive for saviour behaviour. Karpman's triangle also shows the inextricable role of the 'persecutor' figure in rescuer dynamics: the existence of someone onto whom the rescuer can project all the blame for the victim's situation. These are the 'bastards' who I wanted to 'get' with my investigations: the bankers, mining executives and tax haven lawyers. As the discussion of activist projections in the previous chapter showed, it is much easier and more satisfying for somebody who likes being a 'rescuer' to apportion blame in this way – much easier, that is, than acknowledging their own complicity and entanglement in the problem.

Psychotherapists must routinely handle the 'transference' that happens when a patient is working through the traumas of their past. It is part of the process that the person in therapy may cast their therapist in a role of saviour, persecutor or victim. Judith Herman, an American psychiatrist and trauma specialist, describes the risk that the therapist, unable to bear the sense of helplessness in the face of what she is hearing, assumes the role of rescuer. 'By so doing, she implies that the patient is not capable of acting for herself. The more the therapist accepts the idea the patient is helpless, the more she perpetuates the traumatic transference and disempowers the patient.' At its extreme, this behaviour can lead to 'a stance of grandiose specialness or omnipotence'. She quotes another therapist, Henry Krystal, observing that the therapist's 'impulse to play God is as ubiquitous as it is pathogenic'. Therapists are trained to handle these 'narcissistic snares'.[124] But activists who do 'development', humanitarian work and any form of campaigning in support of others are not. My intention is not to draw a simplistic analogy here between a 'patient' and 'therapist' relationship and a 'helped' and 'helper' activist relationship. But the juxtaposition of activism with therapy – with its training, ongoing supervision and explicit recognition of the risk of narcissistic positioning – does highlight the potential unawareness with which those who think they want to 'save' others can dive into their chosen task. It highlights too, the dearth of meaningful support and supervision around these issues for activists.

For activists from rich countries, there can be guilt and horror at how an economic system that has benefited them has hurt people elsewhere. These feelings send many people into 'international development' work, or into campaigning to reduce global inequalities – as they did me. Yet the same mental structure that created those economic systems is still at work. The idea that the activist is the one with agency, the one who knows the answers, the one who speaks publicly, who is acting on behalf of others, persists.[125] 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together', goes a line attributed to the Aboriginal activist and scholar Lilla Watson. I wrote in Chapter 3 about the differences in perspective between activists who are fighting for their own lives, and activists who are fighting in support of others. Many activists observe that the most effective

campaigning is done when both types of activists are working together in solidarity. But the tensions of saviourhood may also emerge.

What are those tensions? One is that the helpers may not have the best perspective on what is needed, and that becomes a problem if their self-image as saviour makes them think they don't need to ask. Activists who are intervening to support others rather than fighting for their own lives get described as 'do-gooders', who are fuelled by 'middle-class guilt'. That pejorative term 'do-gooding' has implications of 'well-meaning but misguided', and there may be a truth here, since those fighting for their own liberation – who do not get called 'do-gooders' – tend to have a stronger sense of what is needed than those trying to help them. The international development industry, long a bastion of white-saviourism, is riddled with stories of inappropriate interventions and projects over many decades, but this tension is also built into the structures and procedures of aid agencies and development charities and the 'technical assistance' that they provide to governments. The scholar, author and activist Robtel Neajai Pailey's dissection of the 'white gaze' of development describes how, when she was a young Liberian staffer in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration, white American colleagues, also in their twenties, were permitted to promote themselves past her. White British early- and mid-career bureaucrats were serving as 'governance advisors' to senior Liberian managers with decades more experience. 'I began to understand slowly,' she writes, 'that the … "advisors" only assumed these titles because Western whiteness remains a signifier of expertise, whether real or perceived.'[126]

Emilia Roig, who now runs the Center for Intersectional Justice in Berlin, began her career working on women's rights in Cambodia, Kenya and Ecuador. 'There were things I found completely disturbing in the international development complex, especially the colonial structures that were in place, not even disguised,' she says. 'I could see it in the very way expats and experts related to the national workforce. Local staff expertise was completely devalued, this could be seen in salaries, decision-making, what language you used, status and recognition. I found this extremely disturbing.'[127] Attempts are underway within many of these organisations to shift power and change their culture. Yet, as some staff working within them have observed in our conversations, the dynamics continue to play out

-2021- I was observing this dog in real time.

even as campaigning organisations consciously try not to let the priorities and voices of the people in 'headquarters' override those of their partners, staff or beneficiaries 'on the ground' or 'in the field'.

Saviourhood also carries the risk that the do-gooders can choose the terms of their engagement. They can shift focus when they think it's not working, when they think there's a different place to put their energy and attention. At the start of 2019, as Sudanese citizens faced their government's teargas and bullets in an uprising (which, later in the year, was brutally crushed), a comment piece in *The Guardian* enquired into the whereabouts of celebrity advocates for the Sudanese people, such as the actor George Clooney who had been so vociferous in defence of human rights in Sudan only a few years before.[128] Clooney responded defensively in a follow-up piece that he was still working behind the scenes, but had turned his attention to investigating the financial structures that were supporting the regime.[129] This is a relevant angle that I am familiar with because I have worked on it myself. Brutal regimes cannot survive without the banking services extended to them. But the fact remained that at this moment of evident crisis, violence and suffering in the place that he had publicly invested himself in, Clooney's voice now *appeared* to be missing. Less publicly and all too commonly, NGOs will engage for a few years in a campaigning project in a particular country, raising funds for it, relying on the expertise of local collaborators, diverting local NGO partners from their other projects, before casually re-allocating funds to something else when their 'organisational priorities' shift.

The very frame of international 'development' has long been criticised for labelling some countries 'developed' when they have in fact dispossessed, annihilated and impoverished entire populations.[130] In this sense, to focus on the alleged pathologies of other countries is a turning away from your own culture's problems (as well as, perhaps, your own problems: some of my encounters in Sierra Leone suggested there is some truth in the 'missionaries, mercenaries, misfits' cliché of the humanitarian worker). This structure resonates with the pattern of narcissism. Those who are 'saving' for their own purposes are performing the narcissist's double move of taking the gaze off what is uncomfortable about themselves while at the same time elevating themselves. Contrary to popular opinion, narcissism

I feel like 'narcissism' needs more definition – and distance from NPD.

is not about someone wanting attention because they think they are so damn fantastic. It is about the paradox of someone not being able to love themselves and thus needing attention to compensate for the lack of a healthy and stable inner sense of themselves. A narcissist is someone who seeks to hide their vulnerability from others by distracting them with grandiose outward shows that serve to obtain validating praise. This is tiring for those who must live with it at the best of times, but the form of narcissism that is so utterly rattling to those who receive it comes in the form of 'I was only trying to help you'.

The deep tension of the saviour complex is that being the one who is helping others – who has time and resources to help others, who thinks it is their task and that they have the ability to help others – is a result of privilege. This word refers to the suite of often unacknowledged advantages that come from accidents of birth, accidents that can deposit a person into a life where their path is smoothed. It is smoothed not because they are 'lucky' or have done anything special, but because of painful histories that have been inflicted on someone else. It is not only about the accident of who you are: that you are middle or upper class, or that you live in a 'developed' or peaceful country, or that you live in a body that has not been racialised. It is that through land enclosures, industrial exploitation, colonialism, enslavement, unfair global trade and debt regimes, and ongoing racism and other forms of discrimination, terrible things have been done, by people like you, to secure the comfortable life of people like you.

Saviourhood, then, is a form of entanglement in the histories of abuse, pain and oppression that activists are trying to confront. Activists are positioned in relation to these histories. We have experienced them, or we are benefiting from them, or both; as the theory of intersectionality so illuminatingly demonstrates, any one person can live in multiple positions in relation to multiple different histories.[131] And our ancestors experienced them, or were complicit in them – or perhaps, as in my case, both. My paternal grandfather was the child of Jewish refugees who arrived in the UK having fled pogroms in Russia and Poland; my paternal grandmother was the child of a colonial railway engineer in India. All activists working to reduce global inequalities are likely to be aware of the histories of abuse and theft that have led to the current situation. But for

white activists, acknowledging our own place in these histories, which is what a reckoning with whiteness calls for, brings painful truths – including the recognition that any success we have had does not come only from hard work or our own smarts. Dedicating our life to helping others does not prevent us being complicit in the ongoing suffering of those others. And the surfacing and realisation of privilege, as we saw in the previous chapter, brings awkwardness, discomfort and defensiveness that can get in the way of being alongside the activists who are experiencing the problem that is being tackled. 'The hardest people to facilitate in this work are the people who think they are saving the world already,' says Vanessa Faloye, a facilitator who runs equity and inclusion training for both NGOs and the private sector.[132]

It takes a lot of inner work and ruthless self-honesty – digging over sometimes difficult and painful ground – for an activist to examine this complicity, to uncover their own paternalistic attitudes and hidden assumptions, to be able to work, without awkwardness, in solidarity with people who are fighting for their lives. For activists to liberate ourselves from these attitudes and assumptions might be the kind of liberation that Lilla Watson is talking about. It takes a lot of work to be able to come truly alongside someone, to be as aware as we can of the agendas we are carrying, and say: 'I don't know how it is for you. What do you need?' and to be able to receive the same question in return. In the absence of this work, the awkwardness-avoidance strategies – the awkwardness being the self-consciousness that can come with half-suppressed awareness of the privilege gap – kick in. These strategies include being the expert, knowing best, talking noisily about solutions, maintaining hierarchy and, sometimes, just maintaining the kind of blithe unawareness that lets us think we're doing our bit by hogging the limelight. All of them widen the gap between those doing the work and the people they are supposedly doing it for. I heard the words 'imperious' and 'Victorian' used to describe the 'us and them' approach of staff to beneficiaries in some UK homelessness charities. Ruth Hunt, who was until 2019 the chief executive of Stonewall, had noticed the bluffing that occurred when inexperienced campaigners in the UK found themselves dealing with questions about issues faced by LGBT people in low-income countries. These were strategies, she said, 'made up by people who've not experienced the issues to demonstrate that they're awake to the issues'.[133]

Some of the results of this gap, this unwillingness to be alongside and to listen, became clear when I contacted some of the people running NGOs in Uganda with whom I had worked on resource-revenue transparency campaigns a few years earlier. They were open, and very critical, and I realised that I had not heard them making these points in this way before, because I had not asked in a truly open way. And would I even have wanted to hear it? We had turned up, even under the rubric of 'consultation' – which we thought we were being careful about – with our own underlying ideas about what was important. This tended to be the subject of the global-level campaign that we were working on in London. In conversation with Winfred Ngabiirwe, the executive director of Global Rights Alert, a human rights organisation focused on the impact of natural resource extraction in Uganda, I asked about how her interactions went with funders and NGOs in the global North. It was clear that she sometimes had to make pragmatic decisions because of the power dynamic of where the money was coming from. 'They write proposals from where they are, and say they have this money to do a, b, c. They already have their country-specific plan, and they will only come and tell you this is the money we have to do certain things,' she said. 'You would not say, our interest is supporting women investors in the mining sector; it's our mining sector. They are interested in a certain aspect, even if it's not your priority as a country, and you end up working on that issue and not on the issue that has more value for the lives of people, because the chances of you convincing them to switch to that important aspect are 1 per cent.'[134]

Another tension of saviourhood is that those who are stepping in to help save others do not have to take the situation as urgently as those who are fighting for their lives. Nor do they have to look for sufficiently deep solutions. Imani Robinson, a writer, curator and prison abolitionist, worked for a time in NGO policy advocacy to try to change the police's approach to stop-and-search in the UK. This experience strengthened her view of the profound limitations of policy change when the attitudes that underlie the policies – in this case, racism – go unchanged. She saw, in the policy change world:

> this commitment to incremental change that only the privileged cling to. It's really something that's quite

> depressing and upsetting for people who are at the brunt of that incremental change, doing us a disservice. There's a reliance on this 'we can't do everything in one day' that allows people to believe that actually, policy is the way forward, or these things are worth our time or our lives. And this is not to say that policies changing can't make change. There are a set of policies that we could put into place tomorrow that would ensure better livelihoods and higher well-being for a lot of people, but they're not radical changes, they're not changes that allow us to be seen as full human beings and to bring our full selves, they're changes that are only ever in isolation, they can only ever work with every other policy working with them.

Those who are not living the problem, cannot see the extent to which it needs to be changed.[135]

Activists who try to help don't know enough and are too scared to acknowledge that they don't know; they can choose to disappear; they can afford to assume that certain types of incremental change will be enough. These are all examples of the privileged continuing to enact that privilege, continuing to play it out in activist relationships. A classic assumption of the privileged activist who is trying to help is that they are the one with agency: the space to speak and the voice. Organisations are created around this assumption – like some of the ones I have worked for. I've been thinking, while writing this book, about what I was doing in those jobs. NGOs in wealthy countries try to use their geographical proximity to the global institutions of power to advocate on behalf of those whose lives, far away, are affected by the operations of that power. There is a logic to this. Not all of those affected can leave their work and families and travel across the world to have a go at the IMF or the European Commission. It makes a practical kind of sense for those who are on the doorstep of these institutions to do some of the advocacy with their representatives. And those who are closer to that power know how to speak to it. They share cultural assumptions with those who are in power. Sometimes, as taxpayers or voters or shareholders, they have some form of democratic or financial leverage over that power.