

Waking Up Together

Global Transformation and Feminine Wisdom

with Elizabeth Rabia Roberts



Essays from Rabia

SHOWING UP: Notes on Action in the World

January 2, 2004

Living a spiritual life has always included for me both an intensely inward, contemplative practice of liberation from my identifications and judgments, as well as the challenging aspect of outward service dedicated to justice in the world. No matter how much my own life over the years has become more serene and fulfilled, the world continues calling me to respond to its suffering.

How can I best serve? What action is appropriate? Should I serve in my neighborhood or in distant lands? The world's problems are so enormous, what can I do that might make a difference? I have often asked these kinds of questions myself, and I hear many others asking them as well. In these pages I would like to recount a few of the lessons I have learned during my life about spirit, service, and right action.

Several years ago Elias and I met with the late Cambodian monk, Maha Ghosananda, in a Buddhist temple outside of Bangkok. He was known for his work in war-ravaged Cambodia where for years he led fellow monks and lay people on peace walks from village to village, encouraging the distressed population to build the spiritual and civic basis for safety, trust, and peace. During a decade of these walks he was accompanied by thousands of Cambodians, and others from Asia and around the world, walking through the countryside to support these aims.



We met this saintly old monk in a garden of the temple and asked his advice: "How best can we serve our world?"

His simple answer became a fundamental guideline for our own work as activists. He said, "First you must show up. Be present to the suffering. Ask questions. Listen. Then what you are to do will become apparent. Right action will arise from this."

His words were a reminder that healing is an intimate act. We cannot do it from afar. We can pass legislation and devise ambitious projects, yes, but enduring peace is built when people show up to each other's suffering and encounter each other in their vulnerability and common humanity.

We don't have to go far to practice this advice. Showing up in full presence to our aging parent or a troubled adolescent, or volunteering at a battered women's shelter, gives us an opportunity for compassionate, expressive action. These encounters stretch our hearts to embrace more of the world. They call us out of our comfort zone.

Four decades ago I went to Selma, Alabama, to work with Dr. Martin Luther King in the American civil rights movement. As part of our training to practice non-violence in face of threats from southern white people, he reminded us that our values are not created by what we read or think. They do not arrive from a sudden outbreak of emotion. Our values, Dr. King said, come from the perspective of what we see when we get out of bed in the morning. It is what we hear, see, and feel each day that determines our view of the world and our place within it. In the end we are moved by the circumstances we find ourselves in. Dr. King urged us to have compassion for the whites who were defending their racist worldview because when they woke up in the morning all they saw was the precarious nature of their sheltered lives and privileged positions. I knew from that point that regularly in my life I would find ways to be with those less privileged than myself in order to open my heart to the realities of their lives.



And how do I show up? With my questions and commitment to listening. Each year I experience greater humility in the face of all I do not know. I do not try to “fix” those I encounter or persuade them to be different. I listen. Sometimes that is all I have to offer – simply a person willing to bear witness to someone else’s reality. In the early years of my work with Elias in the tribal lands of northern Thailand and Burma we asked a village elder, “What can we do for you?” I was expecting a request for money or medical supplies. The village elder replied, “We want our story heard.” Throughout our travels we have found that powerful healing is evoked in simply listening to a person’s story. Without engaging them from a preconceived position something magical happens when people feel truly heard. A bridge is built and one is no longer a private person concerned only with taking care of me and mine, or maintaining a point of view.



It became clear to us that what we had to give that might be of benefit for these tribal peoples was the ability to bring others to listen to them. For nine years we led “Interfaith Solidarity Walks” into the region bringing westerners and Asians to listen and learn from the Pagayaw (Karen) people. Today these Solidarity Walks still go on, led by a coalition of tribal young people and urban Thai activists. From the hundreds of gatherings and conversations that have occurred because of the Walks, many beneficial projects have been initiated and the tribal people themselves have developed increasing capacity to consider issues together and articulate their deepest concerns.

We had no idea how our lives could serve this situation when we made our first encounter. It would have been easy to think we weren’t prepared to respond to an unknown situation, especially since we hadn’t created a plan ahead of time. This is what we are taught at school and at work – be prepared! Have a plan and know how you can execute it. What I am suggesting here flies in the face of that advice. It suggests that problems can be solved creatively when we show up to them in an alert state of “un-knowing.” This approach requires faith, not only in ourselves but in the world as well.

Each situation has its own information embedded within the relationships that comprise it. If we are patient and curious the natural “intelligence” of the situation will reveal what is needed to heal those relationships. To be sensitive to this intelligence requires that we slow down and learn to hold the focus without needing to drive an agenda. We may need to wait for hours, weeks, or months for the moment when right action is clear. And we may not know for some time what success will look like when the action is complete.

Action that is creative in this way is an organic process. It rarely comes about all at once. The next step is only apparent when the previous one is completed. It is an iterative process with its own appropriate pace. And this process can seem inefficient, even messy, as differing points of view are aired and debated, or trial projects are started and discarded. But working in this way allows people to explore their diverse ways of understanding what is happening. It also gives each of us more freedom to experiment with who we are and how we can best serve in a particular situation.

This kind of open-ended approach is not always welcome in modern fast-paced culture. Instead we are schooled to have clearly stated goals, to know what we want to have happen in the shortest possible time, and to have a plan for maneuvering others to our point of view. “Showing up” to the needs of a situation in the way I am describing may seem inefficient or even uncertain. Instead of pushing our beliefs, we listen to others; rather than trying to fix a situation we wait to see how we can best serve what is evolving. Serving a person or a problem in this way rests on the recognition that the nature of life is sacred and that its mystery requires our utmost humility as we engage in the work of healing. From the perspective of service we are all connected: all suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy. The impulse – and guidance – to serve our world emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing.

In fact, “fixing” or “helping” is not a relationship between equals. In fixing we see others as broken. A fixer may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this implied inequality. The danger in fixing is that we may take away from people more than we give them. We may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity, or even wholeness.

When we try to fix people or situations we may feel our own strength, but when we serve we don’t serve with our strength alone, we serve with our totality and we draw from all our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, and even our darkness can serve. My pain is the source of my





compassion; my woundedness is the key to my empathy. Service is a relationship between equals and it heals us as well as others. Seeking to fix the world is ultimately draining and over time we may burn out, while serving the world is renewing.

And we can't serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected – that which we are willing to touch. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy. We learn that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise alone. Personally I find this recognition liberating and the ground of a contemplative approach to living.

Several years ago someone told me a story about a man named Robert Desnos. He was a surrealist painter who lived in Austria during World War II. He was known for his faith in human creativity and imagination. Like many artists during that time he found himself rounded up by the Germans and taken to a concentration camp.

We can imagine the scene there – bleak and hopeless. Hundreds of people lying sick on bare pallets in rows of wooden barracks. They work, they try to sleep. Every few weeks they notice that groups of them have disappeared. There is a grey pallor over everything.

One afternoon a truck pulls up in front of the barracks where Desnos is staying. Young guards herd Desnos and others outside and up onto the truck. It drives them outside the camp where everyone knows the gas chambers are. The men are silent, exhausted, and sick beyond despair. The truck stops in front of a brick building and the guards motion with their guns for the men to come down off the truck.

One by one they haltingly jump down. Suddenly Robert Desnos leaps from the truck and grabs the hand of the man in front of him. He turns the palm up and asks, "Here, let me read your fortune! Ah!" he says with his eyes sparkling, "You will have a long life! And many children too!" He reaches for another hand and the message is the same, "You will have a long life! Much success! Many children!" He moves from one to the next, telling their positive fortunes. The men start to laugh. Here they are standing on the edge of death yet eagerly thrusting their hands at Robert Desnos to have their fortunes told.

The young guards are baffled by this joyous energy and the incongruity of the situation. They are thrown off balance. They don't know what to do. Finally they motion with their rifles for the men to get back into the truck, and they drive back to the barracks. A year later Robert Desnos is dead from typhus, but we know this story because many of the men in his barracks survived that day and were freed at the end of the war.

We wouldn't normally consider Robert Desnos a social activist, and by all accounts he was an atheist, but he "showed up" to his moment. Despite being sick he was not numb. His faith in human imagination allowed him to recognize the joy and possibility of life, even in that desperate moment. He wasn't trying to fix anything. He had no idea what the consequences of his game would be. Without calculation he was serving his moment with the fullness of his humanity.

I tell this story because it demonstrates how accessible healing action is to each of us. The potential of each situation, each moment, and our own imagination, is enormous. What limits us is the fixity of our preconceptions and judgments. They keep us from showing up with open minds and open hearts.

And here we can see how the "inner life" of spiritual development and the "outer life" of worldly action align. Freeing ourselves from old patterns of thinking, and relating to our world, is identical work, whether it is called spiritual or secular. The work asks us to show up and be receptive to what is, without judgment. Then opportunities for healing arise naturally. And the realm of what is served, whether we see it as outside of us or inside, is the same.

