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The Power of One

Mary-Wynne Ashford
University of Victoria

MARY-WYNNE ASHFORD is an M.D., a long time peace activist, and a faculty member at the University of Victoria in B.C., Canada.

"...on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences."
Albert Camus, "The Plague"

Not long ago I borrowed a set of tapes from David Suzuki's CBC series, "It's a Matter of Survival", (Suzuki, 1989), and listened to them one after another over a weekend. By Monday, I was paralyzed with despair. Although I had been working every spare moment on nuclear disarmament, suddenly I felt like Sisyphus in a pointless exercise pushing a rock uphill. Every morning the rock grew larger and more unwieldy. Onto the weight of the nuclear arms race, I had now cemented over-population, ozone depletion, drift-net fishing, destruction of the rain forests, the Great Lakes dying For a time, I couldn't put my shoulder to the rock at all.

The questions that immobilized me were as old as the Greek myth itself. How do you find hope when there is no rational reason for optimism? How do you deal with evidence that the situation is worsening despite your best efforts? Does your life make any difference? What is the power of one?

Camus in his 1947 novel, *The Plague*, explores the same questions, using an epidemic of bubonic plague to represent evil and suffering and, specifically, to represent the Nazi occupation of France and the collusion of the Vichy Regime. The protagonist, Dr. Rieux, fights against suffering and death, not as a hero, but as a weary, somewhat detached man, who through his struggle gives his life meaning. His friend, Jarrou, speaks of having had the plague earlier in his life when, as a child, he discovered that his father's role as a judge was to sentence and preside over death. In choosing how to respond to the plague, Camus' characters are not motivated by hope, but by an inner imperative similar to that often described by those who chose to risk their lives saving Jews from the holocaust. The rescuers say that they were faced with someone at the door, and simply did what had to be done. Viktor Frankl (1955) also writes that finding meaning in life is independent of hope or freedom, as he describes life in a Nazi concentration camp, where daily tasks of living often represent a refusal to acquiesce.

Perhaps it is not fair to compare the angst of facing personal death with that of facing the possible extinction of the human race, but our responses are still made as individuals. The planetary crises raise existential and spiritual questions we are usually able to avoid in our affluent society. I find that the question of how to face hopelessness is one I cannot answer with consistency and intellectual rigor. On the one hand, optimism probably represents denial of the facts because the

scientific research offers little evidence that nature can recover from the man-made destruction wrought in this century. I know, therefore, that I cannot rationally base my decisions on the hope that we will turn things around. On the other hand, I find that I cherish the small signs that people are taking action to promote change, and when I see them, I feel a tiny surge of optimism that I am unwilling to repress. My compromise is to work without depending on hope that it will make a difference, while at the same time treasuring the signs that I am one of many.

In spite of my despair after hearing the Suzuki series, I found myself continuing my efforts in disarmament, not because it seemed to be the most urgent problem, or the most terrifying, but because there were things to be done in disarmament that were clear to me. Whether or not I could really make a difference, leaving them undone was a resignation to despair. At the very least, the individual can challenge the silence of assumed consensus. By breaking the silence, by refusing to collude with evil and insanity, one resists the darkness.

Breaking the silence is, I think, the most significant thing we do as individuals. Sometimes even without speaking, one can challenge the silence, as did the women in Argentina during the military regime. The women, Las Madres de la Plaza, refused to be intimidated by death squads. They kept a daily vigil for the disappeared, standing outside government headquarters, their presence alone a blatant accusation of murder and brutality. The women also showed that the power of one is acted out in community, not in solitude. We sustain each other in dark times, sometimes simply by being present together.

The result of "speaking truth to power", as the Quakers put it, is often subtle and unpredictable. Men who left their jobs in US military industries as a result of a crisis of conscience describe individuals who forced them to confront the meaning of their work on nuclear weapons (Everett, 1989). One senior official told of the impact of passing a solitary man who stood every day outside the entrance to the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, holding a placard opposing nuclear weapons. The anonymous protester played a significant role in the official's eventual decision to resign his job.

Sometimes, we look to great individuals like Mother Theresa or Nelson Mandela in order to see that one person can effect change. I find it more inspiring to see the effects of ordinary people who did what they saw had to be done without becoming great symbols of resistance. I think, for example, of hearing the Executive Director of the Manila YWCA speaking at a peace meeting in Honolulu. She was asked whether the YWCA had had any part in the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos and the election of Corazon Aquino. "Well, yes," she admitted, "we did". "What did you do?" the audience demanded. "Well, I lay on the road to keep the tanks from coming into the downtown, and the other women brought food and water." I am inspired to know that she was not an unusual, heroic example in those gripping last days of the Marcos regime. She was one of more than a million who stood up to defy corruption and brutality.

I am reminded also of the small group of people who went to the Persian Gulf peace camp in Iraq before the bombing began. As international observers, they wanted to make a symbolic statement that there were alternative ways to resolve the conflict. One of the group, Muriel Sibley (1991) described the events as the US began bombing. Iraqi soldiers were sent to take the peace campers to Baghdad for evacuation. The campers sat to protest this move, forcing the soldiers to carry each one onto a bus. As one soldier placed an elderly woman on the seat of the bus, he said, "I am sorry mother, I am only doing what I must." She took his face in her hands and replied " I too am sorry. I am only doing what I must." They didn't stop the Gulf War. They did refuse to be silent in the face of evil.

Living a life consistent with sustaining the planet requires a new ethic which builds upon the assumption that each person is of value and that each person does make a difference. The principles of such an ethic are best articulated by contemporary social movements for peace, women's equality, human rights and the environment. It is not surprising that from each of these movements come similar guidelines, because the issues we face are deeply intertwined.

As I interpret this new ethic, I find there seem to be two fundamental assumptions. The first is that humans are part of an interdependent web on this planet, not the pinnacle of creation. The second is that perpetuation of the complex web is good. That is, causing or allowing life on earth to die out is the essence of evil. Derived from these assumptions are a number of guidelines for how humans should live. These include the recognition that we must give up the emphasis on the rights of the individual and stress instead the responsibility each bears to the rest, and particularly to those who will live seven generations after us. In shifting toward responsibilities to others, we must rediscover community in the midst of our anonymous urban settings. As Nel Noddings (1984) writes, we must move to an ethic of caring, an ethic based on relationship.

Women in each of the social movements emphasize the destructiveness of hierarchical structures, not simply because such structures usually exclude women, but because they place an emphasis on status and position over others, rather than on equal relationships. Perhaps if we could return to valuing relationships instead of possessions, we might make our own "ecological footprint" smaller.

Non-violence must become a central value, not only because we have the ability to destroy the world with nuclear weapons, but because the attitude that promoted the development of weapons that could end life on Earth represents a way of thinking in which domination is paramount. Abuse of human rights and of the environment arise from striving for domination of nature, of women, of people of color, of those who dissent.

An ethic of sustainability demands an internal revolution in which we live out individually what is needed collectively. Reducing, reusing, and recycling are still uncomfortable and unfamiliar to most of us. I recall the good advice I

received from my interpreter when I was in Moscow a few years ago. He told me that he was absolutely at my disposal. "If there is anything you need", he said, "call me and I'll tell you how to live without it." Perhaps we need a 1-800 number to tell us how to live without whatever we see on television.

The myth of Sisyphus is not simply a statement that life is absurd, but rather that meaning is to be found in the journey up the hill each time, not in the hope that this time we shed the rock forever. Buddhist scholar, Joanna Macy, writes of visiting a group of monks in Tibet (Macy, 1991). The monks were reconstructing their ancient monastery which had been reduced to rubble by the Chinese. Her heart fell at the magnitude of the task and its almost foolhardy nature. When the monks were asked about Chinese policies and the likelihood of another period of repression, Macy saw that such calculations were conjecture to the monks. Since you cannot see into the future you simply proceed to put one stone on top of another, and another on top of that. If the stones get knocked down, you begin again, because if you don't nothing will get built.

In the end, the power of one is in the everyday putting of one stone upon another, working in community, speaking truth to power and refusing to join forces with the pestilence.

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