

“BEING CALLED AWAKE”: THE ROLE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN THE LIVES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS

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Environmental and other nonprofit activists often confront what Parker Palmer referred to as a loss of heart, particularly where working conditions challenge the capacity of practitioners to sustain their commitment. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the process of learning and self-renewal in the lives of experienced and committed environmental activists. Findings suggest that their lives are characterized by struggles that represent a profound form of learning, involving recognition and understanding of one's work as a calling or vocation as well as exemplifying the kind of transformative learning reflected in Jung's concept of individuation.

Keywords: *adult learning; transformative learning; environmental activism; vocation; calling; individuation*

At the age of 24, Peter O'Malley went on his first camping trip. He recalls,

I remember just waking up on the shores of Lake Superior on a beautiful, rather chilly summer morning, hearing the waves pounding against the rocks below and getting up and drinking my coffee, staring out and thinking, “You know, this is really what I want to do with my life. This is what matters. Trying to preserve these kinds of places so people after me are going to be able to feel this kind of joy and peace.”

Today, at the age of 44, Peter is regarded as one of the most committed and passionate environmentalists working in the Michigan nonprofit community. He describes

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his work as stemming from love. In his words, "That's a powerful fuel. . . . There are relatively few walks of life that I have experienced where you feel that a mass of people is drawn to it because they have this emotional calling."

Peter's experience of work as an environmentalist mirrors that of other committed activists. Although he reveals a deep emotional attachment to his work, he also has had to overcome powerful feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted. His experience is not unique. Environmental professionals are often discouraged, work with a sense of hopelessness, and question their own effectiveness (Berry & Gordon, 1993; Institute for Conservation Leadership, 1996; Snow, 1992; Thomashow, 1995). Recent studies indicate the average tenure of executive directors of nonprofit organizations is approximately 6 years, with burnout being one of the highest ranking reasons for choosing to leave (Peters & Wolfred, 2001; Singleton & Cunningham, 2000; Wolfred, Allison, & Masaoka, 1999). Some suggest that to retain executives, nonprofit organizations should be proactive in finding opportunities for professional growth (Wolfred et al., 1999). Snow (1992) argued that environmental professionals need to be "strong, refreshed, spiritually active, and overwhelmingly positive in their outlook" (p. 190) to achieve their greatest levels of effectiveness. Yet missing from these suggestions is an understanding of the fundamental nature of the learning process involved in helping to achieve or maintain commitment for activist work. Little information is available about the nonprofit sector, and what is available often emerges as fragmented and poorly defined (Weisbrod, 1988; Wilson, 1994). Few empirical studies have been conducted of paid staff in these organizations (Herman & Heimovics, 1989; Wilensky, 1995) and, as a result, we know little about their experiences as activists and even less about ways to help support and strengthen individuals who choose nonprofit careers. The purpose of this study was to better understand the role of learning in sustaining commitment to nonprofit work, with specific emphasis placed on environmental professionals in small nonprofit organizations.

RELATIONSHIP OF THE SELF AND WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Recent scholarship on vocation or calling suggests a deep interconnection between the meaningfulness of our lives and the meaningfulness of the work we do (Whyte, 2001). Historically, *vocation* has meant "to be addressed by a voice" (Storr, 1984) or to have a sense of a life's calling (Cochran, 1990). Now, however, the term is used more frequently to reflect concern for meaning in life through one's work, that is, work we are naturally inclined to do and in which we find personal expression of the self (Fox, 1995). For some, vocation describes the intersection of the deeply personal with that which is socially purposeful, meaningful, or necessary (Hansen, 1995; Rehm, 1990). It is a "place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, 1993).

Studies on work for the common good underscore the importance of this sense of vocation or calling (Colby & Damon, 1992; Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Hansen, 1995; Lashley, Neal, Slunt, Berman, & Hultgren, 1994) and suggest the need to understand more clearly the relationship between who we are as persons and the commitments we make to the work we do. Daloz et al. (1996) argued that commitment and vocation are demonstrated to be closely intertwined, implying that it is not necessarily an individualistic choice to act. Several studies of people working for the common good reflect this interrelationship between the self and a sense of vocation. People who participate in social movements often learn new information and skills; further clarify their values, beliefs, and attitudes; and deepen their sense of self-identity (Boggs, 1986; Foley, 1991; Kastner, 1993; Scott, 1992). The activity of activism itself provides an avenue for enhancing self-esteem, confidence, and strength of commitment and contributes to a sense of becoming more alive, concerned, and active contributors to society (Cosstick, 1994).

Palmer (2000) submitted that vocation, at its deepest level, "is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling" (p. 25). He suggested that vocation is a call to listen:

Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life. (pp. 4-5)

Palmer proposed that being guided by vocation involves learning to listen to the deep but powerful messages that life sends us through the ways in which calling manifests itself in our lives. That is, vocation is not a passive road map through life. Rather, it represents an active stance toward the meaning of our lives and our outer work, a form of ongoing learning and inner work.

Although researchers have begun to study people working with a passion or with a sense of vocation, very little is known about how passion, vocation, and commitment are sustained within the lives of those who work for the common good. What little we do know suggests an openness to change is at the heart of sustained commitment, along with personal evolution, integration, and reflection. In other words, a deep, profound form of ongoing learning appears to be at the core of sustained commitment. Being guided by vocation and sustaining commitment and passion appear to be linked to the inner work of the self.

INNER WORK AS TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

As work brings the person in deep and intimate relationship with the outer world, it also becomes a location for a form of deep learning and the realization of inner meaning and change (Fox, 1995; Whyte, 2001). During the past 20 years,

transformation theory has become an increasingly popular approach to studying and understanding this form of learning. It is also an increasingly contested term (Taylor, 1998). The description of transformative learning provided by the Transformative Learning Center at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education (OISE), however, represents an inclusive and integrative view. They described transformative learning as

a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions . . . a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy. (Morrell & O'Connor, 2002, p. xvii)

Although not inconsistent with the OISE description, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning relies heavily on cognitive, rational formulations of this process. It understates the role of the broader sociocultural context of learning experiences and how emotions, imagination, and spirituality are actively involved in and central to this form of learning (Dirkx, 2000a; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Taylor, 1998). Also missing in prior accounts of transformative learning is "the sense of calling, that essential mystery at the heart of each human life" (Hillman, 1996, p. 6). Environmental activism furnishes a context that evokes ardent passions, emotions, and commitment, hence providing a context for deepening our understanding of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of transformative learning, its relationship to a sense of calling, and the essential mystery at the core of this process.

Of particular relevance for us within the OISE description is the emphasis on transformation as a shift in consciousness—on our self-understanding—and how this shift influences and shapes our being in the world. In this research, we focus primarily on a psychosocial understanding of this shift, recognizing that consciousness is also constituted by sociological and cultural dimensions as well. Boyd and his colleagues (Boyd, 1989, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2000a, 2000b) have advanced a theoretical understanding of this shift in consciousness that is consistent with the experience of learning reflected in the literature on vocation and calling. Grounded in depth psychology and the work of Carl Jung, this view suggests that transformative learning reflects the profound and lifelong struggle of the person to be who he or she is called to be, or what Jung referred to as the process of individuation (Whitmont, 1969).

The concept of individuation provides a theoretical framework in which we are able to relate these aspects of transformation to the journey of the self, a journey that involves a recognition of the self in relation to the world. According to Jung (1921, quoted in Jacoby, 1990), individuation refers to a "process by which individual

beings are being formed and differentiated . . . having as its goal the development of the individual personality" (p. 94). Jung believed that the development of individuality is inherent to being human and that the process is stimulated and guided by a genuine, natural striving for individuation—becoming who we truly are. Individuation stresses the formation and differentiation of individual beings, apart from yet intimately connected with the broader collective (Jacoby, 1990). It refers to the process by which a person becomes "whole," through recognition and integration of conscious and unconscious elements of oneself. Jung referred to this shift of consciousness as "being called awake," of learning who one is apart from yet intimately interconnected with the collective in which one's life is embedded.

From the perspective of depth psychology, individuation is all about transformation, and conscious participation in that process represents what we refer to as transformative learning (Boyd, 1989, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2000b). Despite the largely unconscious movement represented by individuation, it is possible to establish a dialogue between the ego and the unconscious (Moore, 1992), mediated through the presence of powerful images in our lives (Dirkx, 2000b). Through this process, we come to know ourselves more fully through coming to know the various aspects that make up who we are. What was unconscious becomes increasingly accessible to ego consciousness. We begin to see ourselves not as alone, isolated individuals participating in life by ourselves but rather as deeply interconnected to all of life (Jacoby, 1990; Whitmont, 1969). Given this view of transformative learning, the everydayness and movement of our lives provides a rich context for developing a deeper understanding of the strong existential, emotional, and spiritual struggles involved in the process.

METHOD

This research study was guided by three general questions: (a) What is the experience of strongly committed environmental activists working in small nonprofit organizations? (b) What happens over time to the commitment and passion environmental activists bring to their work? and (c) What role does learning play in maintaining long-term commitment and passion? To probe deeply into these questions, a qualitative approach informed by narrative (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) and heuristic (Moustakas, 1990) inquiry was employed.

To be part of this study, the research participants were nominated by their peers as having sustained long-term commitment and passion to their work. Each person had to receive at least two independent nominations as being highly effective and sustained in his or her work and have at least 10 years of experience in working in small nonprofit organizations. Small nonprofit organizations were defined as having a staff size of 10 or fewer full-time employees. The nominators included individuals working in positions that enabled them to have a broad knowledge of the sector, such as positions in large private philanthropic foundations. Through this

process, nine environmental activists working in small nonprofit organizations in Michigan were identified. Most participants received three or four nominations.

The participant group included 6 women and 3 men, ranging in years of experience working as paid staff in the sector from 11 to 18 years, with the average number of years being 14. On average, an additional 3 years of volunteer work preceded their taking paid staff positions. All of the participants were White, representing the lack of diversity in the environmental field in general. Their ages ranged from 34 to 54. Six were married or in long-term partnerships, 2 were divorced, and 1 never married. Six have children, of which 5 still have children at home. All participants possessed a minimum of an undergraduate degree, ranging from the liberal arts to the sciences. Eight out of 9 did graduate work, and 2 hold law degrees. The other graduate degrees were in the natural resources fields.

Two semistructured interviews were conducted with each nominated participant. Each interview required 1 to 3 hours. The first interview focused on the overall experience of being an environmentalist in a small nonprofit organization. Prior to the second interview, the participant's "story" was sent to that individual for review. The second interview was conducted approximately 3 to 4 months after the first interview to probe further into an understanding of the participant's story. Specific questions focused on gaining a more concrete understanding of commitment, passion, identity, and learning.

Approximately 2 months after completing the second interviews, a group activity, which included a semistructured group interview, was conducted with 7 of the 9 participants to help verify the trustworthiness of the data and to begin to interpret the findings. In addition to the group interview, this activity included reflection time. This dialogue provided another level of data collection, with participants assisting in a first-level interpretation of the findings.

Data were analyzed throughout the study. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and a preliminary analysis was completed after each interview. Data were coded and recoded according to the constant comparative method, pulling preliminary patterns together until themes began to emerge. To ensure rigor and establish trustworthiness of the results, attention was placed on gaining feedback from the research participants via the review of the individual stories and the focus group. This feedback helped to establish the accuracy of the researchers' perceptions and conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As an introduction to the findings, we begin by sharing more of Peter's story and what his work as an environmental activist means to him. Peter's words help to anchor the findings in a concrete context.

*Peter's Story: "I Will, One Way or the Other,
Be Working on This the Rest of My Life"*

After his first camping trip, Peter began questioning how to tie his feelings for nature and his career together. With a degree in journalism and experience working in Washington, D.C., as a policy advocate, he was not sure how. Upon encouragement of friends, however, he applied for a job at a statewide environmental organization and received it. He was the staff. There was Peter, an answering machine, a leaky roof, and pigeons on the window ledge. It was in the rooftop suite, so to speak. Peter now reflects that he is glad his life steered him in the direction of environmental activism. He feels lucky. We use his own words to reflect what his work as an environmental activist means to him:

I think most of the people that I know, whether it's in environmental groups or environmental agencies of government, are attracted to the field because they really care. It's not just like, well, this is a way I can make a living. It's something that has to do with almost their spirituality. It is for me. I will, one way or the other, be working on this the rest of my life. It is my life commitment. I'm committed to the earth. It's committed to me, after all. The least I can do is give back.

For most environmentalists that I know, including me, there is a spiritual element to what we do. I hopefully use my rational mind in my work, but it really all stems from a love of, in my case, I guess, Michigan and wanting to see Michigan remain beautiful for other people. That's a powerful fuel. Everybody in the movement I think knows that most of us are at least partially motivated spiritually. To talk about it openly almost falls into the stereotype that some opponents have; it's kind of like a pagan in religion, like some sort of a dark earth-worshipping thing. It's not that at all. It's not like I light candles to pagan gods. I just believe that we have a duty to the earth and that there is a right and a wrong in relation to the earth. Our task as a species is to learn to live more doing what's right for the earth and right for us too.

I don't know how to articulate this without sounding like a bad mystic or a sexist. I don't think of nature as a "she," but I do feel an emotional attachment to it, and when you get angry, you feel like you're defending it. It's almost like you're defending a friend or a loved one. You know, for your husband or your children, you would do anything.

When you do get to the burnout phase, what gets you out of bed and when you lose, defeats, what makes you rebound is you're not even doing it for yourself, you're doing it for the place that you love. When you're experiencing the wonders of nature, you feel there is meaning and purpose behind the universe and that there is a loving force that has created this. It is a very sensitive subject . . . mysteries of life from the heart's perspective. To me, the heart, or spirituality, is a feeling of reverence for creation and a hope that one's work or service is somehow honoring the creation and respecting it.

I think everybody gets to a point in their job where it's just, I can't do this anymore. Sometimes the work is thankless. You can't get excited about stopping bad things from happening. There are certain emotions that you have to figure out a way to vent privately, either because they're counterproductive to being an effective advocate or because they could destroy you. You have to figure out ways to deal with your despair, fear, sadness. When you do have successes, you feel a transcended feeling. A lot of en-

vironmental books that I see really make a mistake by trying to make it sound like it's a science. Advocacy is not a science. There are good reasons it's not a science. It's an art.

Peter's story exemplifies three major themes that reflect the experiences of the activists participating in this study: (a) learning from that which is not known, (b) connecting with and working from the heart, and (c) learning to live through difficult periods of overwhelming stress. As illuminated in Peter's story, the experiences reflected in the themes demonstrate key characteristics of the process of individuation. These aspects, however, are not experienced as discrete episodes but are interwoven throughout the activists' stories and illustrate the ongoing forces of individuation.

Learning to Listen to What Is Not Known

In these activists' lives, commitment for environmental nonprofit work is supported and sustained through a deep longing to improve the world, the continual fostering of connections to humanity and to the earth, and an openness for continual learning about the self. It is quite evident from the interviews that these professionals possess a depth of knowledge about their own needs, their passions, core values, and strong connections to the world. Yet it was often difficult for them to ascertain how they came to acquire this self-knowledge. Few pointed to direct paths such as formal educational programs, specific bodies of information, or experiences that explicitly contributed to these understandings. Most knew, but they were not clear how they knew. This "not knowing," however, was anchored within a continual openness to learning. As one participant noted during the group interview,

I think probably where I am in learning is, I'm right in the middle of not knowing. And I don't know. I'm never going to be out of there. I think there is also the notion of being open to learning . . . knowing that you are just always in that and you are never done. It's a process. You're learning all the time. It's not like you're not learning. So it's about being aware and forcing myself to consciously be open to the learning.

In the face of high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity, the participants clearly demonstrated a continual questioning of life's direction:

[Learning] can be a messy process. I mean, learning is not concrete, sequential when you get to be our age. Those lessons and flashes of insight come where you least expect it and when you least expect it. . . . To be comfortable knowing that you don't know but being open to that and trusting yourself, that's OK. That's really powerful. And I don't think any of us were there when we got out of grad school.

An openness to learning helped to ground them in their overall commitment to environmental work. Dara described routinely questioning: "What's my authenticity?"

What is true for me? What works for me? What doesn't?" The struggle evident in this orientation to learning can be heard in Megan's comment:

What does your heart tell you? . . . It took years and years and years for me to even be able to know. . . . What does my heart tell me as opposed to my head? I mean, it's hard to even figure that out. For some people, it's just natural. They instantly know exactly how they feel about something. They know what feels right for them. They know exactly what decision they want to make. But for a lot of folks, it's a struggle.

The participants' deeply held values about engaging head, heart, and spirit help to drive their willingness to continually learn about themselves and their work. Yet it was often difficult for them to concretely explain how these pieces work together. Dara observed, "It's kind of a fundamental wiring inside me that just says this is the right way to go about stuff." When asked to give a term that would describe the underlying conviction for her work, she stated, "It's righteousness. It's like, yeah, I might be tired, but I'm right. . . . I hope to think that I am not so rigid, but it is kind of this righteousness." Steven remarked,

There is a difference between being right about the work we are doing and being absolutely right, knowing all of the answers. And I think it is dangerous. . . . It is highly problematic to be going around in this work thinking that you know all of the answers or that you know better than everybody else because then it doesn't allow any room for reexamining your assumptions.

The activists clearly expressed a willingness to acknowledge not knowing. This learning to listen to what is sometimes not readily evident—to what might be below the surface or beyond conscious awareness—arose from and characterized their deep commitment and passion to the work. Megan's comment illustrates this point: "One of the things that I have learned about myself is I don't necessarily know I'm making decisions when I am making them. . . . It's just sort of all of a sudden, Oh! I guess I did make that decision, didn't I?"

For the activists of this study, learning is not occurring in the sense of being fundamentally transformative, such as the "burning bush" experience that dominates much of our understanding of transformative learning, but in the sense of an active engagement with everyday experience (Dirkx, 2000a). The kind of transformative learning described by the activists represents the struggle for consciousness in a largely unconscious world, a process that Jung referred to as individuation. Their ongoing dialogue between conscious and unconscious aspects of the self is embedded in the everydayness of their work, as if they are dancing with an illusive, shadowy figure that they can feel move with them but cannot discern its concrete features. But as they continue to dance, they learn more and more about their mysterious partner.

Many appear to be struggling to become who they are called to be. Their stories reflect conflict between their external and internal worlds, both important and

deeply valued. They often feel a deep sense of being bogged down in the mire of one's own existence and seeing no immediate way out. In this place, there is pain, emotion, and strong affect. Their stories indicate, however, their continued engagement with these struggles, and the conscious and unconscious aspects of themselves manifest in these struggles. Through this sustained engagement, they become increasingly aware of those aspects of the self of which they were previously unaware. As these aspects became conscious, their overall sense of who they are as a person changed and transformed.

The activists' descriptions of their experience implicitly portray a multiplistic sense of self. For example, they talked metaphorically about the head, the heart, and the spirit; how each of these entities were present in their lives and work in different ways; and how each aspect of their being has to be a recognized piece of who they are in the world in order to feel whole, to gain some degree of integration and sense of wholeness, and to be able to continually push forward in working toward their passions. They defined this aspect of their experiences as "dangerous," the part that is not well accepted in a culture that idolizes unitary identity and technical rationality. Their stories reflect the deep and profound sense of ambivalence that is evoked through the process of individuation, of confronting the dark, unknown, multiplistic, and often unwanted aspects of one's self (Jacoby, 1990; Whitmont, 1969).

Connecting With and Working From the Heart

Although all the participants reflected systemic thinking and a strong reliance on their intellect within their work, these processes seemed grounded in and derived from strong emotional and spiritual connections to themselves, nature, and humanity. Consistently, the activists mentioned being motivated by head, heart, and spirit. Yet they observed that it is often perilous to openly admit this emotional component of their work. Megan, a lawyer by training, suggested,

I don't think our society has changed to actually acknowledge and respect emotional responses to things. . . . One thing I think is very, very hard for people to learn is to trust their instincts and to trust their heart and their gut.

Abigail referred cynically to the use of facts rather than emotions as "playing the game." She submitted,

I think we tend to shy away from these kinds of things. We feel we need to play the game that somebody else has set out there, which is we need to defend ourselves in the context that is available to us with just the factual and scientific context.

The activists view their work as critical to their sense of leading meaningful and authentic lives. Their stories illuminate work as directly linked to their passions, to

the very being of who they are, and their very sense of identity or self, thus providing a grounding to sustain commitment. Dara, now in her 22nd year as an environmental advocate, observed, "In that soul searching that I've done, this has felt really right and good for me. . . . It hasn't felt like, oh, there are other rungs of the ladder that I want to continue to climb." Abigail exhorted,

When I get passionate . . . it surprises me because it's coming from a different place than the intellect. I mean when people are talking about heart or soul or whatever, it's like your whole being is saying, "Yeah, this matters." . . . It's much more gut level than actually intellectual.

Steven, whose career started as an advocate for union workers, remarked, "What passion that I do have about my work. . . . comes from . . . those fundamental values that sort of bring to it my understanding and desire . . . to be on this path." Helen softly shared, "Love is what must drive the work. And love is what drives the work in the people that I most admire and then the people who stay in it over the long term." Helen's words fit precisely Peter's definition of passion:

The ability to invest emotionally in what you're doing. It's not just an abstract duty or obligation, but a feeling that this is good and you really believe in it from the heart. Passion is, you know, the fuel, whether it's from anger or love that makes the work possible.

In the group interview, a summary definition of passion emerged as "being engaged with more than your mind—being engaged with your body, your heart and your spirit . . . sort of having a fire." As one participant remarked, "I don't sustain [passion]. It's like the internal flame."

The environmentalists described a learning orientation that manifested as an ongoing commitment to self-knowing and a willingness to change, where meaning, purpose, and the self are all tightly interwoven. They described this process as a spiritual quest, saying that people who do not merge values, action, and hope "live lesser lives." Although all nine activists are highly educated and use reflection, thinking, and other rational processes extensively to get things done, they attribute their commitment to deep emotional and spiritual connections with the work. In their stories, there is a strong sense of the inner life passionately seeking its realization in and connection with aspects of the outer world. Emily astutely suggested that working in the environmental field is not going to make a person popular, famous, or wealthy; rather, her motivation is "a spiritual value. It's fulfilling. . . . That's what keeps me charged."

As reflected in the activists' stories, the strong sense of integrating emotion, passion, and spirituality into their work implies a profound relationship between the activist and his or her work, a relationship that is guided by a sense of vocation or calling. Yet a person does not wake up one morning with a crystal clear picture of

this sense of call. It is an evolving process. As Hansen (1995) found in his study of teaching as vocation,

A person cannot "will" a sense of service into existence, nor wake up one day and "decide" to be of service. Those dispositions grow and take shape over time, through interaction with people and through the attempt to perform the work well. (p. 4)

The activists' willingness to invest head, heart, and spirit into their work illuminates this integration of the self with the work, which feels like a natural extension of their identity. In doing so, they are bridging their "deep gladness" with the world's "deep hunger" (Buechner, 1993).

The activists' stories portray a sense of spirituality, ranging from an internal experience to an outward sense of commitment to others. Their interweaving of work and spirituality represents a need to link action to values and meaning (Bean, 2000; Tisdell, 2000). Learning is an integral component of the process. In contrast to participation in formal learning, however, this learning is grounded in a being in the world and oriented toward developing a deeper understanding of both one's self and the world of which that self is a part. Bound up with their sense of vocation, the activists' learning involves a deep engagement with life and an integration of its conscious and unconscious dimensions.

Scholars are increasingly exploring the spiritual dimensions of adult learning in general (English & Gillen, 2000; Wane, 2002) and transformative learning in particular (Dei, 2002; Miller, 2002; Tisdell, 2000). Although there is little agreement on what is meant by spirituality, many of its uses reflect both a longing for greater depth in one's personal life and a recognition and connection with realms of being greater than ourselves (English & Gillen, 2000). The discussions of spirituality by the activists can be understood as highlighting these connections by placing a focus on the need to understand how one's life fits into the larger world (Palmer, 1990).

This sense of spirituality, involving both the deeply personal and the transcendent, is reflected in Jung's understanding of its role in the process of individuation (Whitmont, 1969). For Jung, the dialogical process between the inner and the outer, between the unconscious and conscious dimensions of one's being, results in a deepening sense of self and an overarching appreciation of how the self is at the same time an aspect of something greater. The conscious work of individuation contributes to a deepening sense of spirituality within one's life (Ulanov, 2001). An aspect of the inner work of individuation also involves recognizing and naming the ways in which we are being called (Hillman, 1996). In this inner work, our outer work is experienced as "a vocation, a calling from a place that is the source of meaning and identity, the roots of which lie beyond human intention and interpretation" (Moore, 1992, p. 181). The call feels like a force beyond our conscious awareness that seems to be inviting or leading us somewhere, to some place, to do that which we were intended to do.

Although the activists of this study clearly demonstrated a sense of being called, they were often at a loss to clearly explain how this sense of calling had come to dominate their lives in such a central and forceful way. Nevertheless, they remained convinced that this is something they were meant to do. Guided by a sense of vocation, they learned and developed with a strong emphasis on understanding who they are within their work. They expressed a close alignment between the deep values they bring to their work and the hope they feel when aligning their work tightly with those values. An openness to continual learning was demonstrated, or a willingness to always have a "beginner's mind," in order to push forward in their work.

Learning to Live Through Difficult Times

The participants of this study like their work and their jobs and strongly identify with their profession. This does not mean, however, that their experience of work is without hardships. Rather, their work was punctuated with dark moments, episodes that left them questioning their efforts, doubting themselves, and feeling like there was no more to give. They spoke of the ongoing challenge of feeling alone and unique in their work and their struggles. They would note with assuredness that what they were voicing was probably different than what was heard from others in the study. They looked almost enviously at others in the movement as having more energy, passion, and commitment. Often, the "others" were also people being interviewed for this study, people expressing the same sentiments.

During the interviews, all but 2 of the activists described severe periods of burnout. In Abigail's words, it was a time period of

absolute overwhelming stress. Anxiety at all times. Non-stop insomnia. And feeling like you could Never Get Anything Done. That the important things could never happen. I mean just classic depression symptoms. Everything. Just really bad. The worst part again is the sense that this stuff mattered. It wasn't stuff that you could let go.

Dara described a time of burnout as "a feeling of being just totally buried and feeling that there is no way out and it's hopeless, so it's a pretty deep depression." Peter suggested,

You can't get excited about stopping bad things from happening. You want to see good things happen and they weren't. So . . . I thought I just can't do this anymore. I am going to either have a heart attack or a nervous breakdown, and I just needed something that was more fulfilling spiritually.

In Helen's words, "I was just tired. I felt tired. You know, the hours we work and a lot of weekends and evenings, and I was tired. I got to the point where I didn't want to even drive by work when I wasn't at work." Ben suggested that the reason burnout among environmental activists is so pervasive is due to the inability to both say

no and to really take care of one's self: "It can lead to leaving the field. That's when the other 10 alternative career paths start looking really good."

The activists, however, learn to live through these dark moments in their lives by changing jobs, changing responsibilities within their organizations, taking leave for extended periods of time with or without pay, and looking for outside learning opportunities. In stark contrast to running from these experiences of burnout or trying desperately to avoid them, these activists longed to understand what the burnout was indicating, to make changes or to take the necessary time away, and to move forward. Part of moving forward entailed a level of acceptance of the enormity of the tasks ahead and to recognize that the activists' own needs were important and valid. Although they all spoke of burnout in past tense, they cautioned that future periods of burnout were always looming. Megan lamented, "[It's] negative to have work that you really care about because then it's an emotional investment. The same thing relates to marriages and to relationships. . . . you don't just leave [when] you hit the wall."

Many researchers looking at lives of commitment have found that having a sense of vocation does not negate dark times. Caring deeply about one's work sometimes brings with it the risks of feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, and depressed. The activists of this study described both aspects of their work as if they were parts of the same cloth, joined together through some existential mystery. Hansen (1995) found that for those working with an evolving sense of vocation, self-doubt and commitment go hand in hand with a continual reassessment of ideas, beliefs, and thoughts. Similarly, the process of individuation is characterized by what some have referred to as the "dark night of the soul," referring to the emotional and often difficult and wrenching conflict and turmoil the journey of becoming who we are intended to be evokes within us. Often feeling like we have bottomed out, it seems there is nowhere to turn, nowhere to go for help, nothing that can be done. In this period of despair, we let go and, in doing so, paradoxically experience hope and often find our way. The activists' description of burnout resembles this dark night of the soul. From their stories, it becomes evident that times of overwhelming stress can actually be seen as times of deep learning. For example, the activists suggested that their personal needs were often not a priority, paralleling the findings of other studies looking closely at people working for the common good. When they "hit the wall," however, they are forced to suddenly put the self first and figure out how to pull themselves back up or through. This is deeply painful, in part, because it goes against their values and visions to be so self-focused. As they come to learn, "care of the soul" is a continuous process that will not make life problem-free. Rather, it is focused on cultivating a more meaningful life (Moore, 1992).

When understood through the lens of individuation, the powerful feelings and emotions expressed by the activists draw attention to unconscious issues that need to be voiced and integrated more fully into the activists' conscious lives (Boyd, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 2000a, 2000b). At the point the activists decide to step out of the situation, to take time to pause or critically reflect on their lives and

the meaning of the overwhelming stress, they are engaging both unconscious and conscious aspects of their self. This inner dialogue encompasses an important duality in their learning.

Similarly, Palmer (2000) proposed we need to accept both the darkness and the light to find wholeness. It is in this acceptance that we are able to sustain ourselves. The people who sustained commitment and passion are those that have grown during the times of deep stress associated with burnout. They have been forced to confront inner work, to recognize their own needs, to understand who they are in their work, and to have grown from the experience. And as has been suggested by the activists, they have come away even stronger in their convictions and their understanding of self. In this transition, a paradox exists. When they cannot make meaning of something, they fall apart or lose control (Kegan, 1994). Yet in the falling apart, they experience meaningful change. Passing through this paradox of stress, or what Jungians (Stevens, 1982) refer to as a cycle of ego inflation and alienation, increases the activists' knowledge about themselves and their ability to continue in their work with a sense of vocation.

CONCLUSION

In this concluding section, we explore the implications this study holds for our understanding of sustaining commitment among environmental activists and our understanding of transformative learning. The activists' stories suggest that sustained commitment to their work arises from a sense of their work as calling or vocation. Echoing the findings of others who have explored commitment in activism (Colby & Damon, 1992; Daloz et al., 1996; Hansen, 1995; Lashley et al., 1994), they feel propelled into the work, even at times when their conscious rational selves seem to tell them otherwise. Periods of overwhelming stress became episodes of deep learning, requiring a turning inward and learning about the self. Their stories affirm the importance of Palmer's (2000) invitation to listen to one's self and one's life. They represent a deeply personal journey, a kind of spiritual pilgrimage through which they come to see and understand deeper and different aspects of themselves.

Central to this form of inner work is a process of juggling hope and despair, an unconscious interplay of emotions that seems to propel them onward in their work and further fuels their passion. They describe this interplay of emotions as an inner experience that at times manifests outwardly, such as experiences of hitting the wall. What appears to sustain them through all this is a continual acceptance of the passion and its meaning in their lives. Although such experiences may fill them with doubt, they are sustained through a kind of faith in the deep meaning of the call and the passion they associate with it.

The activists' stories also reflect a sense of the sacred and of mystery, of which their lives and work are an intimate part. They clearly perceive their involvement in and commitment to environmental work as grounded fundamentally in a sense of

the spiritual. They speak of a kind of spiritual knowing similar to the African views of spirituality described by Dei (2002), in which the self is recognized as "a complex, integrated being with multiple layers of meaning" (p. 124). Emotions are understood as an important source of knowledge. The activists accept the power of inner work as coming to "know and understand the self and to be able to interact with the outer world and the collective" (p. 125). Commitment is sustained among these individuals through a holistic understanding of knowing and learning, one that intimately involves "head, heart, and spirit." The stories point to the complex social, emotional, and spiritual processes involved in deep inner work and the processes of transformative learning (O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002).

The activists' sustained commitment and passion arise from and are an integral part of their life journeys. These journeys, we have argued, reflect the fundamental processes of individuation. Transformation is an ongoing process as the unconscious aspects of one's self become increasingly differentiated and more accessible to and integrated with consciousness. Suggesting that individuation should be a major goal of adult education, Cranton (2000) pointed out that it is through this process that the person develops a more genuine sense of who he or she is as an individual, thereby enabling the person to enter into more authentic relationships with others.

Although we suggest that transformative learning is integral to sustaining commitment and passion among these environmental activists, the stories described here affirm aspects of this process less well developed in the theory of perspective transformation described by Mezirow (1991). Similar to Mezirow, the forms of transformative learning reflected in the inner work of these activists reflect a deep shift in their frames of reference. Rather than the dramatic or epiphanic shifts described by Brookfield (2000), however, this process is more gradual and occurs over an extended period of time. This view of transformative learning parallels the perspective advanced by Daloz (2000), who suggested this "change or shift was long in coming and its possibility prepared for in myriad ways, generally across years" (p. 106).

Although this deep engagement may result in various "disorienting dilemmas" or catalytic events, these seem more the result of an attitude or a stance toward one's life, rather than provoking change itself. The form of deep learning revealed in the activists' stories of their struggle to sustain their commitment and passion for their work suggests an active engagement with the everydayness of their lives, a struggle to answer the call within their work. This deep learning is intimately bound up with and embedded in the historical, developmental, and social contexts and movements of their lives. The processes of transformation reflected in this movement are not stop-and-start events, bounded by a "trigger" at one end and a remarkable conversion at the other. Rather than epochal happenings, the activists' experiences of transformation suggest a lived stance toward a sense of call, a form of practice reflective of deep spiritual commitments (Teasdale, 2002), and a gradual unfolding of the self.

This process is suggestive of Kegan's (1994) "orders of consciousness," in which the person increasingly differentiates the self from both internal and external "others." The stories described by these activists, however, rarely indicate a strong reliance in this process on critical reflection and self-analysis. Rather, the forms of transformative learning reflected in their journeys are characterized more by what Scott (1997) referred to as sitting, observing, and listening to the images that come to populate one's consciousness, much like Peter was doing on the shores of Lake Superior. The inner work that characterizes this approach to transformation is grounded in affective, emotional, spiritual, and transpersonal dimensions of life (Dirxx, 1997). It involves establishing ongoing dialogues with the images that arise from these pieces of our being. For Peter, the image of the lake and the emotions he feels for the lake help crystallize and to make sense of a deep part of himself that is difficult for him to express in words. Like Peter, many of these activists reached out to nature to connect with aspects of themselves they found difficult to describe and intellectually understand. It is in this inner work where we find evidence for transformative learning. In contrast to the sharply analytic views of transformative learning prevalent in the literature, however, the activists demonstrate paradoxically a kind of contemplative attitude, a letting go, listening deeply to their being in the world and seeing what has previously been unseen and unknown.

The deep form of learning described by the activists in this study is consistent with Boyd's (1991) view of transformative learning. Whereas Boyd and his colleagues focused intensely on the potentially transformative experiences of individuals in small groups, these activists suggest their transformations can be more thoroughly understood only by considering their active engagement with the outer world. Characteristic of the process of individuation, they learned to be in the world but not of it. Despite their deep commitment to the world and the environment, they saw themselves as different, apart from the collective. Their experiences suggest that transformative learning and the process of individuation in which this form of learning is embedded arise from a deep, dialectical engagement both with the world and one's self. There is something about being an activist that touches these individuals at a very deep level, and environmentalism becomes the context through which this calling gains its voice.

In trying to help us understand the mysterious relationship and interconnections between our deep sense of inner self and our work in the outer world, Whyte (2001) referred to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake. In reflecting Blake's view of his own work, Whyte seemed to capture the essence of the activists' stories:

To have a firm persuasion in our work—to feel that what we do is right for ourselves and good for the world at the exactly same time—is one of the great triumphs of human existence. We do feel, when we have work that is challenging and enlarging and that seems to be doing something for others, as if, in Blake's words, we could move mountains, as if we could call the world *home*; and for a while, in our imaginations, no

matter the small size of our apartment, we dwell in a spacious house with endless horizons. (p. 4)

Coming to this awareness, being called awake, and perhaps being called home is the fundamental transformative learning at the heart of these stories of sustained commitment and of the process of individuation. Commitment arises within and is sustained through this ongoing process of deep learning.

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