

ACTIVE HOPE

How to Face
the Mess We're in
without Going Crazy

JOANNA MACY &
CHRIS JOHNSTONE



New World Library
Novato, California

Contents

Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	I
PART ONE: <i>The Great Turning</i>	
CHAPTER ONE: Three Stories of Our Time	13
CHAPTER TWO: Trusting the Spiral	35
CHAPTER THREE: Coming from Gratitude	43
CHAPTER FOUR: Honoring Our Pain for the World	57
PART TWO: <i>Seeing with New Eyes</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE: A Wider Sense of Self	85
CHAPTER SIX: A Different Kind of Power	105
CHAPTER SEVEN: A Richer Experience of Community	121
CHAPTER EIGHT: A Larger View of Time	139
PART THREE: <i>Going Forth</i>	
CHAPTER NINE: Catching an Inspiring Vision	163
CHAPTER TEN: Daring to Believe It Is Possible	185
CHAPTER ELEVEN: Building Support around You	201
CHAPTER TWELVE: Maintaining Energy and Enthusiasm	213
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Strengthened by Uncertainty	229

CHAPTER TWELVE

Maintaining Energy and Enthusiasm

When we catch the spark of heartfelt activism for our world, that inner fire can be a remarkable source of energy. However, it also brings with it the risk of burnout. How can we remain fired up for any length of time without being driven to exhaustion? In this chapter we look at how to keep inspiration fresh by making what we do more enjoyable and by keeping personal sustainability right at the heart of what we do.

With our world in crisis, it might seem a bit indulgent to be considering our own enjoyment. With so many pressing issues to address, shouldn't we brush aside concerns about personal gratification? Yet there is a strategic value to making what we do rewarding, and it goes further than just preventing burnout. Although many millions of people are already involved in the Great Turning, the movement needs to grow, and the attractiveness of participation grows when it is recognized as a path to deepened aliveness and a more satisfying way of life. Here are five strategies that help.

- Recognize enthusiasm as a valuable renewable resource.
- Broaden our definition of activism.
- Follow the inner compass of our deep gladness.
- Redefine what it means to have a good life.
- See success with new eyes and savor it.

RECOGNIZE ENTHUSIASM AS A
VALUABLE RENEWABLE RESOURCE

Each year, erosion from unsustainable agriculture robs our world of as much farmland as could cover the whole of Kentucky. Similarly, when we push ourselves too hard or are worn down by chronic exposure to harsh conditions, our enthusiasm, like topsoil, can begin to erode.

In responding to the problems of our world, we do need to stretch ourselves and face adversities. The problem is that stretching too far and for too long brings with it the risk of burnout. This state of physical and emotional exhaustion is a form of overshoot and collapse; it is caused by long-term exposure to high levels of stress along with insufficient time and nourishment for renewal. Jenny, who'd worked for many years in a campaigning organization, described what it felt like:

I used to love the work I did. I used to enjoy giving talks and engaging with people. But I reached the point where I felt sick of everything. I had worked too hard for too long, and I didn't have anything left to give.

When athletes want to improve their performance, they expect to push beyond their comfort zones. Through the well-established principle of interval training, they alternate periods of increased effort with pauses for renewal. A similar principle applies in yoga when a stretch extends briefly beyond what is comfortable and then draws back. When we keep pushing we risk harming ourselves. To develop forms of activism we can sustain for decades, we need to address our requirements for renewal. If we are to create an approach to activism that we will want to stick with over a lifetime and that others are drawn to as well, then we need to look at what feeds our enthusiasm too.

Sustainable agriculture reveals how valuable a resource healthy soil is. Finding ways to nourish, renew, and restore soil is a key to long-term productivity. It is similar with our enthusiasm: if we see it as valuable, then we become more interested in how we can nourish, renew, and restore this precious resource.

An image of a boat floating on water provides a starting point for mapping out the factors influencing our ability and willingness to keep going (see Fig. 12). The water level represents our inner reserves of energy and enthusiasm, while hitting a problem like burnout is like crashing into a rock. Draining factors are shown as downward arrows that lower the water level and increase our likelihood of hitting rocks. Nourishing factors that replenish and strengthen us are mapped as arrows pushing the water level up. For example, when we feel we're making progress with our projects, our morale is boosted, raising the water level. Each time we feel discouraged, whether by setbacks, arguments, or the experience of powerlessness, the water level drops. So to strengthen our resilience, we need to pay attention to all the factors that sustain us.

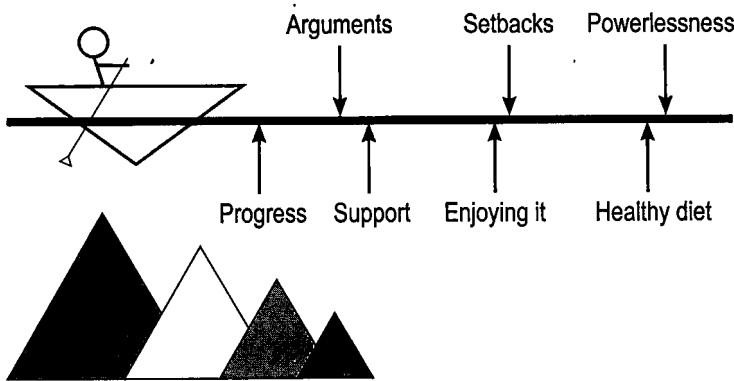


Figure 12. Mapping factors influencing our energy and enthusiasm

If we experience too much discouragement and too few “upward arrows,” then we are in danger of reaching such a low ebb that we may wonder what the point is and think about giving up. When we lose the will, energy, and enthusiasm to continue, we’re hitting the rock of burnout.

With the worsening condition of our world, the slow pace of progress, and the enormous resistance to tackling issues, protecting our enthusiasm has become especially important. Building support around us, as discussed in the previous chapter, plays a central role here, but it is only one of many potential “upward arrows.” Once we recognize the value of enthusiasm, we start searching for ways to make what we do more satisfying. The following open sentences invite this exploration:

TRY THIS: OPEN SENTENCES ON
MAINTAINING ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM

These open sentences can be used when journaling, in conversation with friends, or within a group. They work well in conjunction with the water level mapping process.

- Things that drain, demoralize, or exhaust me include...
- What nourishes and energizes me is...
- The times I’m most enthusiastic are when...

What might happen if we applied open sentences like these when planning meetings or events? Many public meetings follow the old model of having an active speaker at the front of the room and a passive audience sitting in rows, with little, if any, interaction. Sometimes these meetings can be informative and inspiring; they can also be boring and can induce passivity. The water level

diagram can be used to map out factors that make the difference. How can we push up the water level of enthusiasm in meetings so that people look forward to coming rather than just showing up out of duty?

A sustainability group in Frome, England, had a meeting every month, often with a speaker or a film followed by a discussion. Their meetings became much more popular when they started the evening by sitting down together and eating food they'd brought to share. By having time and opportunity to talk with each other, they fed the friendships and sense of community that made them look forward to coming. Conversations while eating have led to a sprouting of collaborative projects and activities that have transformed the local community.

BROADEN OUR DEFINITION OF ACTIVISM

What is the opposite of an activist? Is it someone who is passive? If so, it seems strange that the term *activist* should be reserved for just a few of us rather than being an identity we all take pride in or aspire to. The practice of Active Hope involves being an activist for what we hope for in the world. We're using the term *activist* here to mean anyone who is active for a purpose bigger than personal gain.

The three dimensions of the Great Turning offer a structure that extends the range of activism beyond the important work of campaigning and protest. Whenever we act from bodhichitta, the desire that all life be well, we are being an activist. This includes all endeavors to build a sustainable culture, along with everything that promotes the shift in consciousness and perception supporting this. Having a larger map of activism encourages us to move more freely between these different dimensions, as well as to combine them in ways that empower us. It is possible to overextend ourselves in any of these dimensions, and it can be refreshing to switch track, to move from one area to another, when we are getting worn down.

“Our activism is through our publishing,” say Tim and Maddy Harland, who for more than twenty years have produced *Permaculture* magazine. “Our activism is through growing things,” say Manu Song and Edi Hamilton, founders of a community agriculture project. Taking part in the Great Turning doesn’t have to mean suddenly changing jobs or giving up our other interests. Rather, it means applying our skills, experience, networks, enthusiasm, and temperament to the healing of our world. A participant in an online discussion organized by Transition U.S. said:

The three types of action to achieve the Great Turning is a very helpful structure.... I am by nature better geared to one kind of this work than another and it is okay to apply myself where I work best.

FOLLOW THE INNER COMPASS OF OUR DEEP GLADNESS

While there may be periods when we feel ground down or discouraged, there are also times when activism is hugely satisfying, stimulating, and enjoyable. By becoming interested in what makes this so, we can identify what we want to focus on. The flip side of this is that when we feel ourselves going sour inside, experiencing resentment and a loss of our spark, it is worth pausing and reflecting on the choices we can make to restore our enthusiasm. Our degree of enthusiasm can act as a guide, like an inner compass, that helps us steer toward the sort of activity we’ll want to stick with in the long term.

We are more effective when acting from our strengths and enthusiasm. That is where the Great Turning can happen through us most powerfully. This is a big shift away from the idea that there is one right way forward that we should all follow. Rather, it suggests that each of us needs to find our place of greatest fit. Author and minister Frederick Buechner describes this as where “our deep

gladness and the world's deep need meet."¹ When we find this convergence, the Great Turning works through us in a way uniquely ours.
