

Excerpt from *Active Peace: A Mindful Path to a Nonviolent World*

## Three Capacities

When engaged in an ongoing way, active peace builds capacities we may never have even known we had. As I've thought about the capacities most needed for the work of social change, I always come back to the *Three Tenets* of the Zen Peacemaker Order founded by Bernie Glassman: not knowing, bearing witness, and compassionate action. I believe these capacities will stand the test of time as qualities worth cultivating in the shift to a nonviolent world.

## Not Knowing

*In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's, there are very few.* —Shunryu Suzuki

We spend a lot of time and energy trying to be secure, trying to control the present and predict the future. We invest heavily in hopes and pleasant outcomes. We find comfort and security in our ideas of right and wrong, good and bad. We want the world to be a certain way. We want to know! But one of the few things we *can* be certain about is how uncertain life is.

The trait or capacity of not knowing is a way to face the groundless nature of reality. It's not that we all of a sudden go stupid and literally don't know anything. Instead, it's an acknowledgement that impermanence is the name of the game—that there is no final security or certainty. Not knowing has an open quality.

When we think we know, we have at least one foot in the past, as we rely on past experience and learning. We all do this of course—it is basic to our survival and development. The restorative task is to see how this kind of thinking limits us.

The implications of embracing not knowing are boundless. In my own life, not knowing helps me go beyond “us-versus- them” thinking and

see even those I am most challenged by as fellow travelers. My suffering lessens as I loosen my grip on what I think is “right” and how things “should” be. I feel more and more relaxed as I stop acting like I have, or should have, all the answers. This frees up energy and I find myself more present, open, curious, and creative.

Surrendering to the truth of not knowing is a big step, especially for activists. Because the pull is so strong to think it is our job as activists to know—to know what is right, what justice demands, what the world needs, etc.—there is no more challenging arena for the practice of not knowing than activism.

Not knowing doesn’t mean giving up our hopes and visions for a better world. The energy of our longing is sacred and powerful. But loosening our attachments to specific outcomes keeps us flexible. We can relax into not knowing and still do our work. We can still advocate for “our” truth with intelligence and persistence. We can still hold people accountable for the harm they cause. In fact, the likelihood of real accountability increases dramatically when we meet other people on equal ground, where nothing is certain and everything is possible.

### **Bearing Witness**

*Knowing that nothing need be done is the place from which we begin to move.* —Gary Snyder

We are all confronted by a lot these days—disturbing news and images, the suffering of people and other species, our own fear and anxiety. Mindfulness and not knowing build the capacity to see, and be honest about, what is happening around us and work with our reactions. This increases our ability to move through pain and uncertainty with real presence and resilience.

Not knowing, not needing to have all the answers, means we don't need to act immediately to fix things, but can instead *bear witness*. Bearing witness is an active, nonjudgmental awareness of what is happening. It is seeing, feeling, and experiencing what is actually there—the raw data—unencumbered by our stories about what is happening.

I've noticed how not adding “my stuff” requires ongoing self-awareness. Having a kind of soft focus on my internal experience, even while most of my attention is directed outward, helps keep me from adding my projections onto other people and situations. I'm learning to make a practice out of noticing my own triggering and judgments, my feelings and emotions, even as I pay attention to what is happening around me. As imperfect as I am at this, it is nonetheless allowing me to see more clearly and be more present.

A commitment to truth and restorative practice leads us to a place where we can see the world with less filtering and numbness. Our perception is heightened and the likelihood of responding with intelligence, when and if we do respond, is greatly enhanced. Bearing witness helps us meet each situation and experience in a fresh and honest way.

We will still fall into unconscious, reactive modes. We will still get triggered and angry, still drop into blame, resentment, and judgment. But we are building capacities that help us to work with whatever comes up. Throughout it all we can connect with the love and compassion that brings us to care for other beings and the world in the first place.

### **Compassionate Action**

*Compassion is not the same as doing good, or being nice. Compassion functions freely, with no hesitation, no limitation. It happens with no effort, the way you grow hair, the way your heart beats....It does not take any conscious effort. Someone falls, you pick them up.*

—John Daido Looi

Not knowing and bearing witness lay the groundwork for compassionate action by accessing our innate wisdom, basic goodness, and love. Seeing people and situations more clearly, we naturally respond from a place of connection.

Compassionate action does not mean weak or wishy-washy action. The ingredients that give rise to compassion also give rise to courage and represent real maturity. Through exploring our inner terrain we become secure enough to be vulnerable, and owning our vulnerability integrates and frees our energy. We don't have to hide our love anymore.

Connected to our deepest longings, we can be present to insecurity without being swept away by it. We can be present to fear without becoming it.

From the more integrated center of gravity we have cultivated, a fierce love rises. The lover and warrior bow to each other gracefully, while the kings and queens of the psyche dance with the magicians and fools. We've increased our bandwidth, become less dogmatic, and move with more multi-layered ease.

As peacemakers and restorative activists, it's no longer all about getting our way or feeling better. Without even knowing it, we train ourselves to be more present and trustworthy. Without any effort, we act with less calculation of costs and benefits, and compassionate action flows naturally. And since everything is constantly changing, the next situation will be different, and the opportunity will be there to return to not knowing and bearing witness.