

Sustainable Social Activism: A Process Work Perspective

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Social activism refers to the activity of working for the rights and welfare of those people, animals, trees and spirits that the general public, the mainstream, tends to ignore. The background vision behind social activism is the hope for a better, more equal world, a world where all life is respected. This article is dedicated to that vision and to all those who have struggled and continue to work actively towards making it a reality. We are sharing what we have learned as students of Process Work because it has broadened our abilities to work with rank issues.

Both of us have been social activists for the past 25 years, and social activism has become part of our identities. We have worked in the feminist, gay, anti-racism and solidarity movements, celebrating the victories and suffering the defeats. We have been through the long meetings, the continual vying for power and leadership, the issues that ripped apart our movements: race, sex, class, and struggles over dogma. We've started groups, seen them rise and fall, and started other groups, inspired by the spirits of people fighting for liberation near us and around the world. As part of an international network, we have done education and outreach, going beyond individual fears to become more public with our concerns. We've been arrested demonstrating, survived police violence, public abuse and family rejection. We have lost jobs and sometimes lived in fear for our lives. We've halted traffic, blockaded warships, interrupted racist sports tours; stopping "business as usual" to make our points.

There have been successes, but it has often been difficult for activists to persevere and keep hope

alive in the face of powerful forces of repression. That repression comes not only from the rejection of the mainstream culture, but also from within the body of social activism itself. Although social activists generally see ourselves as free-thinkers—"different" or "radical" because we support minorities and minority viewpoints relative to the larger culture—our ways of working with each other and our opponents have often not been very radical. In fact, social activists have been influenced by the same cultural ideas about power as has the mainstream, and social activists have been stuck in conventional attitudes and behaviors both organizationally and individually. These attitudes include seeing ourselves as different and better than our adversaries and therefore not considering the other side; believing that our beliefs are the only "right beliefs" and that self-knowledge and relationships are not as important as political commitment. Also, the strong commitment to equality and collectivity often resulted in a background competition for leadership.

Process Work has brought us hope as social activists because it reconceptualizes ideas such as "winning and losing," "the enemy" and "leadership" by introducing the concepts of rank, field theory, deep democracy, spiritual warriorship and eldership. In this article we explore specific areas that we find particularly helpful in our own lives.

An explanation of rank

Even though the United States is considered a democracy of equals, the truth is that inequalities in rank exist everywhere, and we deal with them every day. Rank consists of the power and privi-

leges, inherited or earned, that accompany certain positions or states of being. Process Work defines four kinds of rank. The first two, which are external and familiar to social activists, are related to how society is structured. The second two have to do with how we feel about ourselves. Types of rank include the following:

Global rank: is the rank one is born into, i.e., gender, race, religion, health or class. This category also includes sexual orientation. An example of global rank is being born with white skin. A white person inherits the global rank and inherent privileges that stem from white domination in North America.

Social rank: is the rank given by a community to certain positions of power. Teachers, parents, bosses and leaders of organizations all have social rank. People listen to what those with social rank have to say. Students, children, workers and newcomers to a community have less social rank.

Psychological rank: is related to how we feel about ourselves. It includes how we weather our childhood traumas and families. A person who feels okay about herself has higher psychological rank than someone who feels depressed, lonely, or suffers a lot.

Spiritual rank: is a feeling attitude. Spiritual rank is related to how close we feel to some energy source bigger than ourselves. The bottom line is that those who have spiritual rank feel an affirming connection to a source that sustains them in difficult moments. Paradoxically, an oppressed group can have spiritual rank exactly because of the inner experience of surviving oppression (Mindell, 1995: Chapters 3 & 4).

Social activism and rank

The Civil Rights Movement galvanized blacks and whites to fight for black civil rights and against racism. The Anti-War Movement fought for Vietnamese self-determination and against U.S. imperialism. The Feminist Movement fights for women's rights and against patriarchy and sexism. The Gay Movement fights for gay rights and against homophobia. Slogans such as, "Eat the rich;" "Fight racism;" "Gay is good;" "Free our sisters, free ourselves," bespeak the social activist viewpoint. Social activist movements are always working with issues of global rank.

The global and social rank of the opponent or "the enemy" is easily recognized, but social activists have not been very successful thus far at

recognizing and working with global and social rank within our movements. In fact, social activists generally are not able to see that the obvious abuse of rank that a movement is fighting outside, also happens within the movement. It is false thinking to assume that social activists are not susceptible to racism, sexism, homophobia and leadership struggles. Ranking occurs everywhere, and because we haven't acknowledged it within our movements, there are continual struggles for power, organizational splits and public backbiting.

There was a slogan in the gay movement, "An army of lovers cannot fail." As time went on and struggles ripped apart this movement, we used to joke that we fought so much between ourselves that in truth we never would be able to get to the front lines to fight the real enemy. The inability to work effectively with our rank issues around class, race, sex, and sexual orientation still splits progressive movements today. An example of this happened in 1994 to *Act Up: San Francisco*, an AIDS activist group. This group of 300 split over issues of racism within the group. Bell Hooks gives another example of infighting and unconscious rank issues in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Hooks calls attention to the fact that white feminist writers criticize black male writers more often than they criticize white male writers (1992: 66).

As young social activists, we thought we knew who the enemy was. It was capitalism and patriarchy. It was the military industrial complex, the government and the multinationals, white supremacists, the ruling class. It is true that power is often used irresponsibly by those possessing global and social rank, but knowing that and fighting against it hasn't brought us any closer to our vision of long-lasting change. In fact, because social activists have traditionally aligned with the side with less global rank, i.e., that of the minority, we have oriented our vision and strategies towards fighting the so-called enemy, the side with more social rank. This has worked to a point, but has not proved sustainable over time. Social activists have been defined by our reaction to "the enemy" both by ourselves and by others. This limits our goals and visions and locks us into a smaller framework in which creative self-definition becomes more difficult. Process Work suggests ideas, strategies and tools that help work with situations in which rank and power are

present. The focus on sustainable outcomes both nourishes and broadens the vision of social activism as well as empowering its capacity to creatively redefine its identity.

Field theory

A classic example of a field is the force field created by a magnet organizing metal filings in its vicinity into specific patterns. Just as the magnet creates a force field around itself, so do organizations and groups create patterns around themselves that organize what happens in the field of that group (Mindell, 1992: 15). The identity and beliefs of a group make up part of its field, but another less visible part of its field is the tension between parts or polarities, also called roles, within a group. For example, a group working for affirmative action (legislated rights for women and minorities in education and the work place) identifies with its goal, but doesn't identify with the white male already in power. Process Work field theory states that parts with which we don't identify, but which are present in the field, will effect us simply because they are roles in that field. Each group field is made up of many roles which can and do change as the interactive process unfolds.

When working with conflict, a Process Work goal is to create sustainable outcomes which will hold up over time. One part "winning" over another, defeating "the enemy," is not sustainable. All those involved feeling heard or understood is sustainable because the entire field is then represented. Affirmative action is an example where this idea could have been put to good use. The whole field of affirmative action is changing. It is currently suffering a backlash. Thirty years worth of gains made by women and minorities in education and the workplace are being rolled back because those with power have felt disregarded, their side not having been supported.

An understanding of this dynamic could have potentially changed the history of affirmative action. Some say that those with global power and rank will always try to undercut the gains of the less powerful. This may be true, but working with all parts of a system is more sustainable than working with only one part and ignoring the rest of the system. In this example, the voice of the "white male with power" has been ignored and reacts now by coming forth strongly and influencing the entire field of affirmative action. If the role of the white male had been included in

discussions of affirmative action, and a dialogue created to process the tensions between the different roles, the situation might be very different today.

Process Work theory also says that the role of the "white male with power" is not only on the outside of the group, but also manifests itself between us and inside each of us. Being able to name a role that explicitly wields power could dramatically change the leadership dynamic in social activist groups by bringing power out of the closet and into the group's awareness. As social activists, we never understood this deeper reality in our relationships and thus had no way to work with it. We thought that the "enemy," the one with all the power, was only outside us in what we were fighting against, but working with power between us is a process all activists must face.

Deep democracy and ghost roles

Deep democracy is a concept that grows out of field theory and is based on the premise that all parts, not just the traditional majority, are needed to represent reality. Thus, it is different from the common concept of democracy. It embodies an attitude that encourages expression by all the different sides (Mindell, 1992: 154-55). Deep democracy works with the relationship between the parts of a conflict, rather than focusing on who wins and who loses. It is the dialogue between the parts that creates sustainability. This is very different from the traditional social activist stance in which we feel that democracy has failed and it is up to us to right the wrong by overcoming the "bad guys." The problem with the traditional social activist view is that the "bad guys" are part of the total picture and today, as the ecologists say, there is no place left to throw anything away. We have to work with it all.

What we don't relate to, whatever we throw away, becomes a ghost role, an unrepresented position that floats around in the atmosphere silently influencing us. The aforementioned white male with power is an example of a ghost in the field of affirmative action which, because it was not processed within that field, has come back to haunt in the sense that it demands to be heard.

It is a radical thought and a departure from social activist belief and tradition to include the role of white men in power in a dialogue around affirmative action. It requires a leap of faith to enter into an unknown interaction with a part

that has been considered an enemy; to let go of winning and losing and go for the dialogue. In a deeply democratic interaction, as long as the different roles are represented, the tensions can be processed even if the real adversaries are not at the table. Although we can't predict the exact outcome of processing tension, we know that this kind of dialogue creates long term sustainability and builds community (Summers, 1994).

As mentioned above, the leader is a ghost role which is found in many activist groups that believe in egalitarianism and are therefore identified as leaderless. Beneath this apparent equality is often an underground competition for leadership. This competition can eventually break up the group, which has no way to work with the dynamics. This happened in a Central America solidarity group in which Rhea worked for three years. One charismatic man always ended up in the middle of every project the group worked on, but would not take responsibility or identify with his leadership. Other members became frustrated as he implicitly began to control everything around him. As a result the group got smaller and smaller, until he and a few friends were the only ones left. Having the understanding that leadership is a role in the group's field would have enabled the group to work with this behavior explicitly rather than as a background phenomenon influencing everyone, but with which no one could fully grapple.

Using the Process Work concept of deep democracy which welcomes all parts, competition and hidden leadership are openly acknowledged and worked with, instead of implicitly influencing the atmosphere and the relationships between activists. Leadership as a role is always present in the group. Developing sustainability demands that we pay attention to it. The concept of deep democracy honors that role, no matter how disturbing it may be to the group, welcoming it and working with it to create greater awareness.

Spiritual warriorship

In *The Shaman's Body*, Arnold Mindell describes a spiritual warrior:

She senses something unknown to her and consciously decides...to explore it. This is because she has a love for the unpredictable and the belief that whatever comes up will carry her into the adventure of becoming whole. (1992: 83-86)

Working with rank is a challenge that the spiritual warrior welcomes wholeheartedly. Such warriors have the willingness to put themselves in the midst of a turbulent situation, with the belief that something of value will come out of the interaction.

It is often difficult when a painful rank issue comes up. For example, a lesbian may be told by her two heterosexual friends that they're getting married. Since same sex marriages are not currently legally recognized in the United States, lesbians do not receive the privileges that are automatically granted to heterosexual marriages. Therefore, the heterosexuals have global and social rank and the lesbian is marginalized. This is a tricky situation for both sides. Such situations challenge everyone's spiritual warriorship. When issues of rank come up, there are often intense feelings, accusations, counter-accusations and a sense of rigidity. In this instance, the lesbian is challenged to bring her friends' attention to their heterosexual privilege without attacking them or sinking into her personal pain. The heterosexuals are challenged to acknowledge their global and social rank without losing touch with their delight or slumping into guilt and possibly patronizing the lesbian.

A spiritual warrior has rank because she trusts the inherent value of such interactions. She takes it upon herself to support others to stay in the interaction, even though she knows tensions, difficulties and pain may emerge. She realizes that staying with the tensions will create more understanding and community in the long run.

Spiritual warriors are vulnerable and put themselves on the line, risking misunderstanding or being taken advantage of. The other side, as those of us with global or social rank know, is often ignorant and arrogant in our lack of awareness about our own role in the suffering of those with less rank relative to us. A spiritual warrior is challenged to draw on her spiritual rank and use that suffering for the growth of the entire field, because she understands that ignorance is a role that can and does change.

Those with global and social rank are challenged to become aware of that rank. A spiritual warrior knows that privilege is a gift to be celebrated and that it is also important to challenge and support himself and others in taking responsibility for that privilege. Those of us with this kind of rank typically do not notice it. For exam-

ple, when a white person unconsciously makes a racist remark and is challenged on this, defensiveness and counter-accusations are common responses. It requires a courageous attitude and self love to delve into and take responsibility for privilege. Whites are often unused to being challenged around white skin privilege, and in that sense commonly experience feeling unsafe when challenged. Also, a person may be left alone in the racist role while other whites act self-righteous and politically correct. This can trigger one's own personal abuse story, which we will discuss in *Working with Abuse*, below.

To stand in the role of "racist" is difficult and painful. Humility is required. One finds himself outside his personal comfort zone; he is seen as wrong. A spiritual warrior knows that the world is not always a safe place and can draw on his inner resources and trust in the unknown. That trust and his dedication to following what arises provide him with the tools to pursue his own unconsciousness even when it leads in such a difficult direction. Similarly, he will join another who is alone in this difficult role because he can see that an individual may need help, and that no one should have to stand alone.

Working with one's own abuse history

Unfortunately, since shaming is universal in western culture, most people are familiar with some form of abuse. At times each of us can feel so hurt s/he can't believe s/he has any power or influence. This is not entirely true, even though it may feel so. When issues of rank come up in relationship conflicts, so do feelings of abuse. The degree to which one has resolved personal abuse issues can be a measure of one's psychological rank.

For instance, a teacher may feel inadequate and weak inside, or less powerful relative to his colleagues. He may not identify with the power and privileges of his position, but in relationship to the students whom he is teaching, he has greater social rank. When he is challenged by students to take responsibility for that rank, he may see himself only in relationship to his inner feelings about himself and in relationship to other teachers. Because he feels "less than" inside himself and in relationship to his peers, he may not notice the rank he has relative to his students.

Both women and men have been hurt in the war between the sexes. Men generally have more global rank and therefore more power than

women. However, in the heat of a fight when both sides are hurling accusations at each other, if the man has been hurt by women, it can be terrifying if not almost impossible for him to acknowledge his greater rank. Often, women who have been hurt by men cannot listen to or acknowledge men's pain unless they have also worked on their own pain and abuse in this area.

In Process Work we are encouraged to "burn our wood" around the issues that fire us up with a lot of emotion. Burning one's wood means working with past hurts, including areas of personal abuse. It includes working on oneself alone, in one to one relationships, in support groups and in the world at large. Working on personal history is a necessary building block towards being able to work with awareness around rank issues, no matter how much global or social rank one possesses.

A friend's story illustrates this point. She says:

I survived a physically violent childhood in which I often felt that I had to fight everybody and everything. I screamed at men as a group over and over, until one day I realized I had some power in the situation and was in fact emotionally demolishing the other. Only then was I able to recognize the man as an individual human being. Through working on myself I am no longer unconsciously pulled into violent reactions. Now I know I have choices, but can clearly remember when I didn't. Because of this I can have compassion for those who lash out.

This woman has psychological rank because her childhood experiences no longer control her life and she knows she can work with conflict.

Much of the work on rank is done in our relationships to one or more of the "isms," that is, race, gender, sexual preference, class, age, etc. Many of us have difficult, negative or painful experiences associated to these areas of rank. The continued ability to deeply explore reactions, feelings and attitudes means that we are burning our wood and gaining greater awareness and ongoing personal growth.

Eldership

Eldership is a momentary state of mind that is extremely useful when working with rank issues. There is a seeming wealth of life experience behind this attitude, though a person need not be old to be an elder. Elders have burned some wood

and sweated out some hot situations. They've witnessed death and ruined lives, along with joyous victories and new births. Elders model deep democracy. They have an openness that cares for all the roles in a field, somehow remembering that they've been there before and knowing they'll be there again. This openness provides the tolerance to stay with difficult moments. Elders are able to put themselves on the line and to support others to do the same in a loving manner that cares for everyone involved. They understand that unless everyone wins, even the unpopular ones, no one wins. Mindell says

Elders are politically wise, psychologically oriented people interested in personal development as well as everything else. They are compassionate people who have feelings that go beyond right and wrong and the borders of their own person and nation and are capable of understanding and helping others. (1992: 157)

Working with rank: a story

Recently the following story was in the San Francisco newspapers. It involved an African American minister trying to get confirmation for one of the city administrative boards. Suddenly, the news broke that he had made homophobic statements. There was a big public meeting to discuss the issue. All parties were present, and the minister refused to retract his statements. He was reprimanded by the gay and lesbian community, which is powerful in San Francisco. Subsequently, the minister was not confirmed for the city board. It was reported as a victory for the gay and lesbian community.

The "victorious" outcome doesn't take into consideration the complex situation of gays and lesbians of color who may have "won" as gays and lesbians, but who didn't get to have African American representation on a city board in a city where their communities are under attack and the power structure is predominantly white. Unfortunately, this story is not an example of a conflict with a sustainable outcome. What is needed here to create sustainability?

Two minority groups are in conflict with one another, but there is a ghost role that is not represented: the mainstream power holder and decision maker. This is the ghost who is watching while the groups with less global rank fight it out. The homophobe is present, but another ghost role is the white racist of whom there is no mention. If

these roles in the field could be brought out and worked with, the tension between all parties would be more fully represented, which would help to clear the atmosphere.

In this story, there is a winner and a loser, but from whose point of view? The "win" is not sustainable. Two minority groups are further divided. No one is practicing deep democracy, so no one recognizes that all parts need to be supported and that a dialogue needs to happen between the parts.

San Francisco, like all cities, needs elders who see themselves as responsible for the whole field. These are people who have burned their wood and can use their rank to support all parts to be heard and understood. All cities need spiritual warriors who trust the unknown and are willing to work with the explosive tension and pain of minorities clashing with each other and with the ghost roles in the background. When this happens, conflict and pain may be transformed into understanding and community.

As process workers and social activists, we dream of a white gay elder who is able to identify not only as a victim of homophobia, but also as a white person with privilege and spiritual rank who can take the side of the African American minister. This person is interested in a dialogue, realizing there is no winning over another part of the field if that means silencing it. As gay women we dream of black and white heterosexual activist elders who perceive that working on the conflict benefits them and so supports the entire field. These elders could hold the field together while the different sides interact. As supporters of all people of color, we dream of white people no longer taking our privilege for granted, but using it to come out and support conflicts about difference.

We dream of people who would not see this public interaction as a victory or defeat, but rather as a moment in the ongoing work of our communities; who would see a community dialogue being created. Process Work tackles the thorny issue of rank—perhaps the paramount issue of our times. The traditional attitudes of social activists towards working with rank have meant that we have been glued to the adversarial mindset of winning and losing, a power dynamic that is at the core of oppression. Process Work's focus on sustainability reconceptualizes the ideas of struggle and change and ultimately breathes

new life and hope into the vision of a better world which lies at the heart of social activism.

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Rhea, MPW, lives in Portland, where she works as a therapist and lives with Emetchi. She has been a social activist, spiritual seeker and performer for many years. She is a life-long learner of Process Work, loves gardening, and (can she admit it?) watching Star Trek.