Politics, Spirituality and Genuine Democracy

by Brenda Thompson

True empowerment is not just proclaiming and believing that "we create our reality", as though all can be done through meditation and inner work. Those are important; they may even be preconditions. But true empowerment arises from choice-creating, from facing the really important issues creatively, from experiencing breakthrough insights and shifts of awareness, and from taking thoughtful action jointly. Jim Rough

Twenty years ago progressive politics was the best route to social justice and many people have endeavoured to make the world a better place through activism. In their quest for change, Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and emerging political parties have failed to examine how competition for power prevents real and lasting progress. Winning power within a hierarchical system of capitalism and representative democracy only replaces one form of oppression with another. Despite the urgency of our situation, we need to stop and consider how our search for meaning and individual empowerment can help us obtain the kind of momentum we need and how our deference to an all-pervading system of domination has prevented us from doing so.

Indeed, with each phase of political awareness (or unawareness, as is usually the case) we risk getting stuck if we are not careful. Most people are only vaguely aware that the terms of our existence are totally undemocratic submitting us to a monetary system that serves only a select few. Many still believe that society's authority figures and institutions are better suited to run the show. As long as we are not affected by any of the negative consequences of capitalism (poverty, war etc.) we cannot imagine why other cultures might not want to recognize our Western "civilization" as the pinnacle of progress. We have completely internalized the prejudices and inequalities of the capitalistic system. Hence, blaming the victim, even if it is ourselves, is the automatic reaction to every day events. At the same time, most of us are brainwashed into focussing on our appearance, our careers, our material status and so there is little time or encouragement for political or spiritual awareness unless it involves personal gain.

We usually don't wake up from this state of denial until we experience a crisis. We lose our job or perhaps we are diagnosed with cancer, upon which we are visited by the revelation that life is not fair for the majority of people. In fact, for the majority life is hell. At this point we become very critical of the system and we actively seek information to confirm things are not right. Now that the media has become a propaganda machine for the status quo, we are forced to go deeper, behind the scenes and if we have any political motivation at all, it is here that we usually find ourselves reaching out to other like minded people and groups. Arriving at this point takes a considerable amount of courage for there is no turning back. Once we've seen through the smoke and mirrors we can never return to our initial state of trust in the system.

This leaves us searching for meaning beyond the temporary fix of material consumption. However, investing our time and energy in the power of the people is not without its own unique set of problems and personal challenges. First, one needs to do research and there is plenty of good information out there to draw from. Whether it is the war in Afghanistan, 9/11, health care or the Trilateral Commission, the facts and opinions unanimously conclude that we do not call the shots. For novices and career activists, assimilating this wealth of discouraging, albeit incisive information is never ending. But without a vision of what is possible, it tends to reinforce our role as victims of a global hegemony or Illuminati, depending on your preference. Indeed, without an environmental or social

crisis to rail against, many NGO's have no reason to exist and no appeal for funding. This limits their strategy to eternal vigilance with a doom and gloom clarion call.

The fact that the alternative movement has been unable to gather the momentum necessary to cause a shift in our direction tends to reinforce this scenario. But it is also an indication of a much more systemic problem. Our institutions are organized so that a board of directors can make executive decisions on "behalf of" members. Our constitution allows us the right to elect a representative to parliament but we do not have the right to make decisions directly. According to Greek economist, Takis Fotopoulous, editor of the international journal Democracy & Nature this "representative" democracy has facilitated the concentration of power into a global market economy, disenfranchising citizens of their right to self-determination and increasing voter apathy.

> The political crisis is a by-product of the dynamics of representative democracy.
> Representative democracy is not a system that was always there – it was created at about the
> same time as the system of the market economy, 200 hundred years ago, and its dynamic
> has led to the present situation. Where it's not parliaments any more that take important
> decisions, it's not even the governing parties, but it's just cliques around the president
> or the prime minister which take all the important decisions. This creates huge alienation.
> That's why today we don't have any more mass political parties. People do not become
> members of parties, as used to be the case in the past. Not only this: Today, many people
> do not even bother to vote. So this is a manifestation of the huge political crisis that the
> system of representative democracy is going through at the moment.

The political crisis is reflected in the results of our most recent federal election. Only 60% of Canadians voted. The lowest turnout in our history. Of the votes that were cast, 61% went to the parties in opposition. Proportional representation is currently being touted as a solution to the unequal distribution of seats however, if we do not take the opportunity to examine our representative system adequately, issues will continue to be compartmentalized, simplified or purposefully avoided with more and more time given over to negative personal attacks amongst politicians. Furthermore, a cartel of broadcasting companies will continue to use publicly owned airwaves to arbitrarily decide which party leaders are allowed to debate. Representative democracy exists to maintain control by creating winners and losers rather than engage all perspectives in creating solutions. Proportional representation can reform the system but it cannot address the competitive, divisive nature of the political game we have been immersed in since the birth of electoral politics.

> Political orthodoxy has many rewards. It's great if you want your politics to be like
> sports events. You can love your team and its captain. And you can safely hate those
> other guys. They are crap. You can abuse them with insults and lies. Alice Klein

However if we acknowledge that it is the system of competition and control that needs to change then we can start to focus on a positive vision of the future outside of that system. We can begin to question when the mainstream media tells us that we must fight for the crumbs in a race to the bottom knowing that it is just another tactic the authoritarian system uses to keep us afraid. It has nothing to do with who we really are or our potential as human beings. By taking responsibility for our future at the grassroots we can start to envision what kind of society we want to live in and begin to work together to create it.

Surprisingly, this new vision is the focus of much of the New Age literature that has come out in the last few years. And if we are going to answer the call for social, economic and environmental justice, I

wonder if we don't need a melding of the spiritual with the political. Authors like Tony Burroughs, *The Code 10 Intentions for a Better World* and Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*, acknowledge that the world we live in is negative and unjust but they insist that the universe is founded on unconditional love and abundance and that we have the power to create a better world by letting go of our fears and focussing on positive intentions and feelings. The idea that the mind affects reality has been validated by quantum physics. Therefore if we have this power in our own individual lives, imagine what we can accomplish as a group. Tony Burroughs sees this as an essential next step.

> Now that we've formulated our vision of a better world and expanded it by sharing it with others, it's time to bring it into physical manifestation. To do this, we must come together. We must begin to make good use of the gifts that community has to offer.

He goes on to suggest that the ability to obtain the gifts that community has to offer is a lost art that we need to rediscover.

> In ancient times, most cultures knew to sit in a circle when they came together as a group. It was common sense to make it easy for everyone to have access to everyone else. Sitting in a circle, the group felt the power of something greater than its individual members.

The idea that our prehistoric heritage was based on egalitarian societal relationships has been substantiated by feminist anthropological analyses of ancient sites such as Catal Huyuk in Turkey. Agricultural societies in Europe as recent as 3500 years ago were based on peaceful relations. Their settlement areas were chosen for their beautiful setting, good water, soil and animal pastures. They lacked the the heavy fortifications and weapons typical of the later Indo-Europeans who built higher up on hillsides for greater protection. Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade,* argues that these first partnership societies are a necessary step towards our evolution.

> ....the original partnership direction of Western culture veered off into a bloody five thousand year dominator detour. Our mounting global problems are in large part the logical consequences of a dominator model of social organization at our level of tech-nological development - hence they cannot be solved within it. There is another course which, as co-creators of our own evolution, is still ours to choose. This is the alternative of breakthrough rather than breakdown: how through new ways of structuring politics, economics, science and spirituality we can move into the new era of a partnership world.

Just as politics tends to view success through a mass movement of active citizenry, spirituality sees the liberation and empowerment of the individual as the ultimate goal. Both are essential if we are to go beyond the existing hierarchy. Unfortunately since most political organizations have chosen to compete for power within the existing system, they have been unable to receive many of "the gifts that community has to offer". Refusing to examine how their own decisions are made, and allowing stronger personalities to dominate, they end up as covert or overt hierarchies, themselves. No matter how well thought out the policies or strategies, these groups can never facilitate the kind of self-determination we crave. They can only change the leader within a system that will always use competition and authoritarian control to circumvent our co-operative tendencies.

This occurs regularly whenever there is a disagreement about issues or strategy within a political

organization. The views of the core members are recognized while those of dissenting members tend to be ignored. A power struggle or faction fight ensues and the organization hemorrhages, losing of some of it's most valuable members in the process.

Regrettably it is our adherence to top down decision making which prevents this kind of crisis from transforming into group empowerment and creative wisdom. In his book *A Different Drum Community Making and Peace*, M. Scott Peck describes the process toward genuine community. Initially when people first get together they think of themselves as a community. After a while differences are discovered and they try to fix each other, but this intensifies the power struggle. Camaraderie is lost and the community eventually faces a crisis where it may dissolve completely. This is a healthy part of the process. However if an authoritative leader steps in to impose their will the chance for community is lost. If allowed to continue people experience "emptiness". They stop trying to fix each other and accept their inability to build community. Paradoxically, this apparent failure allows for transformation to true community.

True community, direct democracy, self-organization: these are all terms used to describe a decision making process that is inclusive, co-operative and draws on the creativity of the group members. Instead of majority rule we enter into a partnership mode encompassing all viewpoints to ensure the best solution possible.

One example of a partnership mode used to transform top down decision making to creative wisdom is Dynamic Facilitation. This technique, created by consultant Jim Rough, gives all members of a group a safe space to express their views no matter how controversial. It is especially good for moving beyond faction fights because the facilitator ensures that power is shared equally, to the point where members are able to tap into the creative wisdom of the entire group. This, in turn, builds a sense of community and empowerment that might otherwise have gone undiscovered.

According to Rough there is a natural progression of empowerment related to different levels of thinking. The first level is when you are just reacting to stimuli: what I like to call survival mode. People living under extreme poverty or conditions of upheaval are rarely able to do anything but react to their environment. For the rest of us it can occur if we are sick or traumatized by some tragic event in our lives. The second level of thinking occurs when you make decisions according to rules and regulations. It can be good for simple situations but rarely accounts for the real needs of people and so lacks commitment. The next level has to do with problem solving. It acknowledges the complexity of real life and relies on evaluative, critical thinking skills along with discussion and debate. It is at this level that we also start to realize that the more we try to control a situation the more problems we create. For example, the more people arm themselves for protection, the more people get shot. Next we have creative thinking. When a problem is so complex we may need to "let go" even more and give up on the idea that our conscious minds can fix the problem and invite our unconscious to step in. Finally the level at which we are most empowered is the level of choice-creating. Here we are faced with impossible issues and by letting go to evoke the creativity of both our minds and our hearts we transcend the problem. A crisis where we feel powerless and emotionally overwhelmed allows for this kind of personal transformation.

We are in a crisis of global proportions. Do we continue to try and bring down the existing power elite through a mass movement or do we build genuine democracy in our communities, our workplace and our neighbourhoods? Perhaps it is not so much a question of one or the other but in what order we go about creating the change we need. In his book, *Escaping the Matrix how We the People can change the world*, Richard Moore talks about how historically political change within our hierarchical system

has occurred in three stages: First one power structure is replaced by another. Then a new system (capitalism, communism, etc.) is established which attempts to transform the culture. But in order to avoid a continuous series of power struggles under different names, we need to transform the culture first.

> .....Each community operates internally on a harmonized, inclusive, democratic basis. As empowered communities learn to work together, harmonizing their concerns and activities as they network with one another, they are creating the political arrangements that are appropriate to a democratic and equitable society. When victory comes the new culture and political arrangements are already in place.

Many activists sense that this capitalistic, hierarchical system has to go but few are prepared to leave their comfort zone and take up arms against the encroaching police state, let alone join a political party. By employing a much more direct form of democracy and nourishing the spiritual within ourselves and our organizations, we are much better able to build solidarity, community and the economic independence required to challenge the system. Not because we want to crush it but because we will have already replaced it with something more akin to the spiritual, creative, co-operative beings we are.

> *In a genuine participatory democracy, the driving force behind individuals' life activities*
> *would be their longing to develop their whole selves. Their struggles would then center*
> *on striking a balance between developing their moral-intellectual and spiritual sides, on*
> *the one hand, and attending their this-worldly needs and wants, on the other. Moreover, realizing that*
> *their self-focused growth and goals, and their outer needs to seek commun-*
> *ion with others in their civic – existence - hence honouring their community-centred, politi-*
> *cal, and citizenship responsibilities. In a genuine democracy, civic participation would be*
> *a necessary condition for individuals' realization of their potentials.* Majid Behrouzi

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