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## Protest and Thrive: The Relationship between Global Responsibility and Personal Empowerment

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# Protest and Thrive

## The Relationship between Global Responsibility and Personal Empowerment

Sarah A. Conn

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*Economic empowerment is intricately linked to personal empowerment, which for many women starts with notions of caring and responsibility. When we care about ourselves, our family, our neighborhood, our community, and our world, we are often moved to action. Examples of women activists abound. This article examines the psychological forces that lead to individual empowerment and social change and warns us that to ignore our reactions to the world around us is to limit our own possibilities for personal growth. Personal power comes from taking responsibility for ourselves in a context of interconnectedness and interdependence. Awareness, understanding, direct experience, and action are key components of developing personal power in a global context. As we “hatch out” through powerful emotions to action and growth, we can move to empower others as well.*

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**G**arbage,” says Ann, speaking to her therapist about her depression, “I can’t stop thinking about all the garbage that’s piling up everywhere. Where is it all going to go?”

In this opening scene in the movie *sex, lies and videotape*, Ann represents a disempowered woman. When she talks about garbage and other issues of concern in the larger world, the audience laughs. Her concerns are not taken seriously as expressions of Ann’s need to participate in the world but are left as statements symbolic of her inner emptiness. Instead of being taken as a sign of her *connectedness* with the world, they symbolize her *separation* from her own life, which she has given over to the role of nonworking-wife-of-a-successful-lawyer-with-a-large-house-in-the-suburbs. Ann’s house is empty of people, her life empty of activity or purpose, and her therapy empty of empowerment.

But garbage is out in the world, not just in Ann’s inner life. In fact, pollution is a *global* problem, which Ann was experiencing personally. Personal and global pain are not separate spheres; they are intimately related. Great potential for personal empowerment can be found in attending to our awareness of global problems and to our understanding of how they connect with each other and with our personal lives. The process of naming the danger, saying aloud that the threats to life on earth are real, moves us from the numbness of denial to the aliveness that makes action possible. Once we make room for our direct

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experience of global threats, our emotional responsiveness releases energy for action. Experiencing the danger and moving into action with others provides the opportunity for “relational empowerment” (Surrey 1987), the development of one’s personal power in a process that simultaneously empowers others.

Each of us is personally confronted daily by evidence of ecological degradation, human oppression, and the threat of nuclear annihilation — the “pain of the world” (Macy 1983). Unless we have become numb, our awareness of these problems evokes emotional reactions. Not attending to these reactions is a function of an outmoded view of the individual that stresses separation from the wider world, a view which keeps us disempowered. If Ann’s concern for the world is seen in a systemic context, it contains important information needed by the world. If her concern is validated and fully expressed, she may be empowered to develop greater awareness and understanding of the world’s problems, and more powerful action to address them. Both she and the world will benefit.

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### **Globalization: Personal and Political**

The extent of our “pain for the world” is a manifestation of the globalization that has occurred in many arenas. For example, our economic systems no longer make sense when viewed from an isolated national perspective alone. What happens economically in one part of the world has reverberations in all parts of the world. Communications technology has made us aware of what is happening throughout the world, often while it is happening, and allows us to participate immediately.

Most of all, globalization is evident in the massive and irreversible threats to life on earth, which are the result of human activity. A general awakening to this occurred in the early eighties as we faced the consequences of the increase in power and numbers of nuclear weaponry in the world. In only a few years, nuclear issues surged to the forefront of public concern. The global destructiveness of nuclear weapons, the possibility of the end of all life on earth, has increased our awareness of the danger of enmity and led to a major emphasis on creative approaches to conflict resolution both locally and internationally.

We are all becoming increasingly aware of the threat to life posed by global environmental degradation. We are realizing that a threat to our “global commons” — our air, oceans, soil, and forests — is a threat to us all, no matter our nationality, economic condition, or gender. “In these and in numerous other ways, we have become members of a large, linked world system. Our lives are elements in several dramas that can no longer be understood simply by focusing narrowly on our inner experiences or personal preferences” (Sampson 1989, 917).

What we need is a revised view of the individual’s place in the world, a more global understanding of the psychological and political forces that lead to individual empowerment and social change. How differently would we look at our political processes if we understood that an individual’s crying out over the degradation of the global commons is not a sign of pathology but the healthy response of a system in trouble? Ann’s concern with garbage is not only a symptom of her personal emptiness and powerlessness. It is a commentary not about Ann but about our culture’s outmoded notions of individualism that the direct experience of her pain for the world is pathologized and can be expressed only in therapy. We need a new psychological understanding of the development of an individual’s responsibility for social change, one which connects responsiveness to global problems with possibilities for personal growth.

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## Globalization and Personal Responsibility

As Mikhail Gorbachev said in his historic UN speech in December 1988, “We are witnessing the most profound social change . . . The idea of democratizing the entire world order has become a powerful sociopolitical force. At the same time, the scientific and technological revolution has turned many economic, food, energy, environmental, information, and population problems, which only recently we treated as national or regional problems, into global problems . . . The world seems to have become more visible and tangible. This calls for a radical review of approaches to the totality of the problem of international cooperation as a major element of universal security” (Gorbachev 1988).

If the world is to emerge from the current state of threat, Gorbachev’s “radical review” must take into account not only global interconnectedness and vulnerability but also include the development of individual responsibility for global problems, which are ubiquitous. Each of us is affected by them. Whenever we eat vegetables, we are not only participating innocently in the natural food chain, connecting with the natural cycle of sun, rain, and seed. We are also connecting with the forests that may have been cut down to create the fields, with the chemicals that may have been used in the growing, with the air polluted in the transportation, with the garbage created in the preparation and packaging. Whenever we shop, we participate in the global economic system, which connects us with the peasants who grew the raw materials, the landowners who run the plantations, the factory workers who created the products, and the factory owners.

Thus, just as we are all affected, we are also implicated in global problems. Those problems have brought home to each of us that we are interconnected and interdependent, that our well-being is related to the well-being of other peoples and other life forms. Each of us is responsible for participating in creating solutions. Each of us has her own version of global awareness, sensitivity, and potential activity. Each of us has a unique perspective to offer, a unique experience from which to act.

How we act, however, is determined by how we see ourselves in relation to the whole. And how we view ourselves as individuals develops in the context of our notions about the nature of reality, our “world view.” In the words of physicist David Bohm, “a proper world view, appropriate for its time, is generally one of the basic factors that is essential for harmony in the individual and in society as a whole” (1983, xi). Our notions about reality and individualism determine what we can imagine as solutions to problems of mental health, of local and global pollution, of violence and drugs, or of war and peace.

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## Individualism in the Context of Separation

The most prevalent world view in the West still holds that reality is made of separate, independent parts, “atomic building blocks,” which act on each other in mechanical ways. From this view of reality we have derived our notions of power and competition, based on hierarchy and separation, expressed prototypically in the theory of evolution, which proposes that only the “fittest” survive. The most “fit” has been seen as that which has power to dominate and control the “other,” whether that “other” be other particles, other people, other species, nature itself, or information.

Most of our model’s of the individual here in the West are based on the “atomic building block” view of reality. The very basis of the American character, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out in the 1830s in his *Democracy in America*, is a view of individ-

ualism that emphasizes autonomy and separation. The psychological study of the individual in this context has emphasized a self that is conditioned by inner and outer forces and is small and needy unless it gains power over those forces.

The “independent, separate self” in this outdated but still prevalent paradigm is “related to” the larger whole through either domination and control or through “unselfishness” and self-sacrifice. Social responsibility and altruism thus arise out of separation and are experienced as giving to an “other” who has “less than” oneself. Socially responsible behavior in the paradigm is usually based on self-interested, reciprocal premises (Sampson 1988). In other words, the “altruistic” person expects to feel good about doing good, and to store up credits against possible future need.

This notion of the separate self, resulting in the extreme form of “radical” (Bellah et al. 1985) or “self-contained” (Sampson 1988) individualism in the United States, which arose only recently in human history, remains a minority view in the world as a whole. Such individualism is believed to have formed the basis of the enormous success of capitalism and technological achievement in this country and is considered by many to be the basis of democracy. Indeed, its emphasis on personal responsibility for and personal control over one’s own life is often considered the basis of socially responsible behavior. Social responsibility in this context, however, turns out to be very limited.

Bellah et al. (1985), in referring to these limits, describe a “pathology of radical individualism,” in which involvement in public life has become severely restricted to two major contexts, which they call “utilitarian individualism” and “expressive individualism.” In the context of “utilitarian individualism,” we become active “not as the routine fulfillment of the duties of citizenship but as a heroic enterprise,” participating only when our own immediate interests are threatened, and otherwise believing that we can be good citizens “simply by being passively law-abiding” (181). We may organize or join a campaign when the water that comes into our house gets polluted, when we become aware of it, but are unlikely to participate in a program that addresses the water problems in the wider world.

Alternatively, in the context of “expressive individualism,” we view “moral concerns as matters of personal preference” (187), emphasizing what will make us feel good rather than what will contribute to the public good. Here we might get involved with the local water group in order to work on our shyness or our fear of speaking in groups. Such a step might even be recommended to us by our therapists! In either context, few of us get involved in actively addressing global problems on their own terms, with the full awareness and understanding they require. We do not have a language of global awareness and social responsibility based on the experience of *connection* with the wider world. Thus few of us are truly able to act locally with a global perspective.

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### **Individualism in the Context of Connection**

In this century a new world view has been emerging, one which has profound implications for how we view individual responsibility. This new view of reality focuses on wholes rather than parts: the world is all of a piece, coherent and connected, every event or object related to, reflected in, and affected by every other (Bateson 1972; Bohm 1983). What has been discovered is that “these wholes — be they cells, bodies, ecosystems, and even the planet itself — are not just a heap of disjunct parts, but dynamic, intricately organized and balanced systems, interrelated and interdependent in every movement, every

function, every exchange of energy” (Macy 1983, 25). No part of a system can be understood outside of its context, its relationship to other parts of the system. Separate entities, divisions into parts, are a function of the way we look rather than the way things are, and as such limit our view and our understanding of the interconnected nature of reality (Whitehead 1933; Bateson 1972; Bohm 1983).

This view also holds that reality is not static, but consists of flux, process, the relationships themselves, the “interconnecting flows” or patterns of energy, matter, and information (Weiner 1967). A small change in one part not only affects the whole, but does so unpredictably. One metaphor for this view is the “butterfly effect,” or the idea that if a butterfly flutters its wings in Shanghai one day, the energy generated moves unpredictably like a wave across the whole planet, affecting storm systems in New York the following month (Gleick 1987).

As cybernetics has taught us, the viability of the whole derives from the openness and responsiveness to the environment of the systems within it (Weiner 1967). As with a network, if any section is cut off, the whole is weakened. The viability of the whole also depends on the diversity of life forms within it. For example, ecology teaches us that a diverse, open system, when faced with environmental stress, has more ways to respond and adapt to change than a uniform, closed one. In this view of reality, the notion of “the survival of the fittest” has new meaning. No longer are the most fit those species or individuals capable of having power over other species or individuals in a competitive struggle. “The survival of the fittest does not mean those fit to kill; it means those fitting in best with the rest of life” (Thomas 1981). “Fitting in” refers here to the ability to be open to and contribute to the well-being of the whole system.

This emerging view of reality is connected with another kind of individualism, based in an interconnected and interdependent “self.” This self does not *have* relationships; this self *is* relationships, ever growing and expanding networks of relationships. Sampson (1988) refers to “ensembled individualism,” which describes a relational self with fluid, changing boundaries that include others, a self that does not exert control apart from the context in which it is embedded. Thomas (1980) asks if each of us is “a tissue for the earth’s awareness,” a part of the earth itself developing a mind. For Macy, “every system — be it a cell, a tree, a mind — is like a transformer, changing the very stuff that flows through it.” Our pain for the world, then, is the sign that we are functioning as open systems, that “we are the universe becoming conscious of itself” (Macy 1983, 25). This transformation requires of us a radical realignment of our ways of thinking about our relationship to the world.

There are some signs of this realignment taking place. Corporations have begun hiring ethics consultants to assess their connections with the wider world. Public figures are being required to integrate their public and private lives, sometimes at great psychological and political cost. Another example of the shift in our notion about the nature of the individual is the current widespread interest in twelve-step programs, which have grown into a major movement in this country. At any time of the day or evening, people are likely to be gathered in almost any town, participating in groups in which they speak their experience of pain born of “individual” dysfunction, especially that related to addiction. In these groups the challenge is to learn to take responsibility for your life, not by gaining “control” over it or learning to “handle it yourself.” The challenge is to get beyond “the myth of self-power” (Bateson 1972) by admitting the “powerlessness” of the separated, isolated self, by learning to “turn your life over” to a community self. In this way many

thousands of people seem to be learning to discover the kind of power that comes from taking responsibility for themselves in a context of interconnectedness and interdependence.

In the last few decades the pioneering work in this country in the development of the notion of the self-as-relationships has been the product of efforts to correct the bias toward separation and autonomy in previous theories of human development based on male experience and generalized to all human beings. In these theories words like “independence,” “self-reliance,” and “autonomy” are used to describe psychological health. In 1976 Jean Baker Miller broke new ground by pointing out that although women were not developing according to the dominant model of the independent, autonomous self (indeed, we were consistently found lacking when judged on those terms), nevertheless women *were* developing in healthy, powerful ways.

For the last ten years Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center at Wellesley College have been creating a new theory of relational development that takes our interconnectedness and interdependence into account. The Stone Center group has observed how women develop “through participation in and attention to the relational process” (Kaplan 1984, 3). The female growing-up experience is of unbroken connection in the mother-daughter relationship, which fosters the development of empathy and other relational abilities, whereas males, from a very early age, are pushed toward separation. Women’s experiences with pregnancy and child rearing also reinforce the experience of connection through a deep empathic caring for others’ welfare (Spretnak 1986). Crucial to relational growth, empathy is a complex set of cognitive and emotional abilities that enable one to enter into another’s experience while maintaining one’s own boundaries (Jordan 1984).

For women the experience in the mother-daughter relationship involves not only emotional connection and mutuality of empathic processes but also *responsibility* and *empowerment*, which are intimately linked (Surrey 1985). Surrey refers to “response/ability” as the capacity “to act in relationship” by holding “the psychological reality of the other as part of an ongoing, continuous awareness beyond the momentary experience, and to ‘take the other into account’ in all one’s activities” (1987, 6). Responsibility in this context is much more than “altruism,” which involves helping those seen as “other,” implicitly sacrificing one’s own interest. Responsibility based on the connected self does not require sacrifice. “We must reorder all our perceptive faculties so as to emphasize the wholeness rather than the otherness. Before we can love our neighbor as our self, we must *see* our neighbor as our self” (Butreau 1989, 77).

To encourage the massive behavioral adaptations required to protect the earth from humanity’s excesses, we need to broaden our concept of self to include other groups of people and other life forms. Naess (1988) contributes to this effort with his notion of the *ecological self*. The growth to maturity of the self, he says, includes not only growth in *human* relationships with family, community, and beyond but the broadening and deepening of the self through identification with *all beings*. This broadened and deepened identification leads to the experience of interconnectedness, which is an essential condition of empowerment.

When we are able to experience this interconnectedness, we need no moral exhortation to adjust our behaviors and our policies in the direction of global survival. If we broaden and deepen our sense of self, we act *naturally* to care for our world. In Immanuel Kant’s terms, we then engage in “beautiful acts” rather than “moral acts,” behaving not out of motivation to do our moral duty because it is right but rather acting out of positive inclination and pleasure (see Naess 1988, 28). Planting trees, for example, would not be sacrific-

ing our time and effort for the good of an earth separated from us. Planting trees would be experienced as a natural extension of self that contributes to the earth's respiratory capacity. "Who I am is defined in and through my relations with others; I am completed through these relations and do not exist apart from them. Therefore, my work on behalf of others is simultaneously work on behalf of myself" (Sampson 1988, 20). John Seed, a rainforest activist in Australia, puts it this way: "'I am protecting the rainforest' develops to 'I am protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking.' What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over, and we begin to recall our true nature" (Seed 1988, 36).

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### **The Development of Individual Global Responsibility: A Model**

As we have seen, the scope of the problems facing the world require an expanded form of responsibility. Let us now define "global responsibility" as behavior that takes into account the experiences, needs, and rights of others, including all life forms, the future generations of these life forms, and the ecological balances required by the living systems of which these present and future generations are a part (see Everett 1989).

Globally responsible behavior might include "conflict resolution and prevention; . . . support for nonviolent alternatives to warfare; preservation of resources; avoidance of release of harmful materials into the environment and cleanup of those already released; realistic management of nuclear and chemical wastes which takes into account both technical and psychological issues for the duration of the wastes' danger; attention to human and environmental health in all phases of development, marketing and consumption of products" (Everett 1989).

From my perspective as a psychologist, there are four equally important, interrelated aspects of global responsibility, or the ability of individuals and groups to respond to global problems by engaging in social change. The first and most essential is awareness, which refers to the perception of global problems. Ann manifested the beginning of such awareness in her concern for garbage. Most of us have some level of awareness of global problems available to us all the time. Our laughter at Ann in the movie may result from the tension between this awareness and the taboo in our culture against actively addressing such topics.

A second aspect of global responsibility is understanding, or the ability to integrate and analyze the information that comes into awareness. Understanding garbage, for example, means linking one's own use of plastic diapers or Styrofoam to the local ballet initiative involving recycling. In other words, understanding refers to the ability to connect one's concern in specific ways to the problems of waste, pollution, overconsumption, and overpopulation in the larger world.

A third aspect is direct experience, the ability to feel and to engage rather than to become numb and dulled. Ann very likely had deeper feelings about the state of the world connected to her statement about garbage. Had those feelings been validated and expressed, empowering energy could have been released.

A fourth aspect is action, the willingness to work actively for one's own and others' survival by engaging in behaviors that address global problems. Action may include making changes in one's everyday life as well as becoming involved in long-term social change programs.

These aspects of global responsibility are interrelated. When one aspect is emphasized,



the others are affected. If one grows, the others are enabled. If one aspect is ignored, the quality of the others suffers, as does the quality of the person's or group's overall effectiveness in confronting a problem. The four aspects of global responsibility occur in the context of connection, and therefore affect and are affected by our relationships at all levels: to self, to family, to friends, to colleagues, to community, to humanity, to all beings, and to the earth as a whole. Our relationships grow in complexity as we develop, and we develop as globally responsible individuals (and groups) as we attend to the four ways of connecting to the world around us. To be effective as socially responsible activists, as global citizens, we must attend to all these areas. To illustrate this model, I use the Growth of Global Awareness and Social Responsibility diagram.

Empowerment to move begins as connections are made. Connectedness expands as the relational context extends outward, from self to family to community, and so on to the earth as a whole. This happens as a person or group or movement develops the four aspects of social responsibility.

For example, most of us in this country are aware of the problem of pollution. However, we are just beginning to be aware of its global consequences, especially the possibility of global warming connected to depletion of the ozone layer as it reacts with human-made pollutants. Many of us lack an understanding of the causes of the problem and of the relationships between global pollution and other global trends, such as deforestation, population growth, and fossil fuel use. Many of us may have some direct experience of this problem — some anxiety or other feeling of concern during a heat wave, or a twinge of fear at the news of the possible increase in skin cancer. However, most people take no action or act only in limited individual ways (buying a stronger sunblock than in the past, for example) that have no effect on the problem itself.

One of my favorite fairy tales is “The Light Princess” by George MacDonald. “The Light Princess” is deprived at birth of her gravity. Because her parents ignored one of the forces of darkness that existed in their kingdom, their child paid the consequences. This poor girl grew into womanhood with no connection to the earth. She floated through the air unless tied down and could only laugh at everything, no matter how serious. As a woman she got her gravity back through entering into a relationship with another. She was able to develop empathy in this relationship and finally regained her connection to the earth when she learned to cry for the other's pain. Thereafter she herself was able to confront the forces of darkness in the land.

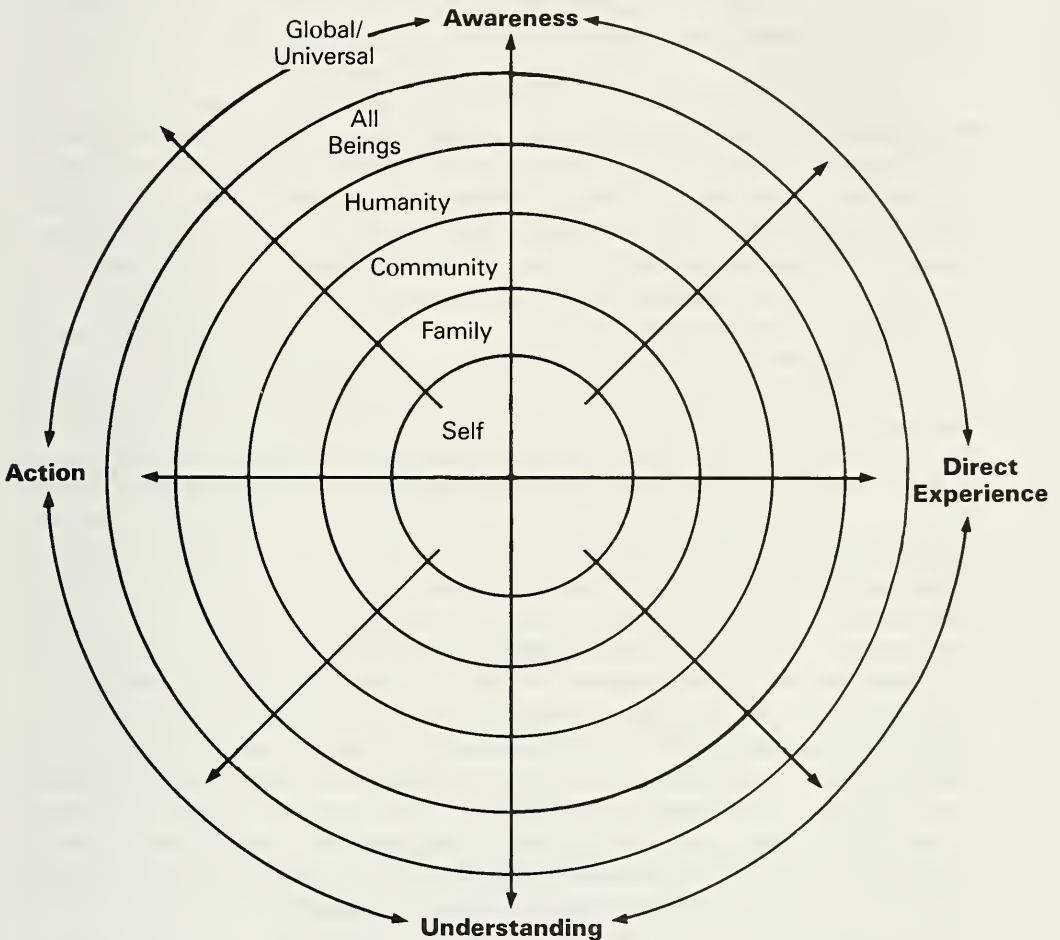
Our “gravity,” what holds us to the earth in these times of threat to the planet, is our ability to feel the world's pain. To keep these four aspects of global responsibility at the level of the separate, disconnected, individual self results in disempowerment, and actual lessening of awareness and a dulling of direct experience, or psychic numbing (Lifton 1979). With understanding and action in connection with others, empowerment will occur, along with a movement to another level of development.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, leading up to the Cuban missile crisis, which was another historical moment when we were aware of threats to the world, several psychological studies were done which demonstrated the connection between the personal and the global. Frank and Nash (1965) interviewed women who became involved in peace activism after some crucial episode stimulated them. “Crucial episodes” occur when world events heighten our personal awareness of global threats to life. These investigators found that women were often sensitized to crucial episodes by some change in their personal lives, such as the birth of a child or a loss through death or divorce. Furthermore, women who became active often had a personal encounter with some individual or group

who was already active. Boulding (1965) also found that women who became involved in the early 1960s in Women Strike for Peace, a group that worked effectively for the above-ground Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, were activated by a combination of world events and formative personal experiences, including suffering and loss.

One of Frank and Nash's (1965) subjects provides an especially clear example of the four elements of global responsibility. Her awareness of the situation in the world was heightened when she read civil defense pamphlets and realized that the government plans she had relied on for protection did not really have any to offer: "When the Soviets resumed testing and tensions had mounted over the wall, nuclear war for the first time seemed imminently possible . . . It had honestly never dawned on me that there was no

Figure 1



### Growth of Global Awareness and Social Responsibility

The arrows in this diagram represent several dimensions of connection. Growth (arrows from center out) can happen within any one aspect of responsibility at any one time, as a person or organization develops more complex connections to the world. This process will not always correspond to a circle, as one aspect develops at one time more than others. However, unless the other aspects of responsibility are eventually included (arrows around and across), the person or group or movement will remain limited and ineffective.

place to hide” (108). The direct experience of this awareness was strong feeling: “I’ve never known such panic and chilling, paralyzing fear and profound depression” (108). Shortly after this she was contacted by a peace activist and persuaded to sign a public letter inviting other women to discuss the world situation, an action leading to a profound experience of connection: “All of a sudden life was different. There were other women who felt as I did; we had found each other and out of our fears came a new determination to influence the decisions that suddenly seemed to have such a direct and threatening relationship to our lives” (109). Her actions began in earnest then, and at first were very intense. As her activism became integrated into her life, her understanding deepened: “Now I see a deeper and more imperative relationship between civil rights and the arms race — and hunger in undeveloped countries and problems of world peace” (109). As she made these connections, her “personal” life thrived. She began to notice that her activities had not only “alleviated unpleasant feelings about nuclear arms,” but had also “enhanced her self-esteem and reduced her self-doubts” (109).

Power is like a verb: It happens through us — Macy 1983, 33

“The planet is not happy,” says Bill McKibben in speaking of “The End of Nature” as we have known it (1989). We have viewed nature as composed of separate, independent parts, available for our domination, needing our “stewardship.” We are now learning, painfully, that all of nature is interconnected and interdependent. The world view from which the notion of the connected, ecological self emerges, “suggests that instead of just giving better orders, we learn to give fewer and fewer orders” (McKibben 1989, 101), and instead to reintegrate ourselves into the natural world. The planet needs each of us to awaken to its plight, to find our particular and unique contribution to its well-being.

Although the situation is desperate, the process of awakening to it and finding one’s response is just what we all need to empower our lives. We all have an opportunity to “protest and thrive.” Development, and particularly moral development, is “not a matter of increasing differentiation alone, but of increasing relationship to the world” (Kegan 1982, 68), a relationship that includes “the importance throughout life of the connection between self and other, the universality of the need for compassion and care” (Gilligan 1982, 98). An increasing responsiveness to global threats, at whatever stage of development, is part of the experience of enlarging the relational context. To borrow a phrase from developmental theorists, we “hatch out” of one relational context into a more complex one as we grow. Having some sense of our relationships within and to the whole global situation at each stage of development can provide a much expanded context for growth. In other words, global responsibility has the potential for hatching us out of a small relational context into a larger one and so can be good for our psychological health. Ann’s emotional responsiveness to the problems of garbage was her contribution at that moment. She was in touch with the problems in ways others were not. What if she could have used that emotional responsiveness as a launching pad for action? Perhaps she would have been able to question the numbing life in which she was stuck.

For each of us the route to empowerment may be hidden in the very personal ways we feel the impact of the world, the very pain we see as a barrier to our active involvement in the world. What would happen if we were able to recontextualize our personal pain in a global context? For example, for victims of sexual abuse we know that the first step in the healing process is becoming aware of and naming the abuse. This has been happening during the last ten years at a cultural as well as an individual level, so individuals can learn that they are part of a process that is happening in the larger system. We know that

healing is much enhanced when accomplished in a group with other survivors. The individual pain is recontextualized in these groups and is no longer individual pain, but shared group pain. And as sexual and physical abuse are named more and more in the media, the group pain becomes cultural pain. With a broadened and deepened sense of self, our identification can grow for all human abuse victims to all beings who have been abused by our treatment of them as objects for human use, and finally to the abused and polluted earth itself. Seen this way, healing from personal abuse naturally involves participation in healing the world as a whole.

My experience with empowerment in a global context began when my oldest daughter reached school age. When I first walked through the halls of her elementary school, I had the strange sensation of being much too big for the surroundings. The last time I had been in such a setting, I realized, I had been small enough to fit under a desk during air raid drills.

When I reawakened to the possibility of nuclear annihilation, I felt a more profound terror than I had ever imagined possible. My daughter's entry at school meant that she might be somewhere else when "it" happened, a possibility I found intolerable. When I learned even more about the implications of nuclear war, I became even more terrified. I had a powerful image of the large brick police station several blocks from my house crumbling into ashes once the bomb hit.

It was as if I had suddenly hatched out of my small world into a larger one that threatened to disappear at any moment, and my feathers were still wet! Luckily I had become involved in a project related to the nuclear threat, a project that required a lot of work and responsibility on my part. My terror became transformed into enormous energy as I worked with others on a project that would help bring nuclear awareness to my city. It was as if the terror became the energy of the project moving through me, no longer mine alone. Others have proposed that the hatching-out process of psychological development is accompanied by anxiety commensurate with the degree of change taking place (see Kegan 1982). I felt like the living proof of the theory.

For me, love of my children was an initial source of energy for this hatching-out process. Another source for many is anger. We need to reconnect with our power to express outrage as part of caring. Anger, controversial and discouraged as it may be in women, is a sign that something is wrong and needs changing. Women's anger can provide the motivation and the mobilization for action (Miller 1983; Bernardez 1988).

Many of the prepatriarchal goddesses, those who were the focus of society in times that were not characterized by dominating, power-over social relations, combined love and rage in their exercise of power (see Nicholson 1989). My favorite is Inanna, ancient Sumerian queen of heaven and earth (Wolkstein 1983). She was a pleasant, loving goddess until she decided that she needed to visit the Underworld, which was ruled by her sister, Erishkegal. To make this visit, Inanna was required by Erishkegal to disrobe and bow down, to become completely vulnerable. Although Inanna did as required, Erishkegal had her killed anyway, and then hung her corpse on a hook in the Underworld. But Inanna had prepared for such an eventuality, and a trusted woman companion back on Earth arranged for her to be rescued. The rescue took place through a creative strategy that involved empathizing completely with Erishkegal, who was mourning the loss of her husband. When Inanna was released from that Underworld hook, she had a power born of the ability to be outraged at what was wrong on Earth, a power born of familiarity with what is dark within us and among us. The power of outrage joined with the power of love in Inanna, and she became a great ruler.

In order for women to reclaim power based on our relational abilities, we will need to move through a variety of powerful emotions. Much of the “burnout” that occurs both in the public sector and in social change organizations occurs because there is no acknowledgment of the powerful emotions involved in living as part of a threatened world and working to save it. Indeed, one of the central barriers to constructive initiatives for social change is the taboo on public expression or even acknowledgment of these emotions. Breaking through the taboo and harnessing the power of our emotional connections is essential work to be done in the public sphere.

At an organizational level, for example, if a social change agency focuses only on awareness of a problem or on an abstract understanding of the greater context of the problem, and acts without direct experience, an important part of the picture will be missing. If such an organization is involved in inner city development, and never spends time in the inner city, emotionally experiencing what it is like to live and work there and hearing from the people who live there what a proposed project’s impact is likely to be, then whatever action is taken runs the risk of being irrelevant or even damaging. Ultimately, without direct, emotional experience, one’s awareness and understanding of the problem will also suffer. The organization in this example is likely to become inward focused and increasingly irrelevant to the problem it formed to address.

I have emphasized the importance of direct experience and emotional responsiveness because these are generally underemphasized by individuals and groups working to make a difference in the world.

Society as a whole becomes truncated when the mind is glorified at the expense of feeling; when activity alone is honorable; when the rational denies the existence of the irrational; and where the will of man is imposed on all nature. Such distortions eventually produce a host of problems, not only on a personal level, but on a global level; aggressive national policies which could lead to nuclear destruction; devaluation of nature or ecology which results in the starving of billions and the possible destruction of the atmosphere; the breakdown of the family and the absence of intimacy which leads to anxiety and sensationalism; and the mechanization of life and vain intellectualizing uninformed by wisdom and a caring for the human condition (Engelsman 1989).

If, as the new science is teaching us, power happens through us, then the medium for this kind of power is our emotions.

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## **Global Responsibility and Women’s Empowerment**

Women have traditionally been responsible for the care and maintenance of human connection. Their capacity for mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships develops from and contributes to this responsibility. As we have seen, “women’s sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships” (Miller 1976, 83). Women are needed now to honor their relational tendencies and capacities by acting powerfully to reshape our social institutions to serve the cause of global survival.

Power in the context of the connected self requires vulnerability, openness to feedback, flexibility, and readiness to change. Closed systems that do not let in information about what is not working are weak and liable to fail. Women’s relational experience, associated as it has been with the experience of oppression and subordinate status, provides us with a

unique position from which to assess and evaluate our past behavior as humans and our present condition on this planet. We are in a position to *know* that all is not well.

However, revisioning our power so radically is not easy in a world that rewards other kinds of power. We must be prepared not only to initiate conflict, but also to participate to its completion. But for women especially, the lessons we need to learn for our own individual psychological health — lessons about turning conflict situations into opportunities, lessons about fighting with tenacity, sophistication, and grace — are precisely the lessons we need to learn to make our fullest contribution to global survival.

If we remain focused only on *direct experience* — even powerful emotions, important as they are — we will be ineffective. To adapt to changing conditions we must perceive feedback about the effectiveness of our past behavior and be open to new information about present conditions. We must understand and be able to act on this feedback. Without connecting our pain for the world with action that contributes to its alleviation, we may become stuck in rage, depression, or crippling anxiety, as Ann seemed to be and I might have been if I had not had others to work with and a project to complete. But action that arises from direct experience will itself remain shallow and ineffective unless connected to continuously growing awareness of the present manifestations of the world's pain in our vicinity, and to an understanding of ways in which those manifestations are related to other aspects of global pain elsewhere in the world.

With all we are learning about the nature of systems, the challenge is to develop policies that are based on and support the connected self I have been describing. We have been looking at power that involves fitting in with the whole, not by suppressing the self, but by learning to participate in an active creative process of fitting together with others. Miller (1976) describes this as a process of empowering oneself through empowering others: “Both parties approach the interaction with different intents and goals, and each will be forced to change her/his intent and goals as a result of the interaction.” If the process is working well, “each party should perceive more, and want *more* as a result of each engagement and have more resources with which to act” (129). In the context of a world view that emphasizes the interconnected self, the process of policymaking is as important as the content of the problem being addressed. Each of us has a unique perspective of the world and of the problems in it. The most effective policies are those which allow each of us to bring our perspective to the problems that touch our lives most directly.

None of this can happen if we remain trapped in a world view that emphasizes the autonomous, separate self and the isolated, self-contained individual. Global problems have provided us with the impetus to recognize our interconnectedness and interdependence. New scientific discoveries as well as feminist scholarship offer us the opportunity to bring our emotional power into our awareness and our understanding of global problems, to develop actions that are mutually empowering to us and to the planet. 🌱

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*If we cannot do great things, we can do small things in a great way.*

— Melnea Cass