

Be Honest: How Much Does a Changed Life Change the World?

By Todd Battenfield Wynward, class of '89

WOULD ANY SANE PERSON think dumpster diving would have stopped Hitler, or that composting would have ended slavery?

That's the provocative question Derrick Jensen asked in his 2009 article "Forget Shorter Showers" [Orion magazine, June/July issue]. And five years later, it's a question that still inhabits my soul. My family and I have changed much in the last six years, living a life of greater sustainability and watershed citizenship. We live in a yurt, use a composting toilet, heat with local wood, eat locally, grow significant food, milk goats, live in community, drive a Prius, take less showers, and skimp on non-necessities.

But Jensen's article made me pause: how globally effective is personal lifestyle change? Is it enough to follow the words of Gandhi, and strive to *be* the change I want to see in the world, hoping that change will somehow spread beyond me?

Derrick Jensen says no.

I've wrestled with this question before, but Jensen made me look at it again, hard. In "Forget Shorter Showers," he powerfully argues that personal lifestyle changes—dramatic as they may be for individuals—do almost nothing to forward the massive systemic change needed today:

An Inconvenient Truth helped raise consciousness about global warming. But did you notice that all of the solutions presented had to do with personal consumption—changing light bulbs, inflating tires, driving half as much—and had nothing to do with shifting power away from corporations, or stopping the growth economy that is destroying the planet? Even if every person in the United States did everything the movie suggested, U.S. carbon emissions would fall by only 22 percent. Scientific consensus is that emissions must be reduced by at least 75 percent worldwide.

Jensen includes a sobering statement by Kirkpatrick Sale: "The vast majority [of energy use] is commercial, industrial, corporate, by agribusiness and government. So, even if we all took up cycling and wood stoves it would have a negligible impact on energy use, global warming and atmospheric pollution." Jensen's point becomes painfully clear: take a shorter shower if you want, but don't pretend it's a powerful political act, or that it's deeply revolutionary. Remember: Personal change doesn't cause social change.

Or does it? After wrestling with Jensen's argument, I remain convinced that personal change *can* cause social change. It's often the necessary catalyst that leads us to it. Jensen states that organized political resistance is necessary to confront and dismantle corporate and industrial power. No doubt. But Jensen doesn't ask the real question: what *kind* of organized political resistance is necessary? He seems to think there's only one kind of organized political action, the kind that is essentially an externalized re-action: citizens opposing injustice by demanding that our government or corporations do something, putting legally-binding limits on

faceless institutions already damaging our planet. This kind of external activism is designed to *get our government or a corporation to improve*, even as our own lifestyles may stay unchanged. Examples of this might be demands that our government forces extractive petroleum corporations to stop fracking, or require industrial food producers to follow healthier practices.

I'm certain, with Jensen, this kind of organized political resistance is necessary for social change. But, unlike Jensen, I'm certain that an *equally necessary form of organized political resistance rises from a groundswell of collective lifestyle change*. Remember that the root of politics is *polis*--people, not politicians or laws--and that organizing culturally-defiant, lifestyle-changing parallel societies has been the *modus operandi* of such movement leaders as Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi, Vaclav Havel, Francis of Assisi and Jesus of Nazareth.

Joanna Macy has a term to define the massive cultural change needed today: the Great Turning. It's already underway. Macy articulates three dimensions of the Great Turning, each mutually reinforcing and equally necessary:

Dimension #1: 'Holding actions' that slow damage to Earth and its beings. 'Holding actions' encompass a great variety of pragmatic endeavors: legal measures like regulations, legislation, political actions, and lawsuits; as well as direct actions such as boycotts and blockades, protesting, publicizing, organizing, whistle-blowing and civil disobedience. These holding actions seem to be the "organized political resistance" Derrick Jensen urges: immediate efforts to curtail the most damaging aspects of industrial society. But while Jensen suggests holding actions be our sole focus, Macy sees them as a crucial stop-gap, providing time to do the other work of the Great Turning: envisioning and implementing a life-sustaining society.

Dimension #2: Analysis of structural causes of destruction and creation of alternative institutions. We must examine the dynamics of the industrial growth society, comprehend how its seductive and destructive mechanisms work, and then create alternative social institutions. Macy states that countless individuals involved in the Great Turning are already crafting new life-sustaining structures and practices in all our major cultural establishments: economies, food and energy systems, government, religion, parenting and education.

Dimension #3: Fundamental shifts in personal worldview, values and practice. Macy asserts this dimension is the most basic, as the courageous resistance and creative new alternatives needed for the Great Turning cannot take root and flourish without deeply ingrained values and spirituality to sustain them.

The Great Turning needed today is not just about urgent political protest; it is equally about *organizing a groundswell of collective lifestyle change* through new worldviews, transformative practices and alternative structures. And so, Derrick Jensen, I am here to tell you that I won't forget shorter showers. I won't forget composting toilets and buying less plastic. These actions are not just personal; when organized and disciplined, they become deeply political, and can be revolutionary.

How? Derrick Jensen tells us that wasteful "corporations and industry" are the chief culprits of climate devastation, and that personal changes in consumption won't matter. In doing so he glosses over an essential truth: an industry's degree of destructiveness—is utterly dependent upon millions of us buying its stuff. When organizations and individuals make independent

choices and stop buying, then industries stop producing, and when they stop producing, they stop polluting.

The bottom line is what Gandhi taught us all along: even in the face of Empire, you still control your choices. Personal lifestyle becomes politically potent when shared, spread and organized.

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