

CHAPTER SEVEN:

ANN HOWARD

ECO-FEMINISM AND SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM: AN EXAMPLE

Ann is an artist, a networker, and a political activist. She identifies herself as a "humanist, an ecologist, and a feminist." She currently works as a fundraiser for an Educational Film and Video Project, and she coordinates workshops in the area of citizen diplomacy, peace making and planetary consciousness.

I sat across from Ann at a large wooden dining table in her apartment on California St. in San Francisco. The whole setting seemed very earthy to me. There were ceramic cups on the wooden table, which she told me she had made herself, and there were two cats looking very much at home. I recorded our conversation and decided to simply let her speak for herself.

I was always a new consciousness person--ever since I can remember. As a child, I had this force in me which would drive me toward learning. I was hungry for a kind of questioning and learning and wanted to know answers. My transformation has always been going on, from the earliest times I can recall when I was a child. And I've been seeking it ever since. Sometimes it was a little slower, sometimes a little faster. I think that's the natural ebb and flow, the way that nature works.

I am 38 years old, the youngest of seven brothers and sisters. I was born in the coal fields of West Virginia, in a very rural area. My father was a teacher, and education was highly stressed in their home. My mom was very tolerant. That was the model that I followed. I didn't know there was anything other than to be tolerant and accept. I loved that because I had a great admiration for diversity. I'm an artist--My professional training has been in art, and I've been teaching art for 11 years. I've been teaching

drawing, printmaking, photography, design--anything two dimensional and colorful--which gives me great pleasure. I have had such an appreciation of cultures of all kinds through their art. My own creative process was the way I had now to communicate with people who lived a long time ago.

As a family, we were totally self supportive, growing all the food we ate, canning food every summer for at least two winters in case they would have a failed crop. This would happen occasionally, so we learned to respect the weather. My parents were members of the Church of Christ and of strong fundamentalist leanings. They were the kind of people who lived by example. I knew I had to do certain things, but they never had to demand anything because I was always so willing to please. That's a good thing and also not such a good thing sometimes. So I've lived my life seeking to be a kind of perfectionist. And I am now trying to figure out what is useful, value-wise and health-wise, for me. I am working on this for years. And even though the precipitating cause happened three and a half years ago, I was born into it.

I'd really like to talk about that in terms of being a woman and trying to be perfect--trying to do everything and to please other people and to help other people's lives go smoothly. This is a great place of compassion for one to live one's life. But also I think it helped me to deny a lot of the needs that I had--that I didn't even know I had. I had as models parents who were completely giving parents. They lived their lives to help those who didn't have as much as they had. And they didn't have anything except nature themselves. So sometimes being poor in the economic structure can help one to realize that we can be very rich in other ways.

I spent first seventeen years of my life in the mountains, in the wilderness. I spent a lot of time hiking around, around the mountains and pine trees. In doing so I became very much in touch with nature and very understanding of cycles and seasons. Quite isolated from many people, nature nurtured me from a very early age, and that has

been a steady source of strength through all the movement and transformation I have made in my life.

As a child I started asking existential questions. I wasn't getting answers from the people I knew but I knew that one day I would get the opportunity. Now I live in San Francisco and it's a place that welcomes that kind of opportunity. I always needed to do things with my hands, and I made all my own toys and, from an early age, my own clothing. From a very early age I was drawn to art, colors, drawing, beauty. I would draw on the rocks, I had no paper. We lived on a dirt road, way up in a hollow. In the summertime, once a year, this big yellow Caterpillar scraper would come through and scrape off the road causing these incredible dust storms, and exposing the most incredible cross-sections of stone I've ever seen. So I would proceed to find colorful stones and draw on other stones. I was always most interested in the creation process-- of how it is we express the internal energy without the impediment of other people telling us what to do. And that has been a lifelong struggle of mine and is still a struggle. I accept that struggle and I hope that I'm constantly renewing myself in a creative process in my life as an artist, as a peace activist, a social activist, as an eco-feminist.

I left West Virginia to go to College, to study art, psychology, and all kinds of history and things that interested me about the world. Upon graduation from College, I got married. My own and my husband's career paralleled each other as we had gone through Carnegie Melon University, and to Harvard. All during this time, I was teaching art in colleges, while my husband was doing his post-doc at Johns Hopkins.

I taught art for 11 years, mostly to students, and at practically all levels from little children through college age to adults. In the process, I encountered an educational system that was not very accepting of the creative nature and which, in my opinion, has lagged behind all the other social changes that have happened. Educational structures are set up to continue the way things have always been done before. There is a great fear of change, especially in education, and a great deal of energy is put forth in this nation to

help children conform to a particular idea, a way of being. It is rare in schools that students have an opportunity to feel that they might have something to express to the world and that they themselves are important just because they are who they are. I myself had to struggle through an economically depressed period when I was growing up through my whole educational process. And even though I was a very bright kid, there was always this underlying inferiority complex, which still exists, which I still have to fight every day of my life.

Why was it that I had to spend so much energy getting through this when I already am all right?. I'm a human being. I am a person, I live, therefore I become part of a society, part of a culture. I understand my life, I am a master of my life--more so than any other person is, was, or will be. That alone gives me a definitiveness to take a stand in the world. I'm afraid our educational process is not one that stimulates this because this is looked upon as being radical. It's looked upon as troublemaking--it's making waves. Even in teaching art, I found I was told what to teach and I had to teach it in a certain way. I thought this is not art. These kids don't want to do this. They want me to baby-sit these children. So, I went to graduate school, in order to have more impact on the educational system. It was a great experience, and since then I am always studying something or other.

In 1984 my husband and I moved to San Francisco. Suddenly, I found out that my marriage, which for 14 years had been the center and anchor of my life, had been based on a terrible deception. My belief system was totally shattered. I started to question everything I held inside--my identity, my real needs, my sense of reality, my own power. So all the time I've lived in San Francisco, it has been an upside down world for me--trying to move through all of the periods that a person moves through. And I think all of us go through things like this in our lives where all of a sudden the whole foundation of the world we live in is totally shattered.

I always thought feminism was something that didn't apply to me. Because I absolutely swore to myself that I would never let myself be discriminated against, because I happened to be a woman. Aren't people human beings first and then we just happen to be the sex that we are?. Well when this happened in my marriage, I began to wonder about men, and I became very interested in the way men treat women. So I read all the feminist history I could read about what is this that has been going on. I learned how I had lived an illusion myself because I didn't ever feel I had any needs to meet. For all those years I did ninety nine percent of the emotional work in the marriage. I held it together. I created it. It was probably one of the more creative art works I ever made.

I began to question everything. What about all these other things I believe in? . Are those illusions too? What about the way the world is working now?. I began to just try to survive and just watch and look and heal. And I'm healing. Through this struggle and this process, I have come to understand intellectually how it is our world is where it is in terms of how people treat each other. It's not only men treating women, but it's men treating men, women treating women, man and women treating children, children treating parents, people treating nature.

There is an interrelated process that we have inherited from our history. Unless we look at our histories very carefully, we're in danger of repeating the same acts of violence that have preceded us. I quit teaching and I started working full time for the nuclear weapons freeze, canvassing door to door, in the 1984 elections. This was personally perfect for my life was because it I knew and was concerned about nuclear issues from early on. When I was told as a child that I could no longer eat the snow because of fallout, I thought "no more snow ice cream, why can't I eat the snow?, Why can't I drink the milk?" I used to draw pictures of hot red cows when I was a kid because the milk was no good. This was during the tests being done in the 1950s.

For me, political, sociological and ecological evolution is also a personal-transformation evolution. In this sense they are all interconnected. They cannot be

separated from each other. Because the thing that makes us human beings is being integrated into the worlds where we live. So we can't say "my personal transformation is coming along fine, but I'm staying in my house all day, I'm not doing anything, I won't participate." So these linkages are all the same thing. They all feed each other and they all grow. They are all reflections on each other. And as we grow, personally and spiritually, we show that in the world where we live. As the world grows and shows how our spirituality is being expressed then we're on to another deeper level. It's this constant giving and flowing of the energy back and forth and expressing ourselves.

Since I have chosen to be peacemaker rather than a violence maker, I've come to watch peace making groups and how we interact with each other. I network with a lot of different groups such as Green Future, which is a group that relates to other groups, the whole Green movement in this country is a movement which is coming to terms with basic necessities of nature working with human beings and not people fighting nature because we are nature and we depend on it. Sometimes we go around pretending that we own it and we can treat it in any way because we need it. We don't pay attention to it so we pollute our waters, etc., creating all the evils we can think of.

But, there are great potentials, or great forces, in networks of people working around the globe--working to bring about positive social change. We have our own personal growth to work through with each other, so we treat each other with respect instead of competing, and sometimes our own personal growth gets in the way of the work that we need to be doing. But I see that as something that is changing and has helped me to change. I choose not to make my life a nuclear weapon. So I choose to work with these people who also, as I do, choose a different world to live in.

Green Future, the Green political movement in this country, and educational organizations such as the Education Film and Video Project, the Rainforest Action Network, the Cross Cultural Studies Program, and Earth First--this is my family of organizations that I have connections with. One of my roles is to become a facilitator to

help us to understand how we are working for the same things. We need to help each other rather than being isolated from each other. When we get rid of those walls of separation is when we're most successful. When we work together as groups we are the most successful. Our numbers become greater, our personal support of each other becomes stronger so we can become more and do more.

When my marriage broke up I realized that what is important is learning what is important, and I am doing it now, focusing on my own personal health and that of the planet. When you go through an emotional crisis it is not only your mind that is shaken, but your body as well. And I got sick, and I broke bones, and I got scoliosis, I had torn ligaments in my knees, and I got hurt all over. And I was in hospitals, I was so hurt. I could not straighten my spine, and I would just feel the stress and the pain of holding the pain so much. I know that in order to do whatever it is that I need to be doing here I have to be healthy. And that is why right now the health process is one that requires a fine tuning to find out what it is that I need to do in order to be healthy. I incorporate psychological help, physical help, I ski and I run, and I bike and I hike., I do Tai Chi, I keep a very healthy diet and I am connected to people and networks.

In psychotherapy, I started to inquire what was my role in my family pattern. I always thought that they were playing in a theater, and now I am aware that my life also was also played out by rules that were not of my doing, not of my control. And this awareness is the transformation. I am learning about that, and about relationships, about anger and denial, and about grieving over the past and moving through, and understanding history of family, of school, of work institutions, about how these have formed who we are and how sometimes we lose ourselves in that. How this all-being that I am, with the culturization from society and the institutions I have been involved in-- how does that manifest with other people? And that is a reason why I do Tai Chi. I've practiced Tai Chi every day, for almost a year.

I went to a Tai Chi class because of a friend of mine. I had always seen people doing it in the park, and I always thought it looked so lovely. I did not never know much about it except that it is a martial art, and it is graceful and beautiful, and I love to move and I love dance. For all these reasons I loved it.. But Tai Chi is much more than that physical dance that you see on the outside. It is an internal dance as well. And it exists at many different levels of integration between the spiritual self, the physical self, the psychological self. Tai Chi is making me much stronger than I ever thought I could be. It refines those internal structures that hold the very essence of ourselves together--at every level that you want to take that meaning.

I find myself being able to hold slow movements and becoming aware of a lot. It is a very different level of being. It is a moving Zen meditation-- it is a meditation. There is an intent in order to do it. The dance itself focuses the mind in the movements, and it also stimulates all the acupressure-acupuncture points. And the dance itself is made so that in the course of it all of these points in the whole body have been activated. And so when I do it now my hands get warm, after having been cold for years. ...I feel hot and I feel all this heat, all this energy that flows, and I can really feel the flow that it has, coming up and coming down. But Tai Chi is non verbal, and it is really a non-verbal experience. So it is language that is teaching me on a level that is much more subtle than this world that we see and in which we name things. It is a different level of reality. I am also altering my language and how I say things, because as I say these things and think my thoughts, I become them.

Now that I am no longer an angry woman, I have a lot of space that I can use in many other ways--learning how to take care of myself and helping other people to take care of themselves. So I have been dragging a lot of other people into my transformation process. And even though I am helping myself I have this need to share.

I also did Rolfing because I needed reconstruction of the muscles that held my spine together. Food is another area that is transforming. I can talk about food the same

way I can talk about Tai Chi. I ate the food my parents ate, like most children do. Fortunately my parents had a very good diet, because they grew their own food. Along with the process I am cutting out all meat from my diet, eating more and more only raw vegetables.

This transformation, all these reawakenings, I feel like I am being born right along with the end of my marriage. I went to a holistic chiropractor, to try to get the body to function, to survive from one day to the next. She could help with PMS. She got me into a very strict diet for two weeks--raw vegetables and rice--that was it. No meat, no oil, no sugar, no caffeine, no flour. It became a psychological battle, it was hard, yet I was committed to getting healthy. The purpose of that diet was to clean myself from all the foods I was eating so that I could begin to introduce single foods and see what they did to my body. All foods are chemicals and all foods are drugs. I learned how sugar made me feel, and how my heart and pulse would palpitate when I'd take coffee, I learned that I was allergic to flour--So I eat sprouted bread.

The beginning of my transformation was through health, because I was in such a bad shape. It is not fast, it requires commitment and it has been gradual. So you see that all these things are connected: diet, Tai Chi, chiropractic treatments, changing my habits and rituals in life. They are not isolated events from each other. Everything we do in our lives has an effect on every other part. So I can not isolate any one part as a subject, like we do in school, this is biology, this is chemistry, and so on...that is not life. Life is integrated, flowing. I need to go through the grief. And as it leaves me I am left with feelings of joy, love, strength. Part of this transformation is to learn to trust this process and do the things for myself that I know I have to do and that therefore is the best for me, for the others around me, and for the planet. It is all connected, with self esteem work, with trusting and listening, and trying, and learning the truth, and then making conscious decisions based on long term effects, and short term effects.

We used to live in an age in which karma was taken in the sense that the sins of the fathers would affect the generations that followed. But now we live in a time where everything is speeded up so much. So now what we do in the USA ecologically, for example, is that we export DDT to Central American countries who grow bananas and ship them back to us. And they don't test them for DDT residues so we are eating our own pesticide residues. We are killing ourselves as fast as we can. In fact, the state of health of the environment is a direct reflection of the health of the people in that society--which says a lot about how sick our society is--because our environment is very ill. This is why the quality of the food that I eat is very important. This is why I am trying to be as careful as I can to eat foods that are whole, organically grown, complete in the way they grew. So I eat vegetables, beans, and rice, I drink water--I do not eat sugar at all now, and no caffeine. I eat hardly any oil, just in nuts and whole foods, no chicken, every now and then I will have sushi--maybe once every two months.

I am my environment. And taking care of our environment is one of the most crucial things now because our environment is so abused. That someone would not respect and recognize the value of a two thousand year old redwood tree thinking that it would be better in a newspaper than left growing where it is, or that the destruction of the rain forest should occur just so that we can sell hamburgers more cheaply--this is a very short-sighted economic outlook. It is trading the long term for the short-term benefits. Could you believe it? Could you, if you knew it consciously, alleviate one entire species from the earth? The indirectness with which the corporations are treating this "nobody is doing it, it is nobody's fault" or "if you see one redwood tree you see them all"--this is sick.

There are effects that are going to be felt in people's health. they already are! They are just not recognized. The U.S. is one of the most neurotic and alienated places on the face of the earth. And a lot of it has to do with how we treat each other, how we treat the environment. Our weather patterns are changing, our oxygen is being depleted, and

our health is influenced by all this. Nothing really exists in isolation. And the thing is that many people do not recognize this. We're dealing with old institutionalized ideas that everyone is separate and we can all do what we want as individuals. I don't have to divide myself from the redwood tree or the rainforest because I am it, it goes much deeper than the dependency for survival. I think that one of the main reasons why do we have alcohol abuse, drug abuse, TV addiction, and other problems such as these in our society now--like so many murders, whatever--all come from not seeking what each individual really needs. We are seeking what corporate America needs, and corporate America needs to use people, needs to make money. So therefore people get the illusion that in order to be successful they need to do all these things.

For me, it is as if the more still I become the more conscious I become of being drawn, pulled. Being able to feel these things helps me to see how more effectiveness can be brought about in social action because of the interconnectedness of all. This is something over which I have no control anyway, and I do not have to make it happen. It is just a matter of allowing it to happen. Now it is time for me to resume what is important to me--and to resume my professional career in the area of art. My personal problem now is how to make money with my talent and experience and energy--finding a time and place for myself in the world. I'm finding it all the time. I'm constantly finding it and refinding it.

Commentary

I chose to include Ann Howard in this presentation because she is a clear expression and strong example of commitment to personal and social healing. Though neither she nor any of my interviewees could be considered typical individuals within the context of our mainstream society--they are, in fact, all atypical people in our times--Ann Howard is representative of a transformation in consciousness and lifestyle

occurring in our culture. She represents a growing minority population that we may speculate (or hope) will one day be typical in our Western society.

I chose her because she participates in, and speaks to, the whole spectrum of new social-consciousness concerns. She is involved in the personal-growth and human-potential movement in a personal and holistic way--focused on the body and physical well being as well as that of the emotions, mind, and spirit.

After the years of involvement in the current research, Ann's recovery of health by way of some type of "alternative healing"-- when she could not really be helped much by conventional medicine-- does not strike me anymore as extraordinary. I become aware of such healings in the literature in the area of holistic health and healing (of which biofeedback is only an outstanding example), and in my travels to rural Mexico and Indian reservations in the USA. But also, unexpectedly, many of the people I met and interviewed had experienced such healings on themselves or on close acquaintances (from cancer, knee problems, migraine headaches, osteoporosis, cardiovascular illness, and many more¹). Many of them reported that the first-hand experience of their will to heal and their work with some healers had also a powerful transformative impact on their life styles, their belief systems and their sense of "connectedness". Complementarily, many respected "healers" described to me the basic healing mechanisms as *love* and the *will to heal*-- both common to the patient and the healer.

Within the context of Western science and the contrived concepts of conventional medical treatment this may sound simplistic, primitive, possibly bordering on ignorance, obscurantism and superstition. Furthermore, many of the above mentioned healings tend to be routinely labeled within conventional medicine -- a posteriori-- as "misdiagnoses", totally denying the value of alternative methods prevalent in ancient contemporary cultures. Yet, such a superficial view pales in comparison with the depth of the reports of the people that I have encountered and of which holistic medicine is also filled with. In fact, such a narrow perspective seems to be more a reflection of the

restrictive power of the dominant Western scientific paradigm and its imperialistic ethnocentrism. It is at odds with a truly planetary perspective based upon appreciation and tolerance of cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication.

Greg Schelkun, a respected and compassionate "psychic healer" who maintains a very successful practice in the Marin-County city of San Rafael, California, defines his healing work and its role in the contemporary planetary transformation as

... helping a person in the transition to health, from ill health to good health, that can be spiritual, that can be physical, that can be emotional, ... mental. In that process energetically through my hands I am able to help things move and through my heart to make things happen in a person's life. That's basically I think what healing is... is that, you know, is that part or what we identify as that part of a person's life. From ill health to good health. Coming back to a positive, powerful state. A peaceful state.

...

Today more and more people are coming to a sense of their own spirit, and their own connectedness... ah... I think it was the Gnostics the ones who believed in every one having their own personal divine inspiration with God who speaks personally to each individual. I think that that's what it is. Ahh... In the Bible they talk about... in the book of John they talk about... the time will come when they will no longer have to preach the word of God, for it is written in every man's heart. And so I believe we are coming into an age where we are learning how to touch our own hearts. ...There is no spiritualism in Capitalism... America has lost its spiritualism because of formal religions, and, as they became organizations they became more physical, more political than really spiritual, and I think people have a yearning for that which is spirit. A lot what I do is helping them find that spirit within themselves, and that makes them well. It is the access to health and well being.²

Ann integrates her development in the areas of holistic healing with her activism in ecology, racial equality, peace and social justice, and feminism.

The term feminism (not unlike "holism" or even "environmentalism") can now be applied to such a variety of viewpoints and activities that its use needs qualification. Nevertheless, real issues and real solutions require some applicable terminology. The

relatively new terms eco-feminism and the eco-feminist movement could be variously understood (if understood at all). Yet, since the term is around and often used among contemporary activists, I believe it is useful to consider how it may be applied to Ann Howard.

Feminism to Ann (and to me as well) primarily indicates a recognition and respect for those qualities or characteristics of human nature that have been called feminine--particularly the already-established and defined characteristics of unconditional love, caring, and nurturing. Much has been said (particularly among women, no doubt) about our male-dominated society but it may be meaningful to speak of a "masculine society." Ours is a society controlled by a majority of males, but it is also a society controlled by characteristics (such as competition, aggression, and "earned" love and care) that are generally defined as masculine characteristics of human nature--present, to some degree--in perhaps all the population.

"We lived on a dirt road," said Ann, in our interview, "...nature nurtured me from a very early age". She speaks of her struggles and successes with her own health and personal transformation as "the way nature works."

To me, "eco-feminism" ought to indicate an unconditional love that sees no boundary between self and nature. There is a kind of caring, a giving of self that, though commonly symbolized by the feminine or by motherhood, particularly, is a natural human characteristic--also present to some degree, at least potentially, in all the population.

It was apparent to me that ecology to Ann Howard is not simply something "out there," that she sees beyond the illusory separation of self and nature. There is an ecology inside the skin as well as outside the skin--and it is the same ecology.

Ann's life, as she has related it, was both difficult and challenging as well as inspiring and fulfilling. I believe that much of her strength has come from her art--her love of beauty and her talent for expressing it or reflecting it.

Two aspects of Ann's life and work impressed me particularly and appeared to me to be very relevant, though often missing, in the lives and work of activists for peace, justice, and social change: Ann works on her body, seeing her personal physical health as being crucial to her ability to care for others and crucial to all her motives and her effectiveness. Also, Ann is an artist, capable of self expression. This is a capacity missing among many socio-political activists. Ann Howard has demonstrated to me the importance of a sense of creativity. There is a certain confidence and strength I have witnessed in individuals like Ann. They know that they can do much more than object to the way things are. They can create.

¹ For example, Reichian Therapist, Dr. Ed Jackson, from chronic knee problems; Avon Mattison, the founder of *Pathways to Peace*--an outstanding planetary organization that should have been included in this work-- from cancer; Bernhard Mack, German "integral body worker", from chronic spine and joints aches, to the point of occasional catatonic stupor, when he had to be moved by others to be able to change his position in bed; Patricia Ellsberg from cancer ; Greg Schelkun from fifteen years of chronic and debilitating migraine headaches; Anne Arsmtrong from migraine headaches and mental instability; Christina Grof from a host of physical and mental "bizarre" symptomatology; and the list goes on and on.

² I interviewed Greg Schelkun for the first time in 1987. Since then I have maintained a close relationship with him, and I can attest to his integrity as a healer and as a compassionate person. Through an unexpected set of circumstances in 1973 Greg met --and was trained by-- Placido Politayan, a well known Phillipino Faith healer. He now practices what is mentioned in the Bible as "hands-on-healing"--a form of work conducive to the restoration of health by way of an intended realignment of the subtle energies of the body-mind. For a review of his training, see Gerth Chesi's, *Faith Healers in the Philippines*. (Austria.: Perlinger Verlag GesmbH, Brixentaler Strasse 61, 6300 Wörgl, 1981).