

Warriors of Compassion:

Coordinates on the Compass of Compassion-Based Activism

Frank Rogers Jr.

During the contentious elections for marriage equality in California, Leah Rosen moved, with her lesbian partner, to the rural central valley to serve as a temple rabbi. In addition to teaching Torah and leading Shabbat services, she started an LGBTQ advocacy center devoted to education and public witness. One day, as she was leaving the temple, she discovered a pamphlet on her car's windshield held in place by a stone large enough to shatter a plate-glass window. The pamphlet advertised an upcoming rally protesting marriage equality at the town-square intersection. Handwritten on the note were the words, "I dare you to stop us."

Leah knew who did it. The chairman of the caucus protesting marriage equality lived across the street from her. While she and her partner were unloading their moving van, he had gathered his grandchildren from his front yard then staked down placards condemning homosexuality. Every time she left the house, she felt his glare from the shadows within his living room window. The rock on her windshield, however, was the first act of outright intimidation.

As would anyone, Leah's instinctive reactions were outrage and fear. Part of her was furious, damned if she would back down, incensed enough to organize a counter demonstration with blistering placards of her own declaring she could not be bullied. Part of her wanted to crawl away, ignore the threat and just swallow the indignity; after all,

she still lived across from him, and reacting would only encourage him, or escalate his hostilities.

Trained in compassion-based practices of self-restoration and nonviolent social engagement, Leah refrained from acting out of her reactivity. Instead, she cultivated a grounded, contemplative presence and listened to the needs within her impulses. She recognized that she needed to stand strong in her personal identity and political commitments; yet she wanted to stand strong in a way that still invited relationship. She wanted to find a way to befriend her neighbor; to return hate with love and dignity; and perhaps, even, to win him over, not through rage and ridicule, but through empowered compassion.

So she got curious. She asked around and found out that he was a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church, and he had a passion for ministries supporting abused animals. Leah could appreciate that, serving on the board of a local animal shelter herself. She also found out that he had a source of pride, his homemade chili—the best in the central valley to hear him boast—which he showed off every summer at the annual parish festival.

That's when Leah got an idea.

On the day of the rally protesting marriage equality, Leah gathered some friends and staged a chili cook-off in the park across the street. They had music, balloons, booths for children, and a dozen pots of chili, all proceeds going to the local animal shelter. The energy was so contagious, and the chili so enticing, folks mobbed the park, ignoring altogether the handful of protesters at the rally. Before long, the protesters lost their steam

and started packing up to dissemble. Leah took her cue and crossed the street toward them. She walked up to her neighbor, the ringleader, and said to him,

“Excuse me, I understand that you make a mean bowl of chili.”

“The best in the central valley,” he grumbled.

“Great,” Leah replied, “you see, we’re having a chili cook-off across the street, and I wonder if you’d be willing to be our honorary judge.” The man was taken aback. “It’s for a good cause,” Leah encouraged, “all the proceeds are supporting abused animals.” She gestured toward the other protesters. “Bring your friends,” she continued. “Free chili for everyone.”

The man could not resist. Before he knew it, he was across the street tasting chili. After sampling them all, he told Leah that none of them could hold a candle to his own. To which Leah suggested that they do it up right, design a chili cook-off together for the whole town, each of them drawing on their various networks to support it.

And that’s what they did. They organized a veritable festival together, all the profits benefiting the animal shelter. It went so well, Leah suggested that her neighbor serve on the shelter’s board. She offered him rides to the board meetings, which turned into stops for coffee along the way. And to the man’s shock and dismay, after months of her indefatigable friendliness, he found himself actually liking this woman.

A year and a half went by before the gentleman worked up the gumption to ask Leah a personal question. “Tell me,” he fumbled one day over coffee, “how long have you been a lesbian? And how do you really know? I mean, how does it work?”

Leah was curious if he had ever known anyone who was gay or lesbian. It turns out he had. His younger brother was gay, years ago. He came out to his family when he

contracted AIDS, back when AIDS was a death sentence. The young man's family shunned him, as did his church, as did he, the older brother. The young man disappeared on the streets of San Francisco, and died alone.

Leah could see the shame and regret hidden within her friend. Moved, she offered him a gift. "In my tradition," she shared, "we say Kaddish for those who have passed away. It is a way of honoring their memory and hoping they have found the peace that eluded them on Earth. It would be my privilege if I could say Kaddish for your brother. If you want, we can do it together."

The man nodded. And the two of them, a conservative Roman Catholic deacon and a lesbian Jewish rabbi, gathered in a small town temple and honored the memory of a man who had died alone some twenty years earlier.

We are living in turbulent times. Violence and violation seem to permeate our world—shootings in our schools and concert venues, sexual assault in the workplace, abuse in our sacred institutions, the daily indignities suffered by virtue of one's race, gender, orientation, religion, immigration status, or political loyalties. To be sure, such turbulent times can activate all manner of emotions and impulses within us—outrage, fear, disgust, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed to the point of numbness, or powerless before the forces that threaten our hope for the kind of world we yearn to live within.

And in the midst of all the turbulence, both in our world and in our souls, people like Leah Rosen shine as beacons responding to violence and violation with compassion, courage, creativity, and a commitment to personal and social restoration. The Center for Engaged Compassion, where Leah Rosen trained, researches social activism that

responds to conflict and violence with empowered compassion. Its programs integrate compassion-based communication skills, Internal Family Systems theory, restorative justice, conflict transformation, and nonviolent social action with the contemplative resources and practices of the world's spiritual traditions.<sup>1</sup> Its approach can be distilled into twelve core principles that inform and promote a compassion-based social activism.

1. *Violence is an affront to the moral fabric of society.* No one deserves to be abused or violated. No one deserves to be mistreated by virtue of their race or gender, their religion or political party, their income level or sexual orientation. No one deserves to be denied access to the resources on which our lives depend. No one deserves to have their houses of worship, their homes or schools, their night clubs or places of business vandalized or terrorized. Violation is wrong, and should be prevented, confronted, and disrupted. And those victimized by violence should be protected—their healing tended, their dignity restored, and their freedom to flourish secured.

2. *Traditional 'Flight or Fight' responses to violence are self-defeating.* Fleeing—in the form of ignoring violence, tolerating its indignities, dismissing its damage, or staying silent so as not to make it worse—only allows violence to continue unchecked while diminishing our humanity in the process. Fighting—retaliating in kind with either physical violence or emotional violence like shaming, berating, reviling, or ridiculing—only escalates violence, more firmly entrenching an adversary in the truth of their cause and perpetuating the cycle of mutual antagonism. As the famous maxim

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.centerforengagedcompassion.com>. Influential resources include Frank Rogers *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air Books, 2015); Richard Schwartz *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1995); Marshall Rosenberg *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer Press, 2003); Howard Zehr *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (New York, NY: Good Books, 2014).

attributed to Gandhi observes, “A eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, only makes the world blind and toothless.”

*3. Human beings have a core Self-essence within us, which can ground responses to violence that are empowered, wise, and compassionate.* Spiritual traditions recognize a core essence within us, calling it by various names—Buddha nature, imago dei, Christ consciousness, Soul, Atman, the inner ‘I’, the Inner Light. Internal Family Systems, Jungian psychology, and mystics like Thomas Merton call it the true Self, a spiritual core of calm, clarity, courage, and compassion. When grounded in our Self-essence, we have access to bold, creative, strategic, even loving responses to violence and violation that both preserve our own dignity and treat our opponent with nonreactive care and curiosity. Leah Rosen accessed her Self-essence when, after relaxing her instinctive fight-or-flight reactivities, she settled into a space where she could be curious about her neighbor, open to his humanity, and creative and resilient in the ways she engaged him.

*4. Human beings also have interior reactivities, all rooted in positive intentions.* As much as we all have a Self-essence, we also are often hijacked by interior movements—emotions, for example, like anger, disgust, or fear—that dislodge us from that grounded, empowered, compassionate essence. As the Compassion Practice, Internal Family Systems, and Nonviolent Communication reveal, these interior movements are all rooted in positive intentions. Our emotions and impulses are there for a reason. The spiritual invitation when hijacked is not to demonize our reactivities, nor even to try to suppress or manage them; rather, it is to befriend them, to listen to their cry. They are rooted in some essential life need that feels threatened in the moment—perhaps to feel safe, to feel valued, to have agency, to claim dignity. Extreme reactivities are rooted in

deep wounds that ache for healing and care. In fact, our interior reactivities are pitch perfect barometers of what our souls need when confronted by violence. Leah's reactivities alerted her to the deep need to stand strong in her personal identity and her yearning to coexist peacefully with her neighbor.

*5. When we are activated by violence, our spiritual invitation is, first, to take the 'U' turn and tend to our reactivities until we are restored into our grounded Self-essence.* Responding to violation out of fear or rage is not only counter-productive, it disregards and does violence to the cries within our own souls. Turning inward, or taking the 'U' turn, invites us to cultivate a contemplative groundedness that is mindfully aware of our reactivities and listens to the deep needs hidden within them.<sup>2</sup> As Leah Rosen exemplifies, tending to these needs not only dissipates the intensity of our reactivities, it settles us into our Self-essence from which grounded, creative, and constructive responses to violence can be discerned.

*6. Once we are restored to our Self-essence, we can see our adversary with greater clarity.* When we are hijacked by our interior reactivities, we see our opponents through the obscuring lenses of our own fears and indignations. We see them merely as a threat, and we reduce them to one dimensional caricatures—a homophobic redneck, for example—we feel entitled to denigrate. Again, as Leah Rosen illustrates, when we ground ourselves in our Self-essence, we are able to see the other non-reactively, and be curious about them as full human beings. A man who loves animals emerges, with an endearing delight in his own culinary capacities. This opens the possibilities of treating him with kindness, even to the point of befriending him.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'U-turn' has been used in numerous contexts. I first heard it from Richard Schwartz, *You Are the One You've Been Waiting For* (Oak Park, IL: Trailheads Publications, 2008).

*7. Our adversary's offensive behavior is rooted in an interior cry within them aching to be heard.* The behaviors, emotions, and attitudes we find offensive make some sense within our adversary's experience. They are rooted in life-essential needs that feel threatened; fundamental values that feel at risk; primal wounds, impossibly painful, defended to the death but aching to be held. In essence, our adversaries are suffering. Their behavior is their cry fighting to be heard. The cry does not come out directly. It comes out in the form of destructive behavior or offensive attitudes. Hidden underneath, however, is their desperate plea—"I feel threatened; my life feels at stake; I am in pain. Please, someone, hear me." Leah Rosen's neighbor reveals this precisely. His behavior is violating; his homophobic attitudes are revolting. Yet they serve to protect him from a gut-wrenching terror—if he is wrong about homosexuality, his brother would have died alone for nothing. The shame would be unbearable. Better to rid the world, even violently if necessary, of anything that stings that still bleeding wound.

*8. Our adversary's offensive behavior will continue until they feel heard and honored at the level of their deeper cry.* Shaming, ridiculing, attacking, cajoling, even outright debating our opponents only entrenches them more fully in the truth or righteousness of their positions. It reinforces their sense of victimization; it escalates their outrage at being discounted; and it mobilizes their resolve to fight even harder. This makes psychological sense. They are experiencing their deepest fears coming true. Their soul's cry is not being heard. And survival itself is at stake.

*9. Conversely, being heard can relax extreme attitudes and behaviors.* Offensive persons expect to be attacked, hated, feared, or dismissed. They do not expect to be befriended. When we are genuinely interested in them as human beings, seeking to



understand what is at the heart of the matter for them, what is the source of their inflexible commitments, what is at stake within their passions, it has the potential of easing their rigidity. When we are not heard, we get louder. When someone cares enough to listen, we calm down. Curiosity softens defensiveness. We do not need to scream when someone is genuinely listening.

10. *Our adversaries are more than their offensive behaviors; they, too, have a Self-essence.* As much as we might like to believe that offensive people are incapable of goodness, such is not the case. However dimly, a true Self-essence pulsates within them like a pilot light of the soul. When their hardness feels safe enough to relax, they possess capacities of generosity, openness, kindness, and genuine connection. Leah Rosen's neighbor, a vitriolic persecutor of homosexuality, found himself praying alongside a lesbian friend and mourning the death of a dishonored brother.

11. *Compassion toward an adversary is possible without legitimating the violence of their behavior or agreeing with their viewpoints.* Recognizing that an offensive person is still human, and sensing the suffering hidden within their difficult behavior, opens the door for compassion. We can understand why a person has come to believe as they do; we can be moved by the painful circumstances that give rise to their actions. Such compassionate understanding, however, in no way condones nor minimizes violation and abuse. We must oppose violent behavior; educate the unenlightened; sequester the unrepentantly dangerous; safeguard the victimized; and empower the downtrodden. Compassion for the violator simply means that we refuse to dehumanize them in the process. We fight for justice with a backbone of boldness; and we hold our opponents with care.

12. *The goal of compassion-based activism is not simply stopping the offensive behavior, but winning our adversary over into right relationship.* To be sure, activism seeks to curtail violation in all of its forms. Those who harm others—with words, behaviors, or public policies—must be stopped. However, the most effective and enduring transformation comes not from coercing the aggressor into submission. That only breeds a resentment that will smolder until a later eruption. Rather, compassion-based activism seeks to win over the hearts of our adversaries. It invites them, willingly, into right relationship by listening to their deepest concerns, finding points of connection, or simply believing in their humanity when no one else will. Leah Rosen found a way to dissuade a bigot from leaving stones on her windshield and discontinue his anti-gay rallies. She did it by making him a friend. This is our greatest spiritual power—transforming our enemy into a companion. After all, it is hard to demonize a person who holds you in your pain, and cries with you in your grief.

These twelve principles invite a compassion-based activism that fights for justice while loving our opponent. So what does this actually look like in practice? Compassion-based activism cannot be reduced to a list of specific actions. Any action can be done with a spirit of violence and contempt. A chili cook-off could become toxic with disgust, self-righteousness, and in-your-face hostility. Such emotional viciousness, even under the guise of nonviolence, is spiritually violent and mirrors the hatred we seek to resist.

Compassion-based activism, rather, is more defined by a set of qualities that comprise the spirit or energy with which any action can be performed. Instead of a list of actions to implement, then, we really need a compass to point in the direction toward

which we might move. A compass is something we consult when we are lost or disoriented. It helps us get our bearings, the needle pointing due north. For the needle to move freely, the compass must be balanced, its magnetic forces held in an equilibrium. Eight coordinates circumscribe the compass of compassion-based activism, each one held in creative tension with another that must be balanced for the needle directing us to move freely. Taken as a whole, this compass orients us toward what compassion-based activism might look like in any situation of violence or violation.



1. Compassion-based activism embodies *empowered personal dignity*.

James Lawson, a nonviolent activist with Martin Luther King, was leaving a café in the rural south during the civil rights movement when a passing motorcyclist spat into his face then pulled into a parking lot across the street. Rev. Lawson wiped the spit off his face with his handkerchief, walked over to the cyclist, and with dignified nonchalance, asked the cyclist for directions to a nearby town. The nonplussed motorcyclist knew of nothing else to do but give the man directions as if Lawson were his social equal.

Compassion-based activism is not passive before violation. It does not submit to its indignities, minimize its effects, nor retreat in cowering intimidation. Rather, it boldly

stands up for one's personal dignity. It speaks truth to power, refuses to be shamed, and asserts one's worth before those who are dismissive or condescending. As Mahatma Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of noncooperation with everything humiliating."<sup>3</sup>

Sue Monk Kidd embodies this as well. She once popped into a drugstore where her fourteen-year-old daughter worked after school. She paused when she spied her daughter kneeling in the aisle stocking a bottom shelf. As she watched, two men walked up the aisle and stopped behind her daughter. One smirked to the other, "Now that's how I like a woman—on her knees." The other man chuckled as the daughter, hearing it all, dropped her head in humiliation.

Kidd knew, if she walked away in silence, her daughter's spirit could dim, condemning her to the interior posture, like too many women before her, of always being down on her knees before condescending men. Kidd was not going to let that happen.

She walked up to the two men and said, "I have something to say to you and I want you to hear it." The men stopped laughing. "This is my daughter. You may like to see her and other women on their knees, but we don't belong there. *We don't belong there!*"

The two men were dumbstruck. Then one said snidely, "Women." And the two walked away.

That night, back home, the daughter came to her mother's bedroom. "Mama," the daughter said, "about this afternoon in the drugstore. I just wanted to say, thanks."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers* (NY: Fortress Press, 1999) 177.

<sup>4</sup> "That's How I Like to See a Woman" by Sue Monk Kidd—excerpted from *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 7-10. Reprinted in Laura Slattery et. Al. (eds.) *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living* (Oakland, CA: Peace & Bene Press, 2005) 20-21.

Compassion-based activism courageously embodies empowered personal dignity.



2. Empowered personal dignity is held in creative tension with an opposing magnetic force. Compassion-based activism also embodies *love for one's adversary*. In the same way that violence does not transform violence; hate does not transform hate. As King so memorably phrased it, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”<sup>5</sup> Love is the transformative agent that can melt the heart of another. Cesar Chavez also knew this. When writing from jail to the farm-owners exploiting the workers, Chavez underscored that his movement would resist with “every ounce of human endurance and spirit,” yet they would resist not with dehumanizing violence, but with “love and compassion.”<sup>6</sup> With King, he refused not only to shoot his opponents, he refused to hate them. Compassion-based activism recognizes the humanity of the other—they too have known suffering, they too have terrors and are fighting for their lives, they too have capacities for love, generosity and good will. As firmly as compassion-based activism fights for the dignity of the oppressed, it preserves

---

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King *A Gift of Love: Sermons from Strength to Love and Other Preachings* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012) 67.

<sup>6</sup> “Letter from Delano” by Cesar Chavez—excerpted from *Christian Century* (Chicago: April 23, 1969. Reprinted in Laura Slattery et. Al. (eds.) *Engage: Exploring Nonviolent Living* (Oakland, CA: Peace Bene Press, 2005) 127-8.

the dignity of the oppressor as well. It refuses, not only to shoot them, but to humiliate them, denigrate them, dismiss them, hold them with contempt, or gloat over their demise. To paraphrase King again, “Let no one pull you so low as to make you hate them.”<sup>7</sup> Compassion-based activism lives in this tension of standing up for justice while loving our adversary, even when they do not deserve it.



3. A second magnetic force balances the compass orienting compassion-based activism. On the one hand, compassion-based activism embodies a *universal inclusivity*. Spiritually grounded activists recognize that the compassion that inspires and sustains our work extends to all human beings. None are excluded from its embrace. Its loving, restorative energy is offered to the Republican and the Democrat, the peace activist and the NRA member, the terrorist and the terrified, the abuser and the abused. To be sure, we all have inclinations to demonize others as egregiously over the line and hopelessly irredeemable—that gang member is just a cold-blooded thug; that white supremacist is just a hardened bigot; that bully of a leader is just a power-hungry narcissist—then dismiss them as being beyond the reach of civilized behavior. Compassion-based

---

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King *Paul's Letter to American Christians* (Sermon November 4, 1956).

activism extends love to everyone. It embodies a radical inclusivity that refuses to place limits on those whom we will treat with dignity, compassion, and hope for restoration.

For many, this universal reach of activist love is rooted in a cosmic source. As King writes, “Whether we call it an unconscious process, an impersonal Brahman, or a Personal Being of matchless power and infinite love, there is a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.”<sup>8</sup> Engaged Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hahn describe the web of inter-connectedness in which all of us are one, each of us participating in one another’s suffering and joy.<sup>9</sup> Jesus’ nonviolent activism was rooted in a God whose infinite compassion extends to all like the sun that rises on the good and the evil, like the rain that falls on the just and the unjust.<sup>10</sup> However understood and described, compassion-based activism is aligned with a cosmic, universal energy that welcomes all persons into its care. As the bumper sticker succinctly puts it, “God bless the whole world. No exceptions.”



<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther King, “An Experiment in Love,” in James Washington, ed. *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986) 20.

<sup>9</sup> See Sallie Krawcheck King *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Mt. 5: 45. See Frank Rogers *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2016) 51-3.

4. This radical inclusivity is held in tension with another quality. Compassion-based activism also places *firm limits around violation*. As much as compassion-based activism extends love and dignity to all human beings, it does not allow violation to go unchecked. Compassion-based activism protects the vulnerable from abusive behavior, limits harm done by toxic people, draws firm boundaries around those who are dangerous, and sequesters those who are unrepentantly violent and violating. Compassion-based activism invites a radical reconciliation with even the most hardened perpetrator, but it recognizes that reconciliation has conditions. When a violation has occurred, relational restoration requires the offending party to acknowledge the offense, show remorse, make restitution, and commit to a rehabilitation that prevents future offenses. If the person refuses, say an abuser is recalcitrant or a terrorist remains violent, compassion-based activism stands firm. It does what is necessary to safeguard the endangered. And if that entails isolating the perpetrator from the human community, the activist complies and then, though relieved perhaps, grieves at the brutalities they must have endured to have become so calcified. When the Jews were liberated from Egypt, their captors dead in the Red Sea, the angels wanted to celebrate. But God intervened. “The work of my hands are drowning in the sea and you want to sing songs.”<sup>11</sup> God’s grief extends even to the suffering of the enemy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Elizabeth Johnson *She Who Is* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1994) 260.





5. Compassion-based activism is also *grounded in non-reactive presence*. Its responses to violence embody an inner stability even in the midst of challenge, conflict, or attack.

Nick, a friend of mine, once attended a peace vigil. After the invasion of Iraq, in the wake of 9/11, a Quaker group organized a silent witness for peace at a busy local intersection. When Nick, a long-time teacher of contemplative practice, arrived, a gentle elderly woman approached him to share the parameters. Her life-long commitment to Quaker activism nurtured a radiant calm that informed the vigil's design. They gathered to create an oasis of peace within the fever of war. Nothing more. They offered a silent presence of care. Respect and courtesy would be extended to all. But no words were to be uttered. They would embody peace, not debate it. Peace speaks for itself.

She cautioned Nick that this could be difficult—people might gesture, honk their horns, shout out their dissent. Nick assured her that, as a teacher of contemplative practice, he knew how to be silent. He scrawled a sign, *Peace For Our Children* and took his place on the sidewalk.

Within moments, right in front of him, a pick-up truck stopped at a red light. The windows rolled down, talk radio blared from the speakers. The man inside fumed at the

traffic, looked around, saw Nick, and spat out, “Your children would be dead if we lived in Iraq.”

Nick, seasoned contemplative that he is, spat right back, “Your children will be dead if we keep bombing innocent people.”

“Don’t talk about my children!” the man shot back.

“Don’t talk about mine!” Nick rejoined, “I want peace for them all!”

*“I’ll show you peace!”*

*“Show me! I’m right here!”*

A gentle arm wrapped around my friend’s shoulder. The elderly Quaker woman suggested they take a walk. As the light turned green, the truck pulled away. And the peace vigil settled, once more, into silence.

It can happen to us all. Even when well-intentioned, we get hijacked by fury, indignation, or self-righteous dismissiveness. This stands in stark contrast with the civil-rights college students integrating the lunch counters in Nashville. Though assaulted with epithets, burning cigarettes, thrown food, fists, and finally handcuffs, the Black students sat with poise, dignity, and nonviolent presence.<sup>12</sup> Compassion-based activism is non-reactive. We become reactive when we lose our grounding in the truth of what we know. The Black students in Nashville knew their truth—the truth of their dignity, the truth of their cause, the truth of their vision of a Beloved Community where their worth is God-given and their liberation is secured. And they knew it with such a steel spine of inner stability no thuggish brutality could knock them off their center.

---

<sup>12</sup> For footage, see “We Were Warriors,” *A Force More Powerful*, directed by Steve York et. al. (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2000), DVD.



6. This interior groundedness in the spine of one's truth is held in tension with another quality. Compassion-based activism embodies an *openness to the other's truth*. It recognizes that our adversaries are fighting for something that feels life-threatening to them. Their behaviors, passions, and ideologies are rooted in needs that feel essential to them, or sometimes, in suffering out of which their positions were forged. The compassion-based activist seeks to understand, with genuine openness, the truth within an adversary that informs their life posture.

In today's climate of vitriolic political polarization, this may be the most difficult and necessary invitation facing us. We need to cultivate spaces that are genuinely curious about the core concerns, the life experiences, the deep terrors that inform persons who embody positions, not only contrary to ours, but offensive to us. When people feel listened to, extreme positions relax, the heart of the matter can be revealed, and if common ground cannot be found, at least we can offer our adversary the gift of having been heard. Perhaps that will touch the buried pain that festers within their extremism.

Megan Phelps-Roper was literally the poster child for the Westboro Baptist Church. As a child, she held posters viciously condemning homosexuality at the funerals of gays and lesbians. As a young adult, she continued her campaign through social media. She expected people to vilify her in return, which only served to fuel her zeal. One small

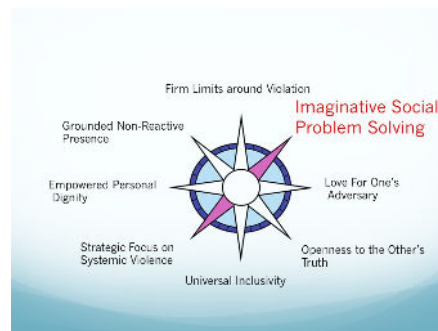
group, however, responded to her differently. They were genuinely curious about her. They asked her about her story, her experience growing up in her community, the concerns and values at the core of her viewpoints. Phelps-Roper grew curious in return. Who were these people who offered her such warmth and interest? She met them, stayed in their home, and, over time, could not reconcile her extreme beliefs with the humanity of the people befriending her. She renounced her virulent views, at the cost of being ostracized by her church and family. Now she writes and speaks about the power of dialogue and empathy when relating to extremists. She knows. Compassion-based activists, authentically open to the truth of her experience, de-radicalized her, and restored her to her humanity.



7. A final magnetic force orients the compass of compassion-based activism. Such activism embodies a *strategic focus on systemic violence*. No one is born a racist, a killer, a misogynist, a fundamentalist extremist. Violence is rooted in and perpetuated by a complex web of forces—family systems, cultural ideologies, institutional discriminations, political disparities, economic injustices, and generational trauma.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> An excellent resource is Maria Cimperman *Social Analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

People engaged in violent behavior are themselves shaped by and enslaved to the social forces that give rise to violence in the first place. As King taught us, the enemy is racism, not the racist; poverty, not the ones robbing houses; terrorism, not the terrorist caught in the vast global forces that give rise to radicalization. Compassion-based activism involves strategic social analysis. It educates itself about the systemic causes of violence in our world. And it seeks both to free those captive to these systems, and to transform the systems themselves.<sup>14</sup>



8. Such rigorous systemic social analysis is balanced by a final quality. Self-led activism practices *imaginative social problem-solving*. So often, acts of violence polarize us into mutually unsatisfying fight-or-flight options. We are attacked, we either attack back or swallow it. A white supremacist demonstration happens in our town, we either stage a counter demonstration escalating the tensions or we suffer it in seething silence. Compassion-based activism does not get boxed in by polarized, binary options. Rather, it is free, creative, imaginative, and playfully innovative. It sees violence as a problem-solving opportunity to brainstorm out-of-the-box possibilities that might defuse tensions,

<sup>14</sup> For her TED talk, see

[https://www.ted.com/talks/megan\\_phelps\\_roper\\_i\\_grew\\_up\\_in\\_the\\_westboro\\_baptist\\_church\\_here\\_s\\_why\\_i\\_left](https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left)

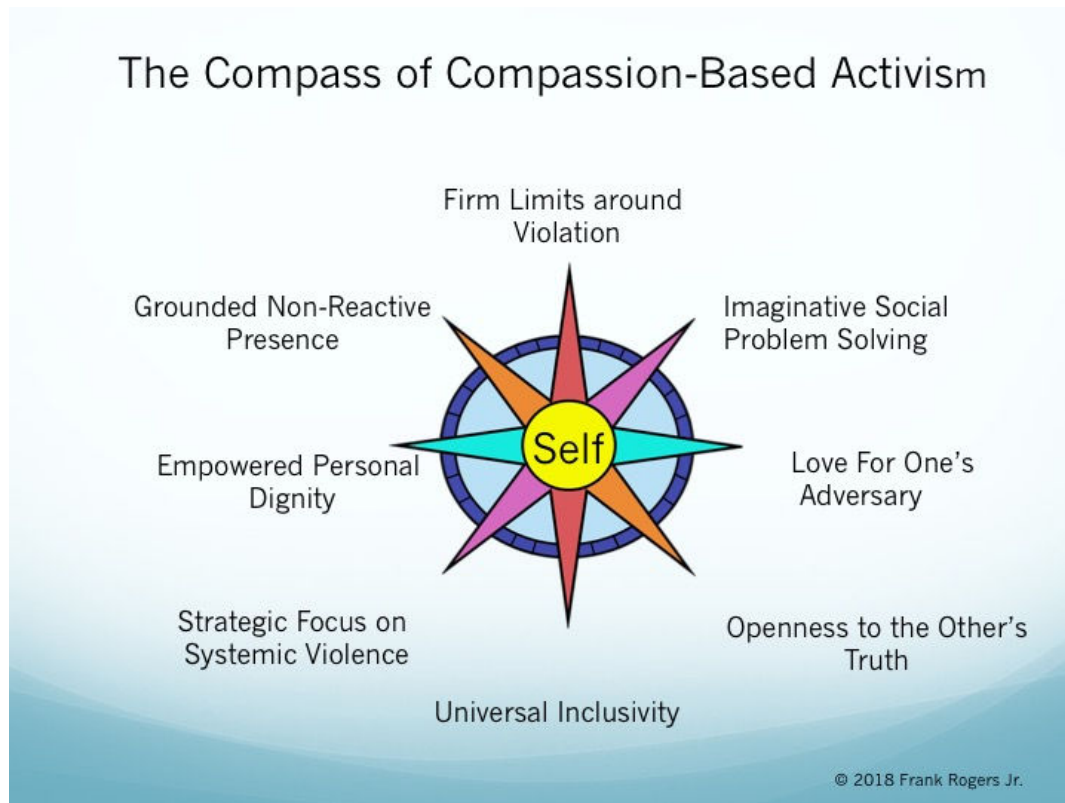
shift the power dynamics, and invite an alternative relationship between the parties involved. Leah Rosen thought out-of-the-box when she conceived of a chili cook-off to benefit abused animals.

The citizens of Wunsiedel, Germany were similarly creative.

Wunsiedel is where the Nazi officer Rudolf Hess was buried. For years, a group of neo-Nazis staged a fascist rally on Hess' birthday marching some two miles from the town-square to Hess' gravesite. The citizens knew that if they prohibited the rally it would only play into the neo-Nazis' image of being victimized, unable even to exercise free speech, inadvertently energizing them all the more. Suffering it in silence was unacceptably excruciating. So they got creative. They turned the rally into a charity walk-a-thon. They gathered pledges from individuals and local businesses—for every meter a neo-Nazi walked, money would be donated to anti-fascist organizations. Suddenly, the dynamics were reversed. The citizens showed up to cheer the marchers on. They painted a starting line and finish line; they had aid stations to keep them going; they filled the route with signs informing the marchers of how much, so far, they had made for the cause and thanking them for their contributions.<sup>15</sup> This is imaginative social problem-solving at its best—creativity that shifts the power dynamics, dissolves the aggressor's momentum, and energizes the victimized.

---

<sup>15</sup> Moises Velasquez-Manoff, "How to Make Fun of Nazis" *New York Times* August 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/opinion/how-to-make-fun-of-nazis.html>.



These eight qualities comprise the coordinates on the compass of compassion-based activism. When we find ourselves in the midst of violence and violation, compassion-based activism invites us to seek that path that courageously embodies empowered personal dignity while extending a compassionate love for our adversary; that aligns with a cosmic universal inclusivity while firmly establishing limits around violation; that is calmly grounded in a truthful non-reactive presence while curiously open to our opponent's truth; and that strategically focuses on systemic violence while creatively engaging in imaginative social problem-solving.

And when we walk that path, we will find ourselves in good company. Leah Rosen, Megan Phelps-Roper, Sue Monk Kidd, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Mahatma Gandhi, James Lawson, along with unnamed peacemakers in segregated

lunchrooms and Nazi birthplaces—these are the people showing us the way of compassion-based activism. They boldly fight violence and injustice, but they do so with weapons of love and grounded dignity, courage and creativity. They are warriors—warriors of compassion creating a world where war itself will one day be no more.