

## CRMS 'WORD' TO YOUR ACTIVISM

*The Colorado Rocky Mountain School is a boarding high school located in Carbondale, Colorado (outside Aspen). As you can imagine, it is beautiful, and in addition to academics the kids participate in rock climbing, skiing, kayaking, etc. Every year, they host a symposium and in 2007 the theme was activism. I was invited to give the keynote talk.*

Breath/breeze-ruach-sources of renewal  
Nothing like mountain breezes—thanks you to the  
Colorado Rocky Mountain School for bringing me here!

On the Jewish calendar, we are in a period of time known as the 'omer.' There are fifty days between the holy day of Passover, which celebrates freedom and the holy day of Shavuot, which celebrates social responsibility. During this period of time we ritually count each day (ex. In my prayers tonight, I will recite the following words-'This is the eleventh day...'). Basically, we are saying, 'being freed from slavery was wonderful, but we were not complete until we received a tradition which included the instructions to building and maintaining a more loving, compassionate and just society. The first of those instructions are commonly known as the 10 commandments, but this is a mistranslation of the Hebrew term which is 'aseret ha-dibrot'-- the '10 words.' (story about legend of the silent aleph-the first letter of the first word, anochi-what were God's instructions? Just that first letter of the first word which is SILENT, so that we have to fill in our interpretations of what is a high and holy way to live) Obviously, each of the 10 is more than one word, so a more accurate contextual translation would be 'The 10 Sayings.'

Therefore, in the spirit of the season, I humbly offer you 10 words or sayings derived from my experience as an activist.

First, 'be aware of self-interest.' My first recollection of activism—5<sup>th</sup> grade Braeside school, protesting because we weren't allowed to go to a Cub's game as promised. Is it really activism at all if success means some material reward for me? (the postscript of the story is that all of us involved in the protest were made to wear a sign around our necks with the words 'bad dragon,' Then we had to each go to a kindergarten class as a negative example. Of course, the kindergarten kids thought it was cool that I was in their class and I read to them, and played with them leaving them with the impression that to be a 'bad dragon' was really a good thing!) Though the anti Vietnam War movement is considered a major activist success, its reputation has been damaged because of the perception that many of the protestors were active not because of moral outrage, but to save themselves from the draft. On the other hand, 'self-interest' isn't always necessarily negative. (Rabbi Grollman at March on Washington-'I never felt so clean). For the rabbi, self-interest was less material than spiritual; his activism allowed him to become a more enlightened human being.

The second saying is that the 'personal often becomes political.' My two children attend a remarkable public elementary school in our neighborhood. The student population there is literally half African-American and half white, and there is a tremendous diversity in terms of socio-economic class. I have fallen head over heels in love with this school!

Traditionally, many upper-middle class families, white and black, have made the decision to either move or choose private school rather than send their children to Flynn Park. Two years ago, my wife and I began to meet with families, in large settings and small to describe our experiences, attempt to debunk irrational fear and prejudices, and passionately explain our belief that the balance in the school lifts everybody higher. We hope we are making a difference. As a direct result of the intimate fact of where my kids go to school, I have become a very public advocate of addressing the racial achievement gap, hiring more African-American teachers, and dismantling systemic racism from the district. Don't be surprised when your own life circumstances guide your activism.

The third word is, 'sometimes you find yourself in the right place at the right time.' (JUU story about advocating for nursing home workers led to discovery that JCA was severely eliminating Medicaid beds...temporarily stopped advocating on behalf of the workers and started to advocate for the residents and their families...numbers at meetings spiked, massive public forums with incredibly touching stories...victory!) Because we were flexible, the reputation of our group grew and we were able to return to the worker's rights piece with more trust, goodwill and support than we had before.

The fourth saying, 'why not me,' I take from one of my heroes Craig Kielberger from Canada. When Craig was 12, he learned about the murder of a Pakistani child named Akbar. Akbar was sold into a life of slave labor, escaped, and became an advocate for other children until his untimely death. Craig decided to take up where Akbar left off, and as a pre-teen himself, tirelessly campaigned to free children. Once, he ended up in Pakistan at the same time as the Canadian Prime Minister, and, humbled by Craig's presence, he derailed the trade pact he had come to sign because it had no language objecting to child slavery. When asked 'why you?' his reply was 'why not me.'

Number five is 'face-to-face.' I had the blessing of working with a group of Washington University students who were campaigning for a living wage for campus workers. They formed a group called the 'Student-Worker Alliance' and took a group of sympathetic clergy and activists from the general community on a tour of campus. I will never forget walking with the students, and they seemed to personally know every worker on campus. Hugs of solidarity were regularly exchanged with janitors, cafeteria workers, and manual laborers. It struck me that these students weren't just activists for some faceless idea of 'the workers' but for people with whom they had formed real relationships. It reminded me of the young volunteers at the soup kitchen I ran who developed friendships with the homeless guests and went on to work for universal health care and other issues that impact poor people. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas taught that each face-to-face relationship we develop increases the chance that we will stand up for people who are vulnerable and victims of injustice, even those whose faces we cannot see.

The sixth saying is 'have faith in diverse coalitions.' Our synagogue is part of an urban interfaith and multi-racial coalition. We work together as activists on issues where we have common cause such as affordable housing, the training and hiring of minority workers, and equity in education. Because there are liberal Jewish congregations at the same table as Catholic churches, we don't talk much about abortion. We do our pro-choice work with other allies, and they do pro-life work in the same manner. In this particular organization, the leadership now consists of a catholic priest, a Jewish woman, and a lesbian minister! Just Wednesday night, I participated in a concert put on by this

coalition in which a choir from a gay/lesbian church sang in beautiful harmony with a choir from a socially conservative African-American Baptist church. When we work together, tolerance and acceptance become the rule rather than the exception.

Number seven is 'there is much to learn through the generations.' I will never forget organizing anti-hunger marches with punk-rock junior high students who taught me all about internet activism or the elderly rabbi with whom I was arrested protesting police brutality teaching me the various ways he has learned to alleviate the pain of being handcuffed.

The eighth word is 'self-criticism.' This is in the grand activist tradition of the Hebrew prophets like Amos and Isaiah, who understood that social justice will never be achieved as long as we think we're doing everything right. My congregation, which prides itself on being progressive, inclusive and diverse, decided that there must be more Jews of Color than were attending our services and programs. We had been fighting racism on the outside, but we knew it was time to start an initiative to dismantle racism within. One person of color told us she felt that people avoid sitting next to her at services. Another person told us that he loved Judaism, but there was no music to reflect his cultural context as an African-American. We have since changed our literature, educational materials, prayers and prayer music, and even the artwork we display at our temple in an attempt to reflect embrace of Jews of color and although there is a long way to go, our synagogue is increasingly racially diverse.

The ninth saying is 'hang in there.' This I learned from my mentor, Rabbi Susan Talve, the senior rabbi at our congregation. She has been in St. Louis for 25 years, and in those years has shown up at countless meetings, programs, and actions in the African-American community. Often she is the only white person present. This commitment and perseverance does not go un-noticed. Recently, she became the only Caucasian to receive an annual prestigious award given by the African-American community to a hero of racial justice. This saying also helps to counter-balance the self-interest perception, which is effectively negated when others show up for your cause. Directly as a result of Rabbi Talve 'hanging in there,' when the Jewish community rallies during a crisis involving Israel, the presence of African-American clergy and activists in St. Louis is notable.

Finally, the tenth word, 'don't forget to laugh.' Activism should not dampen your sense of awe in the face of all that is holy, life-affirming and enjoyable about life. One of my heroes, the late Yippie Abbie Hoffman once said that his goal was to make working for social justice as much fun as being in kindergarten. Or, maybe as fun as being a older bad dragon in a kindergarten class!

I leave you with sayings from two of my heroes in the world of 'spiritual activism.' Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. who we've all heard of, and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who maybe you have not yet heard about, were interfaith partners working for justice and peace. They each considered the other a modern day prophet. Dr. King said that 'life's most persistent and urgent question is 'what are you doing for others.' Rabbi Heschel said, 'to be is to stand for.' Thank you very much!