

Staying Fired Up

Antidotes for Activist Burnout

Letty Cottin Pogrebin



Like many progressives, I sometimes delude myself into thinking I know exactly what must be done and how to do it. There's a problem? There's a need? It's simple: We'll just call a meeting, invite the best people, build a coalition, get thinkers to think, writers to write, funders to fund, organizers to organize—and before you know it, the problem will be solved, the need will be fulfilled, and the world will be transformed.

But you and I know that it's not so simple. Inevitably something happens to complicate matters. Someone

throws a monkey-wrench into the proceedings, there's a clash of egos or an ideological schism. The issues get muddied, the opposition gears up, our troops slow down, and *tikkun olam* is postponed another month or year or decade.

Emerson said we are what we think about all day. If that is true, I must be a schizophrenic, because my thoughts on this topic are always swinging like a pendulum between optimism and pessimism. One day I see the *building* blocks for a just and caring society, the next day I fixate on the *stumbling* blocks that obstruct the path to social change. Tonight, I want to focus on just one of those stumbling blocks, activist's battle-fatigue—otherwise known as burnout—because the diminution of our troops so often is what prevents us from moving forward.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin is a founding editor of Ms. magazine and the author of seven books, most recently, Deborah, Golda and Me: Being Female and Jewish in America (Anchor paperback). This article is adapted from a speech presented at the TIKKUN Conference, January 1994, at which the author received TIKKUN's award for healing and repairing the world.

