

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.

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Burnout is the reason people say no when we ask for their time, their name, their labor, or support. Burnout explains why some dip in and out of liberation movements and others have given up on collective action altogether, no longer believing change is possible. Before long one individual after another becomes exhausted or disillusioned, then one group after another shrinks and eventually disbands, and finally, what was a movement dissipates into separate people nursing their separate dreams and disappointments, their energy lost to the liberal community which is only as strong and vibrant as its rank and file.

Burnout comes up all the time in my reader mail and at my lectures. People suffering from political battle fatigue ask questions like, "After twenty-five years of struggle, how do you keep the passion in your politics? How do you protect against cynicism? What keeps you going?"

Or they say: "I feel deeply about—fill in the blank: Bosnia, gay and lesbian rights, Jewish education, fighting racism and anti-Semitism, welfare reform—but moving the issue is such a battle and every minor advance takes so long that I'm ready to give up. I don't have the strength for another round of protests. I'm tired of the infighting. I can't stand explaining the basics over and over again to every new listener. I'm sick of arguing with my friends. I'm tired of being the resident radical or the town trouble-maker. I feel stigmatized. I feel defeated. I feel alone."

People who say such things are neither gratuitous whiners nor martyrs looking for medals. They're just worn out by the hard work of social change. Maybe nobody warned them that the struggle would be this arduous, its fruits so meager, its time lines so protracted. Maybe they are strangers to the dynamics of political change, or the lessons of past social movements or the prospects for a politics of meaning. Maybe they're too impatient, or thin-skinned, or naive. Whatever the explanation, the problem they describe is real, painful, and often ignored by leftists who are too busy trying to move forward to notice how many have dropped out along the way.

In the last couple of decades, several brigades of seasoned activists have come and gone. Just look at the Jewish world. Whatever happened to the folks in Breira, the multitudes who identified with the New Jewish Agenda in its heyday, the crowds who turned up at past Jewish feminist conferences here and in Israel, the Jews who demonstrated against the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, or marched for organized labor, civil rights, women's equality, and gay rights? Where are the stalwart forces who first

supported Women in Black, or The Shalom Center, or Jews for Racial and Economic Justice; the huge audiences that turned up to hear Amos Oz or Alice Shalvi, Avrum Burg or Shulamit Aloni, the thousands who at various times have affiliated with the pro-peace politics of American Jewish Congress, International Center for Peace in the Middle East, New Israel Fund, and Americans for Peace Now?

If all these progressives had banded together and stayed on board for the long haul, our movement would be unstoppable, and instead of dealing with an overflow crowd at Columbia University, TIKKUN would have had to hold this conference in Madison Square Garden.

So I put the problem to you bluntly: Why haven't we retained a critical mass of experienced social justice advocates? And how do we inoculate one another against losing heart and losing hope?

I have no easy answers, only those that have worked for me during a quarter of a century in the movements for women's equality, Jewish feminism, and Middle East peace.

As I see it, there are three major causes of burnout—backlash, backsliding, and backbiting.

What we call backlash, of course, is the invidious, often invisible, countervailing response to any serious effort to challenge the status quo. Our first protection against the pain of backlash is to accept that a reaction from one's adversaries is inevitable. When you disturb the comforts and privileges of the dominant class, you cannot expect them to roll over and play dead. The next step is to decode the particular backlash and analyze how it is taking root and spreading, lest it seem to be a natural or evolutionary socio-political response rather than a well-choreographed crusade by special interests who can be neutralized or offset.

To understand the anatomy of a backlash, read Susan Faludi's book of the same name in which she deconstructs the campaigns of co-optation, defamation, and disinformation that characterized the 1980s war against American women. The book explains how political conservatives, corporate interests, media, and certain strata of American men mobilized against the progress made by women during the 1970s, specifically how these reactionary interests tried to vilify feminists and delegitimize the organized women's movement in order to silence our continuing challenge to male supremacy and patriarchal norms.

But even with an understanding of the machinations of backlash, I've found I need an

