

Chapter 3

FIND YOUR PASSION

Being in service and being involved in something that is greater than you is what makes a person complete and whole.

RITA MORENO, ACTOR, SINGER, DANCER

Brother Utsumi's Story, Part 1

My friend Catherine invited me to a work party at the Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda, a Buddhist temple in Newport, Tennessee. She admired the resident monks and often helped construct the magnificent structure. So, we made the dangerous trip up a remote mountain. I was not sure what to expect, but I learned about the power of a vision.

Why Focus Your Passion?

In *The Lifelong Activist*, author Hillary Rettig says, “Working on too many movements or on too many types of projects means that you will probably have to manage unwieldy amounts of information and people. By focusing, you’ll gain in-depth experience in whatever type of activism you are doing—expertise that will help make you an even more effective activist.”

People who care tend to care about many issues. If you support feminism, you probably care about homelessness, addiction, racism, and the environment. There are many opportunities to serve in ways that bring you joy. But the downside of caring is getting pulled in too many directions. Before you start in activism, take time to find a clear focus.

Focusing your passion has many advantages.

- **Effectiveness:** Activists who specialize tend to be more effective. This results in more impact on your community.
- **Values focus:** With reflection before action, you’ll likely find the place in activism where you can live your values.
- **Joyful activism:** Activism can be challenging, but it can also be satisfying.
- **Engagement:** Activists who focus their passion stay engaged rather than dropping out.
- **Expertise:** With focus, you become an expert for your cause.
- **Balance:** Activism becomes a manageable part of your life. Do activism while still being a partner, parent, and employee.

Your Part in a Movement

In the 2016 book *The Third Reconstruction: Moral Mondays, Fusion Politics, and the Rise of a New Justice Movement*, Reverend Dr. William J. Barber wrote, “You have to know your history, practice the moves of those who have gone before you, and make their music your own. But you haven’t mastered the art until you’ve learned to improvise - to take the wisdom passed down to you and write the next verse of humanity’s collective song.”

At the beginning of movements are people who step up to make change through grassroots activism. A potent force gains momentum over time when they pool their resources, energy, and creativity.

Grassroots activism fosters community and empowerment. Through shared values, activists understand who they are and what they stand for. This common ground results in deep bonds and feelings of trust, well-being, and purpose.

In this way, grassroots activism drives impactful social movements.

An activist is one part of an overall movement. The change you want to make has likely been needed for a long time. And others have been working on this cause, too. But as Rev. Dr. Barber says, “. . . take the wisdom passed down to you and write the next verse of humanity’s collective song.” Find your perfect place in the overall movement. You cannot change everything. Instead, focus on the cause closest to your heart.

For example, you may wish to eradicate mental health discrimination. That’s a worthy goal. But it is also immensely challenging for one person, especially one who is not a full-time activist. So, instead, reflect on your community. Where is discrimination the worst? Who is impacted? A more focused goal might be eradicating mental health discrimination in your place of business.

Millions of people using their unique skills make up a social justice movement. Each activist focusing their passion makes the movement strong.

An Overview of Movements

In the 5-Step Activism Path, you find the cause closest to your heart by reflecting on your ideal life and world. This differs from studying a list of social justice movements and then picking one. Instead, your passion leads you to your place in the movement, the one most dear to you.

But if you’d like to know more about movements, here is an overview.

Overarching Movements

Overarching movements tackle broad issues that straddle many topics. They are a sort of *movement for movements*.

For example, the nonviolence movement championed by Gandhi decries violence in any form. Martin Luther King Jr. followed these tenets when advocating for racial equality. And many other movements, such as peace activism, feminism, and animal activism, call for ending violence.

Another overarching movement is the Economy for the Common Good, which strives for a cooperative world economy that benefits humans, animals, and the planet.

Environmentalism

Environmental activism covers many issues important to protecting our planet. Climate change, conservation, animal rights, veganism, and environmental justice are covered in this category.

Mental Health

Mental health activists focus on getting help for those with a diagnosis and their families and caregivers. One in five adults and one in six youth (aged five to seventeen) will experience mental illness each year. Activism in many forms is needed to eliminate discrimination, increase service options, and offer support and comfort.

Racial Equality

We'll have racial equality when people are treated equitably regardless of their skin color or physical traits. However, we have a long way to go to achieve this goal. Anti-apartheid, Black Lives Matter, and the Indigenous Peoples movements are included in this category.

Consumer Activism

There are opportunities for the betterment of society in how companies create goods and services. The labor and farmworkers movement, Occupy, and fair trade are included in this category.

Health Equality

Our health is a huge part of living a fulfilling life. Activists in the cause of health equality work to make sure everyone gets access to the health care they need. Health equality activists fight for community healthcare, affordable medications, and support for those with debilitating illnesses.

Feminism

Women are still fighting for equal rights. Someday, women will have equal pay, a level playing field, and an environment free of sexism. Pro-choice, reproductive justice, and White Wednesdays (removing head scarves) are examples of feminist movements.

LGBTQIA+ Rights

Rights for LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other sexual orientations or gender identities) cover many issues, including legal and social equality. In addition to equal rights under the law, activists for this cause work toward better societal acceptance.

Disability Activism

Disability activists work for the rights of those needing access to the same resources as abled people. Their goal is to create a world where people with disabilities can live as easily as those without disabilities. Examples include universal design (an approach where structures are accessible to all,) employment opportunities, and a lack of stigma.

Peacebuilding Activism

Peacebuilding activists envision world peace. This category includes anti-war activism, domestic violence, weapons of war, gun control, and anti-bullying.

Deep Engagement vs. Boots-on-the-Ground Support

Once you focus your passion, you build your expertise and use your unique skills to make a difference.

Finding the cause closest to your heart does not mean ignoring other social justice work. It simply means you have a deep engagement with *your* cause. But not deep engagement with *multiple* causes. You'll end up with burnout.

When you find the cause closest to your heart, does that mean you stop caring about other causes? No. Social justice organizations need support from people who take on essential roles (deep engagement) and those willing to mobilize when needed. I call this type of mobilization *boots-on-the-ground support*; voting, protesting, and being an ally are examples. Feel free to engage in boots-on-the-ground support as your time and motivation allow.

Jamarcus' Story

Jamarcus hopes to make a difference for those with disabilities. He sees how they struggle in a world designed for abled people. Disability activism is the cause closest to his heart. Still, he wants to further narrow his passion, perhaps by making the local community park more accessible for wheelchair users. Although he believes narrowing his passion will mean he is more effective and satisfied, he wonders about leaving behind other causes he cares about. As he explores focusing his passion, he realizes he can balance deep engagement with support for other causes he cares about. Sometimes a warm body at a rally can make a difference, and he is glad to help.

How to Find the Cause Closest to Your Heart

To find the cause closest to your heart, take these steps:

1. Visualize your ideal world.
2. Describe your current world.
3. List the gaps between your ideal and current world.

Visualize Your Ideal World

When you reflect on the state of your community, the country, or the world, what do you wish? What does your ideal world look like?

This visioning is essential for identifying the cause closest to your heart. And to help you keep your end goal in mind as you travel your Activism Path.

You get to be the master of the universe. Describe the kind of world you would create. Be clear about the change you wish to see in the world.

One way to think about your ideal world is by using the visioning techniques from Chapter 2. Meditate or use art to imagine your perfect world.

Here are examples of what an ideal world might look like:

Relationships: “People follow a moral code of conduct.”

Education: “Education is valued, well-funded, and free for everyone.”

Government: “Government supports necessary functions.”

Currency: “Currency is worldwide and electronic.”

Employment: “Everyone is able to contribute.”

Nature: “Our Earth’s health is as important as that of humans.”

Religion: “Everyone is free to follow their religion or be free from religion.”

Peace: “Wars are eliminated, and people work together for the common good.”

Trade: “People can easily work and trade anywhere in the world.”

Health: “Everyone has access to excellent physical and mental health care.”

Talia’s Story

Talia describes her ideal world:

My world is peaceful. We know how to relate to one another. There are no borders. Our environment is thriving. We accept differences in each other. Wanting things is rare. We take care of everyone's basic needs. We eat plants instead of animals. Everyone has justice. Universal design means the world works for everyone, abled or disabled.

Your Turn: Your Ideal World

Your Ideal World

Here is your focusing question: What does my ideal world look like? Use the categories below to support your vision.

- Relationships
- Education
- Government
- Currency
- Employment
- Nature
- Religion
- Peace
- Trade
- Health

My Current World

Thinking about an ideal world is lovely, but examining your current world is a step toward finding the cause closest to your heart.

Here are examples of how an activist might describe their current world:

Relationships: “Many people focus on themselves over others.”

Education: “K-12 education is valued in the United States, but college is inaccessible to many.”

Government: “My local government does not consider the needs of everyone in the community.”

Currency: “Currency is stable in my area, but I know that is not true for people in other areas of the world.”

Employment: “Employment opportunities are plentiful, but the pay is not a living wage.”

Nature: “We are not moving fast enough to deal with climate change. My area experiences higher year-round temperatures that impact farms and gardens.”

Religion: “Most people in my area share religious beliefs and want me to be governed based on their religious values.”

Peace: “There is a huge need to eliminate wars and for people to treat others respectfully.”

Trade: “In my town, I have access to most products I need, but they are not always sustainably produced.”

Health: “My state refused Medicaid funding from the government, which leaves many in my community without proper health care. It is also difficult to find mental health care providers.”

Your Turn: Your Current World

Your Current World

Describe your current world. Here is your focusing question: What does my current world look like?

- Relationships
- Education
- Government
- Currency
- Employment
- Nature
- Religion
- Peace
- Trade
- Health

Talia's Story

Talia sees the gaps between her vision of an ideal world and the current world. One is income inequality because it doesn't seem right that there is such a massive gap between the top 1 percent of Americans and the rest of the citizens.

She also sees that we don't appreciate each other's differences, which shows in the mistreatment of those with less power and privilege.

Finally, she worries about the health of the environment.

Your Turn: Comparing Your Ideal and Current Worlds

Comparing Your Ideal and Current Worlds

Now, compare your ideal and current world. Tap into your heart to find the deep passions you can use for change.

Use these focusing questions to analyze the gaps:

- What are you seeing in the world that inspires you and makes you want to act?
- What makes you angry? For example, what news do you avoid because it upsets you?
- What/who do you love that needs help?
- A calling is a longing to address a particular need or problem in the world. Are you drawn toward a particular need or cause?
- Where is change necessary to get to your ideal world? For example, what would need to change if you imagined a perfect world with no weapons?

Narrow Your List

Now, you have a list of areas for your activism. It is likely a long list. If it contains more than five items, narrow it down a bit.

You can do this by focusing on the following:

- Anger
- Love
- Heartbreak
- Callings
- How you made change in the past

What makes you angry?

Review your list of gaps between your ideal and current worlds to determine what makes you most angry.

The Gamaliel facilitators taught me the importance of drawing on anger as a vision source. Although dwelling on anger is uncomfortable, using it to focus your passion pays off during more difficult times in your activism work.

Sofia's Story

Sofia is a new mother who is astonished at the number of diapers her daughter Olivia uses daily. She knows sending these to the landfill is terrible for the environment. She is angry that the hospital starts new parents with disposables, and everyone pushes their use. Sofia decides to change to cloth diapers. It is more work, but she is happy to make this difference. With more awareness of environmental impact, Sofia is careful about products for her baby. When Olivia is older and Sofia has more free time, she wants to make more of a positive difference on the environment. For now, she will use her boots-on-the-ground support to vote for candidates who support the environment, purchase from zero-waste companies, and donate to environmental causes.

Ponder this question: When you think about the gaps between your ideal world and current world, what makes you angry, gives you that feeling in your gut, or disgusts you so much that you must turn away?

What do you love?

Love is a key to the passion you choose for your activism.

Rex's Story

Rex Burkholder got involved in activism in his deteriorated Portland, Oregon, community, eventually serving in government. "Why would ordinary people put on bright orange vests, walk the night streets carrying only flashlights, and confront young men most likely armed with guns? The only answer I can come up with is love." He loved his community and its people, which led to a decades-long focus that transformed his town.

Focus on *what* you love. For example, that might be the beautiful parks in your town. Or the opportunity to participate in elections.

Focus on *who* you love. For example, that might include the kids in your classroom and the people you met on a trip to Guatemala.

Recall your childhood when your imagination was free to go places without having to weigh the expectations of others. What did you love? Can you reawaken that love?

What inspires you and makes you want to act?

What breaks your heart?

Heartbreak is the hard side of love. Consider what gives you that hollow feeling because something hurts so much.

- What breaks your heart?
- What makes you sad?
- What makes you ashamed?

For example, it might break your heart that the lovely people you met in Guatemala must beg for food to have enough to eat. Or you may feel ashamed that your local school system does not support trans bathrooms.

Talia's Story

Talia lists the issues that break her heart:

- Violence and mistreatment toward anyone or anything helpless, such as kids and sexual assault victims
- The impact of global warming on everyone, particularly on countries that didn't cause or don't contribute to the problem

- Lack of financial capability and the effect on the person and their family, particularly women
- Racism, particularly the impact on children

Callings

Author Tara Mohr has a chapter in her book *Playing Big* on your calling and how to recognize it. She defines calling as ". . . a longing to address a particular need or problem in the world." Her definition sums up the idea of activism well.

Here are her ways to recognize a calling:

You feel an unusually vivid pain or frustration around the status quo of a particular issue. You see a powerful vision - vague or clear - about what could be around some aspect of the status quo. That vision keeps coming back into your mind and keeps tugging at your heart. You feel huge resistance. A part of you wants to run in the other direction. You feel a sense of "this work is mine to do" or of having received an assignment to do a particular piece of work in the world.

Parker Palmer, whose beautiful words are at the beginning of Chapter 2, calls this concept *vocation*.

"This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but are nonetheless completing."

Is there anything in your life that affects you this way? Something powerful that draws you even though you feel resistance to it? Pay close attention because it may be a calling.

It is okay if you don't have a calling. You will still find the cause closest to your heart.

Talia's Story

Talia gets angry about these issues:

- Domestic violence and abuse
- Bullying
- Sexual assault
- Exploitation of our Earth

What or who needs Talia's help:

- Families, particularly women, who are struggling financially
- Nature, the planet, the town, and the national parks

Callings

Talia does not believe she has a calling, but she found the process of reflection and visioning valuable for finding themes in her life.

How You Make Change

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Unless you have a momentous change of focus, you tend to behave the same way as you go through life.

Examine the ways you have made change in the past. Your time, talent, and treasure are one way to see how you make change.

- Consider your time—the hours you have spent supporting causes. What activism causes have you helped? Where have you volunteered?
- Consider your talent—the skills you have used to support causes. What talents have you used in activism and volunteering?
- Finally, consider your treasure—where have you directed money to a cause?

You may find you have already focused on particular causes. Or you might be like I was, scattering my time, talent, and treasure everywhere.

Now, look at your political and religious preferences.

- What is your political affiliation? How has it affected your activism or volunteering?
- What are your religious tenets or principles? How have they influenced your activism or volunteering?

Are you still invested in your past choices, or has your visualization practice led you down a different path?

Your Turn: Worksheet: How You Make Change

How You Make Change

The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Without a meaningful change of focus, we tend to use the same practices, patterns, and skills as we navigate our lives.

Identify ways that you've made change in the past in your volunteering, activism, and giving. You may choose to continue to use the same methods, or this reflection may lead you toward different approaches in the future.

Focusing Questions:

- Your Time: What activism causes have you supported? Where have you volunteered?
- Your Talent: What talents have you used in activism and volunteering?
- Your Treasure: Where do you donate money?
- Look at your political background to remind yourself of what may have informed your work in the past. What is your political affiliation? How has that affected your activism or volunteering?
- Look at your religious background to remind yourself of what may have informed your work in the past. What are your religious tenets or principles? How have they affected your volunteering?

Reflect on what you've written. What stands out to you that will inform how you make change in the future?

Parker's Story

Parker is a teenager who identifies as non-binary, someone who does not identify as exclusively a man or a woman. Like most youth who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, they have experienced bullying. But they don't believe they can make a difference. When Parker examines how they made change in the past, they realize they wasted time talking to teachers and school administrators about bullying. School staff can't be everywhere, and bullies are excellent at not getting caught. Parker wants to use his time and talents differently.

Parker is in the school Drama Club and loves all aspects of it: acting, directing, prop making, and even running the spotlight. They decide one way to address school bullying is to create a play that taps into methods bystanders can use to diffuse it. If other students feel more comfortable protecting victims, bullying might decrease.

The play involves scenes of bullying with pauses to get the audience involved. Volunteers come up to the stage, where the actors recreate the scene. The volunteer tries diffusing the situation with the help of the audience.

Parker feels great joy in the entire project because it integrates their talents well. All the hours spent pay off in its success as a play and fewer instances of bullying.

Parker's story is an example of Legislative Theater, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.

Talia's Story

Over the years, Talia ended up doing a lot of hodgepodge volunteer work. She helped build houses with Habitat for Humanity. After her children were born, people roped her into a variety of volunteering, such as chaperoning field trips and becoming the unofficial school nurse. She felt satisfied with these volunteer roles, but she wasn't passionate about them. Still, they held clues to her strengths and interests, as well as less motivating tasks.

Her first long-term, formal volunteer position was as a community mediator for unmarried parents with kids. This work involved encouraging the parents to stay focused on the best interests of the child and helping them reach an agreement they were both happy with rather than letting a judge decide for them. Most of these family situations were ugly, but Talia felt pleased to mediate a settlement that worked for the parents and the children.

Talia always felt uninformed and disconnected from politics because she didn't align to a party. This confused her and resulted in less interest in political issues.

Talia's passions are for vulnerable women, animals, and the environment.

She sees the gaps between her vision of an ideal world and the current world. Her potential activism areas are income inequality, mistreatment of those with less privilege, and global warming.

Brother Utsumi's Story, Part 2

The Great Smoky Mountains Peace Pagoda is the vision of Buddhist Monk Brother Utsumi, who came to the United States from Japan to protest against nuclear weapons and promote peace. Brother Utsumi's passion is abolishing nuclear weapons. One way he chose to do this work was to build a gigantic concrete peace pagoda on a remote Tennessee mountaintop about a two-hour drive from the nuclear facility at Oak Ridge.

Brother Utsumi, Sister Denise, and many volunteers erected the peace pagoda. My friend Catherine and I traveled up the mountain for a fall work party. The final path requires a four-wheel drive, so Sister Denise, sporting concrete-splattered glasses, hauled us up in her truck, dropped us off at the temple, then ran the rest of the way up the hill to continue pouring concrete. All sorts of people contributed to the vision while we were there—a graduate student from Virginia, a Dutch citizen who travels to the US for work parties each year, a transgender woman, a senior citizen, a Presbyterian minister and his daughter, and a Buddhist monk from Massachusetts.

Brother Utsumi's vision of a peace pagoda in a remote area in the Bible Belt shows the power of a big idea for change. He and Sister Denise remind me of the power of dreaming big, having faith in people, and keeping your passion over the long haul.

Your Passion for Change

Now it is time to list three passions to use as you complete the following steps of your Activism Path.

Look for common threads in your visioning. You might see a topic throughout your vision. For example, as a child, you did chores to earn money and donated to the local shelter for the unhoused. Now, you knit scarves and hats for the firefighter's campaign to give to the community. Poverty is a thread in your visioning and a passion.

Your Turn: Identify Your Passions

Identify Your Passions

When you have completed your visioning, use that information to identify passions in your life that may inform your activism choices. Identify three to five activism passions.

There are many ways to do this. Find themes in your work from this and previous chapters. Use assorted color highlighters to highlight issues that appear in your notes. Do you see one color that stands out?

You might consider letting this work sit for a while before analyzing it.