

THE ACTIVIST PARENT

an urgent imperative of our age

by Dr Richard House



Julie McAdie and her children,
Callum and Isobel.

Richard House is a trained Steiner Kindergarten and class teacher, a senior lecturer in psychotherapy and counselling at Roehampton University, London, and a compulsive writer ~ especially for The Mother magazine. E-mail: richardahouse@hotmail.com

I hesitate a bit before daring to write about ‘activist parenting’, as the editor and founder of this wonderful magazine is very probably about the best example of the species I can possibly think of! But in what follows I’ll have a go...

In previous TM articles, I’ve from time to time written about empowerment, and how important it can be in terms of ‘coming into oneself’, and finding the authority and ‘personal power’ (to use Carl Rogers’ term) to stand up for one’s truth, and take a stand against abuses of power wherever we might find them. Mentioning the great theorist of person-centred counselling and humanistic education, Carl Rogers, raises the issue of personal development and self awareness – for the latter surely must go hand in hand with finding one’s authentic authority. There are few things more dangerous than people with great authority but no awareness – that combination can easily shade into authoritarianism and the need to de-power others in order to feel powerful, rather than having the capacity to help others to empower themselves, and celebrate the empowerment of others. The converse is equally unhelpful – i.e. great awareness combined with an inability to take one’s own authority in the world.

‘Personal development’ is a very broad term, which is often allied with the so-called ‘human potential’ movement approach to therapy, which in Britain reached its peak in the 1970s and early 1980s. Such development can take many forms and many paths: some might choose a psychotherapeutic path, others an encounter-

group approach, and others still, a spiritual path – amongst many possibilities. From a so-called ‘psychodynamic’ perspective, one core theme is the importance of becoming aware of one’s ‘stuff’, where the distasteful term ‘stuff’ refers to the emotional pains and abuses to which we’ve all been subject in our different ways, and how these influences might in turn be impeding our capacity for healthy, mature being and relating.

One particular issue that is relevant to the question of activism is the phenomenon of what is often called ‘rebel material’ – more therapy jargon, which refers to when our personal histories have led us to take up a position of congenital rebelliousness to *any* kind of authority. When we come from that place, it might well be that we end up unconsciously *creating* enemies to fight, for example, rather than possessing the mature discernment for telling whether or not there is a just cause with which to engage. Part of a personal growth path will entail getting to know our ‘internal rebel’ well enough to have compassion for that aspect of our psyche, and to be able to choose not to ‘act out’ from it in highly dysfunctional ways. Way back in the 1970s, I had quite a bit of experience of the ultra political left – and if one ever wanted a ‘paradigm case’ of people with unresolved and unowned ‘rebel material’ projecting it all out onto the world and seeing everything as a ‘capitalist conspiracy’ that needed to be struggled against, that was it! Activism can never be effective if it is coming from such an unaware place – and it behoves all of us who aspire to effective activism, to do the necessary ‘inner work’ on these issues, so that they do not unduly distort our belief systems and behaviour. And this also demands a degree of humility, in that if one believes in some notion of an unconscious, then none of us can ever guarantee that we’re not immaturely ‘acting out’ some of our unresolved pain and suffering, at

least to some extent. (It’s also quite possible to be ‘acting out’ in this way *and* at the same time to have a legitimate cause, so there is a great deal of subtlety and discernment needed to tease out and understand the complexities of these issues.)

I thought it was necessary to preface my remarks on what I’m calling ‘the activist parent’ with these cautionary remarks, as *not* to do so would be an abdication of the worldview to which I hold, and my therapeutic experience of both my own development and those of the clients I work with and the colleagues with whom I share group experiences of various kinds. Certainly, once one has set out on a personal development path, some kind of self-sustaining momentum is often triggered, such that it becomes a way of living and an intrinsic part of one’s unfolding life – and I’d even hazard the view that, at its best, that’s how it probably should be.

So what is an ‘activist parent’? I’ve come up with a provisional list of defining features which I would say are necessary conditions to qualify for this description. First, I’d say one has to be *informed*. That is, it’s really important to inform oneself as fully as possible about one’s sphere of activism, with all its nuances and complexities, before committing to the cause. The people we are challenging (who will often be politicians and policy-makers) are often very clever, and certainly not to be underestimated. They will seize upon the slightest factual error we make, blow it up out of all proportion, and quite unfairly use it as a distracting smokescreen to discredit *everything* else we say, no matter how true it might be. So we need to be at least as clever as them, if not cleverer.

I think the 'Open EYE' early childhood campaign (see www.savechildhood.org), which has been written about at length in TM, is a great example of an activist campaign which has not made any strategic or significant factual errors in the six months since it was founded, and it still seems to have government ministers 'hopping about' as the veracity of our challenges become more and more irrefutable. Who knows, one day we may even write up the extraordinary experience of 'Open EYE' and the unofficial 'toxic childhood' campaign, as successful examples of how to 'do' activism that takes on government directly, fearlessly, and effectively.

Secondly, and not unrelated to the above, it's critical to be *healthily sceptical, critically minded and honest*. It can certainly be very tempting to 'spin' every piece of information we come across, to suit our case – and at times this might be appropriate. But it's also a high-risk strategy – not only because it's morally and procedurally dubious, but for the more pragmatic reason that if the opposition is anything like on the ball (and they often will be, with their army of 'bright young thing' civil servants to help them), they will spot the weaknesses, and expose the lacunae of our adopted arguments and positions (unsurprisingly, spin merchants are usually very adept at spotting the spin of others!).

Thirdly, what are the *campaigning tools* that are open to a voluntary group of committed activist parents and citizens? Both the 'toxic childhood' and 'Open EYE' campaigns have found the press, and the media more generally, to be enormously supportive of our message. In part, at least, this might be because we happen to have 'caught a wave' as the general *Zeitgeist* is shifting; but I think it's also a matter of connecting *on a personal level* with journalists as *real, concerned human beings* who share our concerns, and then building a relationship of trust and mutual respect with them. Most, if not all, journalists also just can't resist a good 'exclusive'! So managing this issue ethically and carefully can yield rich dividends: for example, 'Open EYE' got the lead front-page story and lead editorial in Britain's *Times* newspaper last November.

It goes without saying these days that the internet is an amazing resource – both in terms of networking, setting off cascading e-mails, seeking signatories for Open Letters or petitions – and, of course, blogging (for an example of the latter, see http://laura-r.blogspot.com/2008_01_01_archive.html – 'Laura - the life of a non-conformist full-time mother'). Not that there are not dangers in what can often be an addictive and limiting technology – for we are certainly right 'in the



Guy Harding

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belly of the beast', and inhabiting a potentially dissonant position, when we use the tools of technology against the crass *technologism* of 'modernity'. So these are also issues that require discernment, awareness and maturity, lest we get too caught up in the very alienating technologies which we are wishing to challenge.

Next, there is what I like to call Principled Non-compliance. As the great British politician Tony Benn has repeatedly pointed out, there is a long and reputable history of people who have broken the law from a principled and honest place of conscience – and, in many cases, such ethical protest has eventually led to enduring changes in the law of the country in question (the 'Votes for Women' movement in the early part of the 20th century is a 'paradigmatic' and deeply moving example of such success). In the current toxic, even abusive educational climate, for example, I know of parents who have simply refused to allow their children to be subjected to the stress and anxiety of the SATS testing regime, and of parents who have never registered their children with the educational authorities, lest at some stage in the future, the state decides to intrude overbearingly into the home-education milieu. It is common for any political state of *whatever* hue only to allow freedom for as long as it entails no threat to the prevailing power structures, ideological values and material vested interests; but you can be sure that as soon as any movement threatens effectively or decisively to undermine the legitimacy of the state and the 'capitalist status quo', the gloves will come off, and freedom is commonly the first casualty in such circumstances. The history of the freedom-proclaiming United States, to take just one example, is littered with such behaviour over the past half century or so. Finally, *self-help, synergy and community*: there is an extraordinary sense of unifying purpose amongst any group of people sharing a common moral vision or cause – and that alone generates a sustaining momentum and synergy that is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. But in my experience, groups of people working together also inevitably brings up the 'stuff' referred to earlier, with conflict, envies, power-plays and competitiveness often being normal aspects of group functioning. We all therefore have a deep responsibility to do all we can to 'own our stuff' (which will, in turn, often mean painfully facing up to how the way we relate to the group is an unconscious *re-enactment* of the family dynamics in which we suffered as children), so as not to subvert the goals of the campaign through our own intractability in facing what Scott Peck once called 'our *necessary* pains of living'. These disparate notes are just a beginning. I'm sure that the wide global readership of this excellent magazine has all manner of things to add to what I've written here – so why don't you get writing to Veronika's mailbag right away, and let's share 'best practice' with

each other, so that we can help to inform and nurture parent activists across the globe who are truly 'world-class' in their effectiveness in challenging the 'cultural madnesses' against which we are all pitted in our diverse ways.