

## Charles Halpern: Cultivating Wisdom for Justice by Awakin Call Editors

Charlie Halpern is a public interest pioneer and an innovator in legal education. Author of *Making Waves and Riding the Currents: Activism and the Practice of Wisdom*, he has made multiple big waves in the public sector – as the "father" of the public interest law movement, as a social entrepreneur, and as a pioneer in the movement to bring mindfulness to the law and social justice efforts. The outer waves of social transformation that Charlie has supported have been enabled by his inner waves of personal transformation. And those inner waves are supporting him on his latest challenging quests: working for the mindful transformation of the criminal justice system, and preserving our social commitment to core values and practices – such as democratic participation, equality, and respect for marginalized communities. What follows is an edited version of an Awakin Call interview with Charles Halpern, moderated by Alyssa Martin. You can read or listen to the full interview [here](#).

Alyssa: Thank you so much, Birju, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to have this conversation with our guest, Charlie Halpern, today. I'm honored to be here.

As Birju mentioned, our theme today is cultivating wisdom, or developing the inner resources for justice and social transformation. Our guest today exemplifies this theme as his contributions to education, law, and social movements have ultimately been facilitated by his inner work around wisdom and mindfulness. This theme resonates with me personally as learning how to harmonize inner work and outer work is something I've been struggling with in my own life. I believe Charlie will touch upon that today.

As someone who's been tempted by the success trap (giving entitlement to the external over the internal), I've come to learn the importance of learning how to maintain a grounded awareness. It's really inspiring to see someone who's brought that grounded awareness to their public life, and I'm excited to hear more about our speaker's insight into balancing inner work and social advocacy.

Before we get started, I want to say a few things about Charlie Halpern and his remarkable journey, much of which Charlie himself has described in his book, *'Making Waves and Riding the Currents, Activism and the Practice of Wisdom.'* For those who haven't read it, I strongly recommend it. It's an amazing book that gives incredible insight into his personal journey, and the way it intersected with all of his incredible work in the public sphere.

Charlie Halpern started his journey after he graduated from Harvard College and Yale Law

School, after which time he worked as a corporate lawyer at a prestigious law firm in Washington, D.C. During his time there, Charlie had the opportunity to work on a critical case involving the adequate treatment of mentally ill patients. Not only did Charlie's experience have an important social impact on him, but it was also very personally transformative for Charlie, as he was able to make connections with his clients.

His experience working with mentally ill patients really helped Charlie carve out a different path for himself as, shortly after, he and several others started the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP). This law firm was the first of its kind and was dedicated to representing the unrepresented public interests in Washington, D.C., as opposed to the more traditional, well-heeled corporate interests. Although it wasn't entirely obvious how a firm like that would be funded, Charlie and the Board found innovative ways to make their venture work. The Center for Law and Social Policy ended up achieving a number of significant social victories in the areas of environmental rights, corporate governance, rights of the mentally ill, and a number of other public interest areas. As some examples, their work led to the banning of the harmful insecticide, DDT, and to an increase in the accountability of corporate boards.

Charlie continued the work of a social entrepreneur by serving as a founding member and dean of the City University of New York Law School (CUNY), a rather unique law school due to its public interest and curriculum.

As Charlie notes in his book, it was during his challenging time at CUNY that he was exposed to the practice of meditation. For Charlie, meditation really opened up a space for the cultivation of wisdom, which is the heart of our discussion today.

Since then, Charlie has come to see the practice of wisdom as integral to social advocacy, and it has been a very important part of his work since CUNY and CLASP. Charlie served as President and CEO of Nathans Cumming Foundation, where he helped develop a number of grants that integrated support for social advocacy, meditation, and inner work. Charlie also helped create the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, which helps lawyers, journalists, and business people develop the tools to approach their work from a place of mindfulness. More recently, Charlie served as the Director of the Berkeley Initiative for Mindfulness and Law, where he's inspired many students, like me, to align their work with their inner values, and to develop inner resources of the heart and head. Currently, Charlie is working on how to transform the criminal justice system through mindfulness. He's taught mindfulness practices to prosecutors and has organized a conference with leaders in the criminal justice system based on transforming the system through personal transformation. I'm very excited to be here today with Charlie. Thank you very much, Charlie, for joining us.

Charlie: It's really my pleasure Alyssa. I've been a great admirer of Service Space for a long time, and I'm happy to participate in this program.

Alyssa: If it's all right with you, I thought that we could start at the beginning. I was hoping for the initial part of our conversation, you could speak about some of your earlier years. After graduating from Harvard and undergrad at Yale Law, you clerked for a prominent judge on the D.C. Circuit and worked for several years as a successful lawyer at Arnold and Porter. I'm curious what led you to pursue this more "conventional linear path" as you put it in your book, and what led you to turn away from it.

Charlie: My earliest years were spent growing up in Buffalo, NY in a kind of law-saturated environment. My father was a lawyer by training, and a judge and law professor for most of his life. He was someone who had a great concern with law and justice, and believed that the law should operate fairly. He often brought these topics into our dining room conversations, which was a really wonderful background for me.

In addition, I was actually born as World War II was just beginning, and as I look back on it, I was too young to really be conscious of what was going on. But in the post-war years when I was entering a period of consciousness, I became very interested in the fate of the Jews in Europe, and the enormous destruction of WWII altogether. Growing up in a Jewish household, the systematic and serious effort of the German nation to exterminate the Jewish people had an effect, I think, on how I thought and felt at the deepest level. As I look back and try to understand the unusual path I took, I had a feeling this was something very foundational for me. It was submerged, however, for many years by my absorption in the traditional academic exercise of hard, analytic work, and competitive struggle for excellence and achievement. And that was, I would say, the dominant theme in my life in those formative years of high school and college.

My time at Yale Law School moved me more in the direction of social justice concerns, as it was around the same time that the Civil Rights Movement was heating up. Not only were many of my classmates very active in the Civil Rights Movement, but many of my professors were also brilliant and thoughtful participants during that time. They were writing briefs for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and they were evolving new theories about the rights of poor people that could be pursued in court. It was a very heady time for me.

After law school and the clerkship in Washington, D.C., as you said, I went to work in a prestigious corporate law firm that had a reputation for doing a lot of pro bono work, as it's called in the law world. I quickly became interested in that side of the practice, but most of my time was spent doing corporate work, and struggling against federal regulations. I worked there for four years with a growing awareness that this wasn't something I wanted to do with my life. Basically, if you pass through the legal issues, the bottom line was I was helping rich people get richer. There was this one particular experience with a client that really brought ethical issues to the foreground for me, and that was in the representation of the tobacco industry. This was at a time when the evidence was becoming irrefutable that tobacco was connected to cancer and various other health problems, and our job was basically to make sure that information did not become the basis of a federal regulation, or even a ban on cigarette sales. It was pretty clear that I didn't want to be involved in that kind of a business for my whole life, so some friends and I started brainstorming what kind of alternative law practice we might set up. This excellent representation that we were giving to corporate interests, what if we were to bring that kind of representation to groups and individuals who lacked representation? At the time, these were the late 60s, and the field of environmental law had scarcely begun. There were only a handful of cases and no lawyers who were really spending all their time trying to bring their legal skills to bear in protecting the environment. So we decided we would give it a try. We went through a long process and got some foundational support, and obtained some leading lawyers with strong status and credentials to serve as our Board of Trustees. And we went to work.

Alyssa: What I find really intriguing about your story, and especially your earlier years, is that it sounds like your roots played a large role in the important shifts that occurred later in your life. With your family experience, and the social changes that were happening when you were younger, I was wondering if you could speak more about the extent to which some of these earlier seeds were planted for the work you would eventually do in terms of social advocacy and cultivating wisdom.

Charlie: That's an important matter. On the surface I was being groomed in a very, how shall I say, rationalistic, and intellectual environment. And I distinguished between the cultivation of wisdom, and the cultivation of analytic skill and cognitive intelligence. My early years were definitely on the analytic, cognitive side. When I look back and think, well what was planting the seeds of an impulse to do inner work? a couple of things come to mind. One was my experience in nature. I went to a summer camp in northern Ontario for a number of my formative teenage years, and it was there that I got into the practice of taking fairly extensive canoe trips. And what I found were places of peace and stillness. Connecting, as Thoreau or Emerson would suggest, to depths of inner reflection in the context of beautiful and sterling natural spaces. And that was, I think, one important factor for me.

And, actually, I met the woman who would become my wife at that summer camp. We married young and she has been an absolute partner of everything in my life since I was twenty. The fact that she was interested in social transformation and inner exploration was a great gift to me. The fact that we did this together over decades has been an incredible gift.

Alyssa: That sounds wonderful.

Charlie: Yes this has been a real blessing. I couldn't have left my comfortable law firm job to take a leap off into space, and invent a new kind of institution that the legal world had never seen before if I didn't have 100% support and buy in from her. So that was it. There was another thing too. When we started the Center for Law and Social Policy, we thought we were just starting a law firm with a different kind of client, and a different kind of value orientation from a regular law firm. But then it became clear we had an opportunity to reinvent the way we worked together. My colleagues and I, and the support staff, we hired the students we brought in to our program from the beginning. Since the early years of the Center for Law and Social Policy, we always had students coming in. And we tried to create a less hierarchical, more engaged, more committed community. We played together as well as worked together. We tried to engage each other as whole people and not just as brilliant thinking machines, which is basically, as you know Alyssa, the way that law schools tend to engage with their students. We were trying to engage with each other as people, and that paid off because many of the students who passed through our program undertook the kind of public service, public interest, and social justice law careers that we were trying to do in our program. And they've been creative and innovative in their own right.

Alyssa: One of the things I'm hearing, and I find really interesting, is that it sounds like when you transitioned from the law firm to CLASP there was this sense that this new work was going to be more aligned with your values. That this work was going to be

...serving a broader social interest, which made it more meaningful. You also mentioned what a novel experience it was in terms of how you related to people, and dealt with them as whole persons. I was wondering if you could speak more about some of those feelings and emotions you had at CLASP, and whether you were feeling at that time like, "Wow, now I'm so aligned, this is exactly right." If you could also speak to some of your challenges, inner issues, roadblocks and areas of further inner exploration during that time period that would be great.

Charlie: I would say that, overall, it was a very satisfying and exciting time in my life. This was a time of radical innovation in this country, with voices of social justice and interconnection and concern for marginalized people coming forward. We were deeply engaged in that, and, deeply engaged in a way that was unique in my experience because our organization was really supportive of that kind of work. We had our ordinary tensions, things that -- I'll give you an example, something that pushed us in the direction of more involvement. It's not exactly the kind of inner work that I came to value at a later point in my life, but it certainly deepened my understanding of who I was, and what kind of doors could be opened.

There were four of us that started CLASP, and what we all had in common was the fact that we all were white men. It's hard perhaps, for someone of your generation, to see how that could have happened. It would be so unlikely for that to happen in America today. But even as some of the old ways were disappearing in the 1960s, some of them were not. We ended up as four white men pioneering our own group, and the first challenge we received was from the group of women who were doing clerical and secretarial work in our organization because they were all women. And they were women who were talented and had taken this job because they believed in the work that CLASP was doing. That was why they were there. And then they found that, to a very disagreeable extent, we were operating the place vis-a-vis them, the lawyers and support staff, in very much the same hierarchical way that was common in law firms and jobs in more conventional settings that they had held. They resented that, and they undertook to organize and change it. First, they wanted to be more involved in our decision making process, and thought that we should be doing women's rights law -- a very novel field at that time. So we hosted a series of facilitated meetings, some of which were not as skillfully managed as they could have been as I look back. But we were all open to moving this process forward, and out of this process came a number of changes in the way we worked together. These women were more involved in our selection of cases, and they elected one member of the Board of Trustees into the organization. We brought in two women lawyers, both of them recent graduates, to try and develop a women's project. What would a women's law project look like? It was quite a novel notion at that time, and we wondered how they could use the law and administer the processes of Washington to advance the cause of women's equality.

All in all, it was a very productive thing, and again, made us go a layer deeper than we had started. The women's project that we started back in 1970/71 has since grown and has become an independent group called the National Women's Law Center. It is a very prominent player in women's issues in Washington today, and, of course, one that is deeply challenged and threatened by the changes we're facing in Washington under the new administration. They're currently in the process of organizing to protect the rights that they won for women in the United States and around the world over the last forty-five years. As you know the issues that are currently under debate are not just about undoing the Obama legacy, but going back to the New Deal and trying to turn back the clock. They have their hands full and, of course, all of that stems out of the

work of CLASP.

What's interesting is that they don't see the current challenges as reacting to a particular person or particular administration, but rather, continuing their efforts to pursue and press for the equal treatment of women. That was the kind of deepening we saw in those days. Because we were organized with the kind of mandates that we had, and because we were engaging with each other on a deeper level, we were able to see things and take actions that were not apparent to other people who weren't involved in this work. And we were doing it inside the context of a supportive environment where we were working with people we really cared about. We represented causes and people that were vitally important to us, including the environment, rights of the mentally ill and mentally challenged persons, the rights of women and minorities. All of these seemed so important to us that we were touched at a deeper level than many professionals had the good fortune to experience. That was during a time that my balance was still very much on the outer work side, and less on the inner work side. The inner work side became more prominent in later years.

Alyssa: I understand. One thing I found interesting, and maybe you can expound on this a bit more, is that it seems like the inner work did become an important part of your time at CUNY. So maybe you could speak about that and when that shift started to happen, recognizing that you needed other resources and tools to draw on when you were thinking about social transformation.

Charlie: Thank you for that reminder. I did various public law things in Washington through the 70s, and in 1980 I was invited to come to New York City to become the first dean of the City University of New York Law School. Not only had there never been a public law school in New York City, but there had never been a law school specifically aimed at public interest law in New York City. Needless to say it was a very attractive invitation for me, so I accepted, and moved my family from Washington to New York. It ended up being an extremely difficult job. Going in, I knew it was going to be a hard job, but I didn't know how difficult and complicated it would be. We had such a unique and challenging opportunity to rethink the way lawyers were trained, and train them in a way that moved them in the direction of public interest and law practice. What made this challenging was the fact that law is a conservative profession, and the way we educated lawyers is a very conservative corner of that profession. Back in the late part of the 19th century, Harvard Law School pioneered the first modern model of legal education, and other law schools have pretty much followed that case method to this day. This is the same method you are familiar with, Alyssa. It follows the analytic approach, focuses on appellate decisions, places emphasis on making lawyers articulate and oral advocates, but not very good listeners even around their own clients. So we were trying to think of a different way to educate people, but it's hard to reinvent. All the old casebooks are written for the old method, and I didn't realize how difficult our challenge would be. We also had some very conservative politicians, and a state legislature we had to deal with. Because we were public interest lawyers, we decided to admit students on a different basis, and we didn't admit them on the basis that you or I were admitted to our elite law schools. We wanted to find people who not only said that they were interested in serving the public interest with their professional skills, but we wanted people who had actually shown some commitment and skill in that general direction. We ended up bringing in a bunch of students. Our first year students were the activists. They were a very engaged, energetic and disputatious group of people. Many of them were older, and had been union organizers and environmental organizers, and demonstrators that had been arrested repeatedly for sitting in at nuclear power plants that were under

construction. The first president of the black policeman's union in New York City was actually one of our first year students. Then we went on to hire a group of faculty members that consisted of people who had been public interest lawyers; people who had done it in their lives. They were leaders in the women's movement, and The Civil Rights Movement.

There were elements of the job that I had never imagined. And they weren't easy, they were exhausting. A friend of mine who had started at the University of Hawaii Law School as their founding dean came to see me one day and said, "Look I know just the kinds of challenges you're facing. I want to suggest a simple thing you might do that will make your life a little bit easier." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, why don't you try meditation?" And I said to him "What's that?" He then explained to me very simply the practice of sitting for 15 or 20 minutes a day watching your breath. He said when thoughts arise, you let them go and bring your attention back to your breath and back to your body. It was very simple. He said to get up fifteen minutes early in the morning to do this. And I said, "What good is that going to do me?" He said, "Well what you might find is that you find a place of stillness and calm that you can, in the course of a busy day, reach back to from time to time. And as you find your stress levels getting higher, as you're about to blow up at the academic bureaucrat from the City University who's trying to get you to do something that is inconsistent with your plan for the law school, rather than blow up with smoke coming out of your ears, you can take a few minutes, and a few breaths, or not a few minutes, and a few breaths and come back to a place of stillness, and respond with greater wisdom, with greater balance, and a sense of being grounded rather than just flying off the handle. It's not going to happen every time. This isn't going to be a miracle cure. But why don't you give it a try?" I said, "Well, we'll see." And I went and talked to Susan about it, my wife, and she said, "Look why don't you give it a try? This job is driving you crazy." So I did. And it helped. It wasn't a miracle, but it helped. And the first result I found was that I was managing my emotions more effectively. I was being more effective in my "more difficult" interactions. And gradually over time, this practice settled in and helped me. It suggested a path of combining my commitment to social transformation in the world, and doing inner work that would support and sustain that. So that was an important turning point for me.

Then while I was still active dean at CUNY Law School, and we had graduated our first class, a very important teacher came into my life. I was reading a catalog of the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, up the Hudson River from New York City, and there was a Vietnamese teacher who was relatively new to teaching in the United States. Interestingly, he was a Zen monk, a poet, and an activist. He was also doing a meditation retreat at the Omega Institute. And I thought, well, I've been doing this meditation thing on my own just in the simple way my friend taught me, maybe this would be a way to deepen my practice. So Susan and I went to this retreat. It wasn't wholly silent, but I think they stayed 80% silent. We did all our meals in silence, and we walked in silence through these beautiful, wooded rolling hills of upstate New York. And I got to see, and be quite close to Thich Nhat Hanh, who since has become a very important Buddhist teacher and a teacher of mindfulness practice around the world. He's a wonderful man, and I had never been exposed to that kind of teaching before. The only teachers I knew were oriented towards passing along content and skills and analytic tools to people. But this man spoke simply and wisely, and his presence, and the stillness that he embodied, was an inspiration. Could people be like that? I asked.

The most striking thing to me about Thich Nhat Hanh was that although he was so wise,

and grounded, and kind, he had also been a powerful advocate for peace in the depths of the Vietnam War. His voice was so sufficiently strong that both the Viet Cong and the Americans and their allies found him very objectionable. With remarkable courage and effectiveness, he had organized the monks of his order, acted as a Zen priest, and organized in the general population a peace movement in the midst of the chaos and terror of the Vietnam War. That he could draw on these inner strengths that he had to be such an effective advocate was very powerful to me. Just the thought that this was the direction I could move in when things got really hard. When we're dealing with environmental crises that have global significance, or issues of nuclear power and the use of nuclear weapons in war, or even global climate change, Thich Nhat Hanh showed how one could still be absolutely grounded and be able to come towards these difficult issues in a way that is both powerful and resonant for many people, as well as persuasive and effective.

Alyssa: I was wondering if I could follow up on that point actually. In my extremely limited experience, one of the things I find difficult about balancing inner work and outer work, and I'm starting to hear a little bit of this, is that the inner work can be so difficult. If you really want to dedicate yourself to inner work, it can be so time consuming to get to that place of mindfulness and grounded awareness. Essentially you never arrive, it's just a continual journey and effort at purification. You find that you may want to continue in that way, but on the other hand, you want to be out in the world doing good and having an impact. How did you try to balance that in your own life? Were there any difficulties you encountered in terms of wanting to continue to push inward, while simultaneously wanting to have some sort of impact that radiates in a more external way? How do you continue to balance those two forces and make sure the inner part is not being forsaken?

Charlie: That is the conundrum that we all deal with all the time. In a certain sense, it's easier for a Buddhist monk wearing robes to do that inner work, and make it really deep and powerful than it is for somebody living in a family, and supporting and sending children to college and having to pay the rent. The wisest people I've encountered, people like Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama, are people who wear the robes full time. I'm never going to reach the level of wisdom they have, but what I can do is take their inspiration and walk the same path. I can tell you what I've done, but it's different for each person. The first thing I did was making the commitment to start. To say, I'm going to put my feet on this path, and I'm going to walk. Sometime it will be really hard, and sometimes it will be relatively easy. Sometimes it will seem dry and unproductive, other times it will provide real "aha" moments where you'll have this feeling that you're seeing things you haven't seen before, and doing things differently. And you'll look back after you've done it for a few years, and you'll think "I really have changed quite a lot. Not as much as I would have liked to, but some considerable [amount]." It's a daily practice. As I tell these busy lawyers, everyone can find ten minutes a day to sit. Start with ten minutes, and then move it up to twenty, maybe even half an hour. Just be faithful about it, and look for places in your daily life where you can bring those moments of silence and reflective insight to bear on the work you are doing. That's the first thing. The second thing is that there are now places in many parts of the country where you can go on a retreat with skilled teachers inside a caring environment, where you can sit with a group of people who share your interest in doing the same inner work. And there are teachers who have been at it for decades who can help you move along.

While our media soaked environment is one of the things that make it so important and

challenging to do this kind of meditative work, it's also a resource that you can utilize to your advantage. By utilizing your cell phone, you have access to really wonderful teachings that will help move you along the mindfulness path. You can listen to talks and discussions online and, move your inner work along. The last thing that I think has been very important to me, and I would recommend this to anyone, is to make sure you try not to do this alone. I started this journey as an isolated path, but it became much more productive when I had friends and colleagues who were involved in the same enterprise. For example, at this point I have the good fortune of meeting once a month with a group of lawyers, law professors and former judges. And once a month we meet with a wonderful teacher, Norman Fisher, who teaches both Zen practice and Jewish meditation. We talk about how we are struggling to bring our mindfulness practice to bear in our work in law and social transformation. Developing some kind of community of that sort is extremely important, and at this point, it's readily accessible. Mindfulness and meditation used to be two terms that made people raise their eyebrows twenty some years ago. Now, there are lots of people interested in these ideas, and lots of people who are practicing. There's been cultural resonance for this work. I don't want to overstate how powerful that resonance is, but there are plenty of lawyers doing this work and there are lawyer sanghas in many cities. It's relatively easy to set one up too.

Birju: Alyssa and Charlie I'd love to jump in here. I really appreciate where this conversation is going, and it strikes me that we're moving to the crux of the kinds of questions our callers would be intrigued to reflect on how they bring this into their own lives. I'd love to take this opportunity to invite the callers into the conversation to the extent they feel called.

Alyssa: Great, thank you so much, Birju. Actually one area that might be fruitful to kick into this next conversation -- I was wondering if you could speak, Charlie, to how your inner work and how your meditation practice, which has grown over the years, changed your approach to social advocacy? How have you been able to deal with the angrier and more reactionary voices in the social justice field? How has wisdom and your cultivation of it shifted your approach in that regard?

Charlie: These are two very live issues for me now. I would say, as I think of the way I try to be active in the social justice world and social transformation world, it is a work in progress. I try to be more balanced. When I feel myself being taken over by emotions like anger or fear, I try to come back to a contemplative space, and come forward instead of letting my actions be guided by, as they might have been in the past, fear and anger. Instead I try and find a place of more positive feelings, and a place where an affirmative vision and a sense of interconnection with other people could be the motivating forces. There's a big difference between making an argument, for example, about the use of DDT, which was being used with incredible abandon without attention to the negative consequences it was having on the total environment, and just raging on about the pesticide companies being so indifferent to the state of the world. I don't think working from those kinds of emotions is good for my inner being and I don't think it's the most effective way to be in the world. I think it's much better if I can put myself in the place of someone who's spent a career working in the pesticide world thinking he was doing good things. And think about how to talk to that person in a way that's going to permit conversation instead of shouting. So that's one of the things I've been working at, and I'm still working at it. I'm not quite there yet, but I do believe that approach is both good for my own inner growth, and for

situational outcomes. When we started doing the DDT work at CLASP, we were climbing up a very steep hill. No one had ever had the voices of environmentalists concerned with the health of the planet heard in decision-making processes in Washington. What a radical notion that was. But we tended to think about our opponents as enemies. If you can dial the heat down, you can start to understand your opponents, and the various reasons, causes and conditions that have led them to positions where they are in opposition to you.

It was during that time that Rachel Carson's book, Silent Spring, was a powerful summary of the science and damage done by DDT. If we could have had more forums about Silent Spring, and less adversarial proceedings, then I think we could have done the job better. And I think that's true now, too, when we're facing real challenges. For me, it's my life's work to be challenged. It's an effort to silence those voices that we brought into the process in those days, and we've got to respond forcefully and effectively, and in a way that's grounded. We shouldn't respond when we're driven by rage, but instead when we're driven by a sense of possibility -- a possibility that we can open new dialogues in this country, and back off from the intense polarization that's characterized American decision making processes over vitally important matters for decades. How can we come together in a place of dialogue, mutual respect and interconnection? I'm a grandparent, and a lot of these people are grandparents. If we could somehow have the wisdom of the elders passing back and forth among grandparents, that would be a great achievement. I think that can only be done by people who have done some inner work and be the leaders of that conversational process.

Birju: And inviting that spirit of dialogue here, Charlie, I'd love to invite in some of our callers if that's okay with you?

Charlie: Great!

Birju: Wonderful.

First Caller: Hello, my name's Mafia. I'm calling in from Devon in England. I've just listened to your conversation, and it's fascinating! I used to be a lawyer working in a city law firm in London. And a few years ago, around the Occupy Movement, I had a huge shift in my way of looking at the world, and how community can be inspired by shared longing that is driving all of us. I went on kind of a journey myself, and I've come to this place, similar maybe to the place where you were twenty or thirty years ago. But what I respect, and what I've heard from you, is how you have achieved so much real change in creating organizations and structures for changing. I see a movement from social justice towards an environmental movement around Carson and Silent Spring, and now we're entering this new phase, it feels to me. I'm wondering, how we move to the ecological way of looking at the world? That's what I've really been focusing on. Joanna Macy's work around her Buddhism practice has really been key for me. She often talks about this active hope, having to change. I'm really connected to what you spoke about at the end there, and how we can use meditative practices (which I've been bringing into myself). A friend of mine has started a magazine called the Conscious Lawyer to bring all these different people together that work in different ways, and collaborative law and eco-law. But it hasn't, at the moment, grounded itself into working organizations that can actually create the change that I think you helped create with your organizations. I've been studying at a place called Schumacher College in Devon, which is all about holistic Gaia theory. James Lovelock's work is all around the idea that we're in a living system, that the earth is a living system which we are part of, and so there's a lot of

movement around spiritual ecology, or sacred activism, which brings both the meditative practice towards meaning of our human life within the greater Gaia ecology. I'm trying to save that space for a movement from meditative practice, to spiritual ecologist lawyers or sacred activist lawyers, and how can we make it real in the way that you made, in the 60s, your movement real?

Charlie: Thank you for that question. Two things. One lesson I've learned is it's very important to take people where they are at, and move them along the pace they are ready for. It's the only way to succeed. And I can remember how skeptical I would have been of these initiatives if they were given to me when I wasn't ready to hear them. So I think that kind of sensitivity is essential. When I started doing this work, we set up this thing called the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society to try to bring contemplative practices into various sectors of the secular community. And people would say that the law is the hardest place to go with that, and it's a really tough nut to crack. But it's also a very important one. You know you have lawyers thinking this way and it can have huge changes. Don't misunderstand me. The legal profession has a long way to go, but let me give you an illustration of both these two points. One is we'd been working with a group of prosecutors in San Jose, city near the Bay area. People would say lawyers are hard to introduce mindfulness and inner work to, and among the lawyers, prosecutors are going to be the hardest. We've been at this with these folks for about a year, and I thought from the beginning they were surprisingly receptive. They were people struggling in their work, and they wanted to do the best job they could. They were very devoted to the work they do, and finding redress for victims of crime. But they also had a tunnel vision. By trying to use their language to talk to them, and showing respect for the work they're doing, we've had significant movement. I wouldn't say breakthrough, but there has been significant movement. And there are ideas of what a mindful courtroom could look like if prosecutors, defense counsel, judges, and all the personnel around the courthouse including police officers, the prison guards all had some grounding in mindfulness. It's possible to imagine, over time, some significant change in a different kind of criminal justice system that is grounded in rehabilitation and empathy in a sense of community and shared purpose. So all I can say is, stick with it. I'm familiar with the magazine the Conscious Lawyer. There's a new one out of Ireland.

Mafia: Yes that's right.

Charlie: That's wonderful, and I'm hoping to write something for them. I think it's very important that this be an international movement. I'm sure you know about the mindfulness committee in Parliament?

Mafia: Yes. I've heard of it. One of the select committees in Parliament.

Charlie: It's fantastic! There are 150 members of Parliament that have been through the basic training in mindfulness. It's a wonderful program. And the former MP who headed it, Chris Rouan, is now carrying that work to the Parliament of other countries around the world. That's an encouraging sign. I sat in on a hearing about criminal justice and inner work at Parliament eighteen months ago, and it was very inspiring to see all the people working in provincial detention centers and in prisons with prisoners, and increasingly with prison guards and correctional officers. That's a big deal. We should be working together, and sharing our experiences, and encouraging each other.

Birju: Here's a question that came in online from Priyanka in Bombay: Charles, thank you so much for the gift of your being. A lot of what you say resonates well with me, as I pursue justice in my work as a journalist reporting on issues of human rights. My question

to you is, how does one keep compassion and hope alive when cynicism seems easier, especially in the pursuit of justice? I see many, many compassionate advocates of justice who sometimes are not able to see any light at all. On a similar note, how can we have political conversations that anger us without projecting it onto others when we are so doggedly pursuing justice?

Charlie: Thank you, Priyanka, for your kind words. I had a conversation when I was teaching a workshop at the University Of Hawaii Law School about mindfulness. And there was a student there, she was a third year student, and she had come there specifically to work on environmental matters. As a student, she had worked on two or three major cases that had huge consequences for the Hawaiian environment, and she lost all of them. What I said to her was that mindfulness was a good skill to cultivate, especially for public interests lawyers who are deeply devoted to causes that seem so urgent. Because it's inevitable in your work that you're going to lose a lot of cases, you've got to have something to fall back on that gives you a framework to hold these losses, and these disappointments, and stick with it. This invites you to take a longer view of things. To see not just the immediate matters that you're handling, but also the long history that's led up to the environmental mess we're in. It gives space to recognize that the power of private interests and materialistic impulses is tremendous in this area, and deeply threatening to the ecological system. And it gives space to think about the progress that we've made, and how our efforts can help deal with these incredible challenges. As you know, in this country, we're now facing the reality that our new President is deeply indebted to the fossil fuel industry, and speaks about the possibility of nuclear war as if it's an acceptable policy option. So those of us that have been working at these issues for a long time have reason to be deeply saddened. We need a way to maintain our sense of hope and possibility, and I think that involves developing inner strength, which will help us, deal with these things. It will help us put aside the cynicism that we feel inside ourselves, and the cynicism our society encourages.

As for what we do with our anger, and how to avoid just spraying it around on people we view as adversaries, and even on our friends and our family, if we don't have a way of processing our anger, we're going to spill it over on a lot of people with a lot of destructive consequences. I haven't found any easy way to deal with that, and I do find my mindfulness practice sometimes to just breathe with the anger and to let it go. And the more I do with that, the better I am at it. I'm only fairly good at present. I've only been at it a few decades.

Birju: That's the easier said than done element that the practice really helps with. Thank you so much, Priyanka, for the question and, Charlie, for the response.

The next question is from Christy in Sherman Oaks. She asks, "Can you give an example of a time when you saw mindfulness cause a drastic change in the climate of a conversation with someone who did not practice your same techniques?"

Charlie: What's relatively easy is to retain your mindful center in a conversation or conflict with someone who also has the same commitment as you do. Even if there are major substantive disagreements, it's pretty easy. The hard one is when people are coming at you full of anger, and self-righteousness, and are really committed to a narrow view of things. I'll give one example. I was heading a program at Berkeley on Mindfulness and Law, which had a very positive impact on the many students that were involved. And it was beneficial for a number of faculty members as well. There were students that actually came to Berkeley Law School because they knew of this program,

and wanted to be a part of it. Then a new dean came to the law school, and for reasons that I still don't know, he never spoke to me. He simply cut the legs out from under our program, and made it impossible for me to stay on. First, I tried to change his actions, and several hundred students filed a petition that said they wanted this program saved. But it just wasn't going to happen, so I tried to see him, but he wouldn't see me. I tried to hold on to not blaming him, still not understanding why he'd done what he'd done, but not to blame him and make him an evil person. And then for a variety of reasons his career at the law school was cut short, and he's no longer the dean. But the damage he did, in many respects and certainly in respect to the mindfulness program at Berkeley Law, remains on. A lot of my friends had encouraged me to avenge my anger towards him, and what he did. It was better for me; however, to view what he did as unfortunate, a real disservice to the education of law students at this school, but understand that he did what he did for whatever reasons he had. It didn't serve me or the law school community to let my anger towards him find its full expression. So, unfortunately, it's not a happy story where mindfulness changes someone's mind, but it is promising the fact that a mindfulness program, or a meditation program at the law school will revive at some time when it's appropriate, and when the right people come together. By keeping the added unnecessary toxicity out of the atmosphere, I think there lays a small victory, and a basis for hope.

Birju: Well thank you, Charlie, and thank you, Christy, for the question. It is okay to ask you, Charlie, how people can get in touch with you after the call?

Charlie: I'd be delighted. I have to warn the commenters and inquirers I'm rather slow in responding, but I'd welcome their conversations. And in particular, I really welcome the effort to take this work with lawyers and mindfulness global.

Birju: Well thank you so much. We'll make sure that we follow up with that, and I'd love to turn it over to Alyssa for a recap.

Alyssa: Thank you, Birju, and thank you, Charlie. This has been a really wonderful conversation, and as I mentioned before, I'm really grateful to have been a part of it. I think there have so many aspects that have struck me, and as I'm thinking back on this conversation, I think it's very striking that the seeds for the wisdom path that Charlie went down, the seeds for all the social activism that Charlie engaged in, really were sown at a very early age. We discussed in an earlier part of the conversation that the Holocaust and WWII left a big imprint on Charlie's family, and was a big part of Charlie's passion for social justice. Similarly, Charlie had these amazing experiences out in nature where he found this deep inner peace that gave him an intimation of what's to come in terms of the wisdom path that he would eventually go down. Both of those things became more and more prominent in his life as he transitioned from corporate law, to public interest law, and started pursuing social advocacy on a much larger and more meaningful scale.

Charlie discussed his time at CUNY, and how bringing mindfulness to the sphere of education added a new and important dimension to his social advocacy work. According to Charlie, it made it much more effective. So I'm really excited about where this conversation has led, and interested to hear more about how mindfulness can infuse all of our social work, and all of our work in the world. So thank you again, Charlie, for this wonderful conversation.

Birju: And, Charlie, one thing we'd like to do in terms of ending our call together is practicing gratitude for the space and the offering you have offered to us. I have one final

question. Are there any suggestions you have for those of us on the call who want to offer into your work? How can we do that?

Charlie: Well, first connecting with me and telling me what your interests are, and what kind of contributions you could make would be helpful. And I hope my email address will be made available to your listeners. I'm currently launching a group called "Transforming Justice: The Center for Mindfulness and Criminal Justice." You can look us up online, and see what we're doing and what we hope to do. To anyone who connects with the idea of trying to make a criminal justice system that works for everybody, to make it a place where people's sense of safety, and sense of community, and sense of individual responsibility, and compassionate interconnection is fed and nourished, anybody who has that interest certainly could connect with the work we're doing there. But I think the conversation and the encouragement of people is to pursue their own practice, to do it in community, and to always find that point at which our inner work can really help to nourish the world.

Birju: Well thank you so much, Charlie.

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