

Can Love Be A Force for Social Justice?

by Bela Shah

When I heard about Anne Firth Murray through a close friend, I was immediately intrigued. She's a professor at Stanford University who teaches courses on international women's health as well as a course entitled "Love as a Force for Social Justice," the Founding President of the philanthropic organization, the Global Fund for Women, and a warm individual known for her tea gatherings and unusually exotic pets at her home in Palo Alto. I've been interested in women's empowerment issues for quite some time, but to learn about someone who brings love into the field really piqued my interest.

Through this interview, I wanted to learn from Anne how she teaches that love can be a force for social justice, particularly justice for women. Love in what sense? How is it defined, and how is it actually practiced when implementing programs to end violence against women and generate income?

In our conversation, we explored everything from the ethical perspective and practice of love to its impact on women's advancement. She shared how individuals such as Thich Nhat Hanh and others have influenced her understanding of love. Most inspiring was to learn about the students in her classes and how their understanding of love in the context of social justice changed or evolved.

Bela Shah: First of all, after reading your course syllabus, I wish I could take your course at Stanford! I want to take a second to introduce the first course objective: To introduce students to different concepts of love, to empower them to be conscious of the power of love and the possibility of practicing it in everyday life, and to highlight in particular the idea of love as a force for social justice.

How did you begin thinking about love as a tool for social justice? This is a very unconventional approach.

Anne Firth Murray: I had been teaching a seminar course on international women's health and human rights at Stanford and writing a book on this topic from a women's justice perspective since none really existed at the time. All or most of the conversation around the advancement of women was framed around the idea of women in development: i.e. if women had better access to health and education, then the economy would improve or there would be less maternal mortality. This is true and good, but I also wanted people to realize that women should have better access because it is their right as human beings, and it is a matter of justice.

So there weren't any books that looked at the issue from this angle, and while I was working on creating my own, I became particularly immersed in issues of violence against women and kept coming across news reporting violence against women throughout the world. The levels of violence against women are still very high. One out of three women worldwide will experience domestic violence in her lifetime, according to a World Health Organization study conducted in 2004.

So there I was, thinking about this while walking across campus and I thought to myself, "I really must not allow myself to get dragged down by all this negative news on

women.” But this was hard to do because at the time I was working on that book (From Outrage to Courage) and documenting all these outrages. And the more I documented the outrages, the more upset I became about the prevalence of violence. These are very complex issues that require long-term investments in order to make change.

Bela: So what did you decide to do? If the changes we want to see might not even happen in our lifetime, are we approaching this in the wrong way? Maybe we’re making the wrong type of investments or overemphasizing some while underemphasizing others?

Anne: On that foggy morning, I decided to consciously think in terms other than violence. I decided to read more about nonviolence because it was violence that was getting to me. I read from Mahatma Gandhi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rumi, Bell Hooks, and many others.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “Peace between countries must rest on the solid foundation of love between individuals.” His application of satyagraha to achieve self-rule was based on the belief that justice could only be achieved through the unwavering pursuit of truth and nonviolent action, or what he called “love-force.”

And I was also greatly influenced by the book True Love, written by Thich Nhat Hanh. It was really helpful in clarifying for me what I think is love. He describes true love through four mantras that state more or less, “Dear one, I am here for you. Dear one, I see you, and it makes me happy. Dear one, I see that you are in pain, and that is why I am here for you. Dear one, I am in pain, please help me.” When I read those simple mantras, they made such sense to me.

Recognizing another as “dear one”—and the third mantra in particular about seeing someone else’s pain—epitomized what I had tried to do at the Global Fund for Women. “I see you are in pain and that is why we are trying to be there for you.” That is how I would want people to see me—not as a poor, miserable woman who needs charity, but instead, as a “dear one”...that phrase is very equalizing. When I read this mantra, it gave words to what I believe and the way I have been trying to lead my life.

So I began to think, “This is what it’s all about. My whole career—teaching and the creation of the Global Fund for Women— at base has been about eliminating violence and about love as a force for change; maybe love can be a strategy, maybe it can be a tool for change.”

Well it just so happened that around that time, the Freshman/Sophomore program at Stanford wrote to me and asked if I would like to teach another course, assuming that it would be on women’s health again. I replied that I did want to teach another class, but I wanted it to be on love.

Bela: Wow! I can’t imagine their reaction. Obviously they responded favorably since you’ve been teaching the course for more than four years now. But I wonder how the students initially responded? What did the curriculum consist of?

Anne: My original title for the course was “An Exploration of Love.” I went to the first day of class and into the class came no men, only women. As I reviewed the people that signed up, I realized that the group was in almost no way diverse. Everyone who had signed up was white and female. I was surprised, and I decided to cancel the class. I needed to go back and rethink everything because I believe that different kinds of diversity are important to the success of any venture.

I thought about why I was teaching the course, what it was about, and I realized that my intentions for the class were about nonviolence, otherwise known as love, and also about social justice and social change. I decided to change the title to “Love as a Force for Social Justice,” because the purpose was to explore how actions grounded in loving kindness and compassion could be powerful tools for approaching and working on social justice. This new title, which I used the following year, attracted an extremely diverse

group. There was only one male among the fifteen students, but he held his own; he was a wonderful student. The class as a whole represented many different and varied populations.

I integrated into the course biological, psychological, religious, and social perspectives of love, and the readings and guest speakers catalyzed discussion around different kinds of love, non-violent communication, love and the biology of the brain, love as mutual empowerment, and love as a basic concept of religious and ethical beliefs, including Buddhism, Christianity, Gandhian thought, Islam, Judaism and Bahai.

Bela: How do you tie these perspectives and topics about love in with social justice? In your class, do you study examples of social justice movements that were rooted in love?

Anne: One of the goals of my class is to provide students with a sense of the importance of love as a key phenomenon in creating community, connection, and functional societies among humans.

As an example of these outcomes, I do look at a few nonviolent movements. Someone wrote that nonviolent movements have been more successful at moving us forward than wars. In the class, we explore the well-known leaders from our past who insisted on the different facets of love—compassion, tolerance, trust, and truth—in their movements for justice. People who come to mind are Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, and I hope in future classes to learn more about and explore other lesser known movements.

Bela: Perhaps there are other examples in addition to social justice movements that demonstrate the impact of love and forgiveness in strengthening human connections and building community. What immediately comes to mind is the Fetzer Institute and also, restorative justice. The Fetzer Institute fosters awareness of the transformative power of love through research and funding. They just awarded \$25,000 each to three NGOs that further love and forgiveness, and one of those, Insight-Out, is based right here in California. Insight-Out is a restorative justice program that fosters love and forgiveness by guiding prisoners through a healing journey for themselves and for victims of crime.

This brings me to another question. Earlier, what you shared about Thich Nhat Hanh's third mantra of love, seeing the pain of others and wanting to help from a space of love and mutual respect, this can change the entire conversation about funding women's development initiatives.

Do you know of any development organizations that are practicing this approach in their social justice work? How do they operate differently than other organizations? How does practicing love change the outcome?

Anne: I look for organizations that clearly state that they are values-based and that are consciously doing good work in ways that are transformative. These might be organizations that are working with women to help produce income, but they also talk about the way they work with these women, which has to do with mutual empowerment, trust, courage, respect, and compassion.

An example of an organization that puts the values of love and compassion at the center of its work is Mahnav Sadhna, a group in Ahmedabad, India, who work in a large slum there with the motto: Love All, Serve All. I strongly believe that what we do may be important but that the way we do our work is more important.

In terms of outcomes, particularly in the context of women, I continue to collect updated statistics on the status of women for one of my books, *From Outrage to Courage: the Unjust and Unhealthy Situation of Women in Poorer Countries and What They Are Doing About it*, which was just published in a second edition in May 2013.

According to the 2013 edition of that book, which was based on statistics from

2009-2011, we saw very little change and even some things getting worse for women with two major exceptions. First, more girls were being enrolled in elementary schools (more boys were in school too) and second, there has been a decline in maternal mortality. In poor parts of poor countries, women have been dying from almost completely preventable illnesses and injuries in pregnancy and childbirth; that number has dropped from about 550,000 deaths per year to about 350,000. This is still an outrageous number, but it is a significant drop.

Unfortunately, some things have gotten worse for women. For example, statistics on domestic violence and sexual violence are still very high, with one out of three women worldwide experiencing domestic violence in her lifetime. I have not seen any statistics suggesting that such violence is in decline, especially given the intensification of violence against women in conflict and refugee circumstances and the prevalence of trafficking in women and girls. Also women's access to the cash economy and to equal pay for equal work remains unbalanced despite all the attention given to microcredit and other initiatives relating to women's work.

There is certainly more emphasis now on the need to include funding for women as part of the international development equation. That has finally come through. Women are now recognized as central to human networks, to their families, and their communities. There is great recognition around the world that women are very important, but I think that recognition seldom goes beyond the utilitarian reasons to support women.

Most donors support women's programs, particularly girl's education, because they believe that such support will improve child health and increase economic productivity and thereby have an effect on the broader economy. Most do not support women for reasons of justice, for the reason that women have a right to such support. Most organizations make the utilitarian argument, "Look at all of our women's programs. They're going to improve the economy and child care," which is true; they will. However, I believe that if we want to truly effect positive societal change, we must put the justice argument at the center of our intentions.

Bela: Can you clarify what you mean by truly effecting positive societal change? Why isn't the utilitarian approach enough if it's improving access to things like education and healthcare?

Anne: I believe that our motivation to invest in women should stem from a commitment to justice. Although the utilitarian approach can result in economic and perhaps social change, I believe that we should be attempting to transform the basic structures of society. We should be taking actions that result in people treating each other differently within different organizational structures. We should be motivated to invest in women because they are human beings, and that motivation can only be born out of love. Development inspired by this latter motivation is what will be transformational for society as a whole.

So in my book, *From Outrage to Courage*, I take the human rights angle because I believe that if we want to transform societies we need to always keep in mind, and put at the center, justice and love.

Bela: So when you talk of transforming societies, it's not just about improving material wellbeing, it's much deeper and long-lasting than that. Perhaps we can call it spiritual wellbeing, a realization of our interconnectedness as human beings?

I'm reminded of *All About Love* by bell hooks. She writes about living by the ethics of love and quotes from Erich Fromm, who stated, "Important and radical changes are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon."

Do you think that the statistics about violence against women would change if

women's programs were funded for the sake of justice, deeply inspired by the love for one's fellow living being (agape love)?

Anne: The way society is organized at present in our world is dichotomous. We have the haves and have-nots, the literate and illiterate, the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the male and the female. We are always making those dichotomous distinctions and valuing one side over the other. Violence is a strategy of people in power to maintain the existing hierarchy and the system in which we operate. So perhaps integrating the opposite of violence, non-violence and love, into our actions would have a different outcome. I would hope so.

Bela: I believe it would. But how do we bring love into the mainstream social framework, turning it on its head? In her book, Bell Hooks gives an example about going door to door and talking to citizens about domestic violence. In this case, almost everyone will insist that they do not support male violence against women, that they believe it to be morally and ethically wrong. But if you explain that violence against women can only be ended by challenging patriarchy, that is when the agreement stops. "There is a gap between the values they claim to hold and their willingness to do the work of connecting thought and action to realize these values and create a more just society...fear of radical changes leads many citizens to betray their minds and hearts."

Anne: Perhaps the only way is to start small, with small acts of kindness and love. The second objective for my course states, To communicate a sense of personal strength and empowerment by actively learning from each other and beginning to define how students can apply their learning in service to society.

One of the things my students are asked to do every week is to observe an instance of someone using love as a force for social justice and then to write about it and put it up on the class blog. And if they do not notice an instance, they are asked to practice love as a force for social justice themselves and write about it.

In the evaluations of the class, many students have expressed that of everything they did in the class, noticing love was the part that they liked the most because it made them feel that love was real, that it could be learned, observed, and practiced. I believe what we need to be doing to save the world is to practice love, just practice it regardless of what you want to call it.

Bela: Can you share some stories from the blogs that your students wrote? How did these experiences inspire them to explore facets of love that are not as popularized through pop culture and the media?

Anne: In their blog posts, students would cite instances of fellow students taking time to listen to their troubles or of their friends taking time to help them with a task or a lesson. Their examples of love as a force for social justice often were very personal, though sometimes students would write about seeing other people stop and help another person lift a heavy weight or cross the street in heavy traffic. Sometimes they cited instances of people supporting non-profit organizations by volunteering or sending a donation. The students began to see and experience small acts of kindness and love, and they liked doing this. I would like to share an anonymous blog sample from one of my students:

The question that was posed for this week triggers a memory I have talking to the director of admissions at the Stanford Medical School. He was giving a guest presentation in one of my classes, and in the middle of his lecture he paused and said, "We as individuals can do so very, very little," and he grinned, "but we must do our part very, very well." I took comfort in these words, which recognized the crushingly small amount we can do and yet

the enormous potential we have to effect change in the lives of others. In reality, the need is staggering. The suffering is staggering. The hopelessness can overwhelm. And yet, dramatic change and social movements take place in our world. We must remember that even the most remarkable of history's individuals, including Gandhi and MLK, were leaders who directed social movements in pursuit of an idea or a vision. The social transformations that took place during the time of these great individuals, however, cannot be attributed entirely to the doing of these men, but must be understood as the accumulated effort, collaboration, and inspiration of thousands (even millions) of individuals. Love and social change occurs at a one-on-one level. The peace (or belligerence) that we come to witness between nations reflects the prevailing forces of millions of hearts, a nation being a body made up of individuals.

In the small sphere of influence that a person has—in the home, the office, or the car, etc.— there is the potential to create positive change in the life of another. In politics, administration, and even global leadership capacities, there is the potential to shed an influential light on thousands. The changes of heart that truly transform the world, however, will always be occurring at an individual level.

Bela: One idea you focus on throughout the class is “the ecology of three” as a form of community building. Can you talk more about this?

Anne: In my classes, I organize my students into groups of three. Each week, they are asked to meet with their small group, or ecology of three, to talk about the readings and the ideas from the class or just be there for each other to support and sustain each other in their lives as students. A group of three is very nice because you can easily meet; there is no need for a leader, and three perspectives often balance each other well. If one is alone, you only experience your own ideas; with a group of two, you may see-saw back and forth, perhaps challenging or arguing your different points of view; a group of three provides a delightful balance and a rich set of perspectives on almost any topic. Students like their ecologies of three, so I continue to organize my classes this way. We find that the best combination for an ecology of three seems to be two women and one man, but groups of three in general seem to be good building blocks for greater harmony.

Bela: If only organizations and institutions in the real world worked that way, with two women and one man! Perhaps we would have more peace in the world. What do you think prevents more people from practicing love? Do you think it is partly because as a society, we don't understand what love is?

Anne: I think that many people are afraid to use the word “love” out loud. Perhaps they think it is a sissy word or a word that can be interpreted in too many different ways. But I have found among my students that as they begin to be more comfortable thinking about and practicing love, they are happier and very engaged.

Also, not all of us grew up in a loving home. You might have heard that I often invite people over for tea. I remember when I was young, when I came home from school and my mother would ask me about my day; perhaps if I had had a bad day or something, she would always say, “Oh! Let's have a nice cup of tea.” And we would sit down together, take time, and just be there together. To me that was an act of love, not so much for social justice, but it was love. Expressing love takes time; perhaps we need to find more time just to have a simple cup of tea with someone.

The other aspect is that many of us are consciously practicing love every day but we don't call it love. There are many people in this world who are kind to each other, but we're not acknowledging that this can change the world. If enough people took time each day to act kindly toward each other and saw how it really does make a difference, we might have peace.

For more inspiration join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Lee Perlman, founder of the MIT Prison Initiative. RSVP and more details [here](#).