

Create Your Future by Jack Healey

Jack Healey, a former Franciscan priest and former head of Amnesty International-USA, has pioneered the use of music activism to exponentially raise the visibility of human rights and inspire nonviolent action by youth. Called "Mr. Human Rights" by U.S. News and World Report, Jack over a 60-year career has "helped move the topic of human rights from closed-door diplomatic negotiations to widespread awareness, public debate, and direct citizen action." He saw early on the power of music to inspire and galvanize while a director of the Peace Corps in South Africa during the freedom struggle, and would go on to bridge art and activism by enlisting top music stars to activate citizens against oppression everywhere. Since 1994, Jack has fulfilled his dream to create and lead "a one-person organization that could be effective as a medium-sized human rights group with a lot less money," with the D.C.-based Human Rights Action Center. What follows are a couple of excerpts from his memoir, "Create Your Future."

I was lucky, and I knew it at an early age. Outsiders wouldn't know it by looking—I was the youngest of eleven kids, scrawny and nearly blind in one eye. My father died in a horrific streetcar accident when I was two, and our sole income for years was the small monthly check that arrived in our mailbox courtesy of FDR's recently created social security fund. But I knew I was lucky. I was raised by a mother who gave me a voice.

Mary Olivia Gaughan was a quiet, beautiful woman with a magnificent face. She was gentle and easy. Peace and calm were her nature. Nothing rocked her in the essentials: her God, her faith, her belief in our people, her belief in our need to survive and thrive. She was always good, always simple, and an always-present focus was the center of her life and loves. That simplicity rattles a less-than-perfect me even now. I secretly envied those virtues. None of us could misbehave around her. We do not know how this happened, but we all behaved, at least until we got away from her.

Below her calm and ease, my mother possessed a steely, rare toughness. "If someone pushes you, you push back," she said. "You're not my boy if you don't push back." So if someone pushed me, he got pushed back pretty damn fast. It was good training that prepared me for life. She often told me that she did not bring me into this world just to survive, but to do something.

In 1952, when I was fourteen years old, I won a \$500 raffle at school, and my sister Naomi brought the money home.

"We won \$500!" Naomi proclaimed.

"Oh, good," my mother replied. She grabbed her hat, put it on her head, and announced, "We're going to Florida."

That was the day I discovered my mother was a nomad—she just had never had a chance to go anywhere. So the four of us still at home—Mother, Naomi, Mike, and I—jumped in Naomi's car and drove to Florida, just like that. She didn't think about luggage or maps or anything at all. Of course, motels and restaurants were too expensive for us. Instead, we ate apples and oranges and stopped at the Mennonite watering holes.

After what felt like seven years in the car, we finally got to Florida. My brother Mike and I were excited about going to the beach, when my mother asked, "Where is the Church?"

"Oh, no," we moaned under our breaths. "We just got to the beach and we're looking for a Church!"

Catholic Florida was not to be found. We hunted for hours. We finally spotted a Church, and of course, she wanted to stay within walking distance from it, which was about seventy-five miles from the ocean. But her rule was, God first, fun later.

With mother, it was always Church first, everything else second. God is, and then we are, too. That was the order of things and that was that. Her God was an Irish God, giving special protection for widows, orphans, workers, and the poor. No one was to make fun of anyone, especially the kids with real problems. For them it was special prayers to special saints. There are a lot of "specials" in Catholicism, and she rode them all for all of our souls.

Her Catholicism was magical. It was soft and included everyone. I learned more about religion—real religion—at my mother's knee than in all my years in the seminary and monastery. Her faith got to universals, not to bigotry, divisions, and anger. She prepared me for differences and gave me a curiosity that has never stopped. People were people and that was that, with a reminder that some of the Irish were the worst.

We were always on time for Sunday Mass. We never missed it, ever. One Sunday an ice storm came to Pittsburgh, and the city came to a halt. Ice had formed on everything. We thought for sure God would let us out of Church. And God would have, but not my mother. We slid her to Church on a sled with all of us slipping and sliding and falling behind her. God first, fun later.

My mother's Catholicism led me to the seminary and to my becoming a priest. Those years lifted her; she wrote me a letter every single day for thirteen years. I was ordained in 1966. I did my job for her, and in that effort, I gave myself the education, training, and focus I would need later.

I once asked her if she was ever scared.

"I was scared the night I looked up and saw twenty-two eyes staring at me after the funeral of your father," she said, "and then I realized I had a job to do and I just moved on."

In the struggle of my early teens, she bugged me regularly about being a man. She wasn't talking about macho stuff but of truth and of helping and fighting for what one believes.

I finally said in anger, "When will I be a man?"

"When you learn to walk the highways and byways of life," she said, "and learn to listen to

the weeping and the wailing of the poor, then and only then will you be a man."

Lord, I thought, I will never ask her another question.

Human progress—human rights—is played out in the blood of many, many thousands of people. Blood has to be spilt—ours, too. We have to get knocked over regularly and come back. That's all.

We just have to get back up on the balls of our feet and fight again. Just come back up. Get over your little depression and think about something bigger than yourself and go back to it.

Creating your future is not just a possibility; it is a responsibility; one that we owe ourselves, our family, our community and our world. It is about shedding limitations and accessing our power, embracing our fears, and owning our courage. Nietzsche says dare to dream big and the whole universe will conspire with you to bring it to reality.

You don't need money, status or an Ivy League education, but you do need a vision, boldness and willingness to access one truth—one standard—that is immutable and unchangeable. That truth is the inherent dignity and equality of every human being. This is where I started, and it is what I used as the foundation of my work throughout my life. A single standard was my metric by which all governments would be judged in their display of respect for the rights of their citizens.

These days, when I give a speech, I address the most confused kid in the room. I figure the others will be okay. I talk to the smallest kid, the least educated, the least powerful person in the room. I tell them they can do it, because I did. I am that confused, lost, undereducated kid, too. I've got all those lesser things in my life. If they understand that some little jerk went in front of them and did it, maybe it will give them the courage to reach for something higher. All we need is one champion somewhere.

I saw it with Dr. King. I saw it with Fannie Lou Hamer. I saw it with Mandela. I've seen it everywhere in the world.

One person can lift the whole damn thing. So become that one person and lift the whole damn thing. As the work continues, I remember my friend Fannie Lou Hamer's last words to me when she told me she was dying: "And you," she said, "Keep on keeping on...do not stop till you join me."

For more inspiration join this Saturday's Awakin Call with Jack Healey. More details and RSVP info here.