

Women Who Inspire Us

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Friday, March 07, 2014

<http://politicsrespun.org/2014/03/women-who-inspire-us/>

Pam Palmater, getting it done!

“Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

For three decades of activism I have been inspired by a great number of wise, engaged women.

Carleen Pickard, for instance. I first met Carleen when she was the B.C./Yukon organizer for the Council of Canadians. En route to becoming the executive director of San Francisco-based Global Exchange, she was part of their human rights campaign in Mexico, and she has testified before the House of Commons trade committee on human rights in Colombia, with respect to the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement. Her clarity of mind, her focus, and her fearlessness inspired me. And there are so many other women activists who have helped light the way, and continue to do so, including Naomi Klein, Jane Stinson, Trish Hennessy, Igluka Ivanova, Arundhati Roy, Maude Barlow, and Vandana Shiva. (If you haven't heard of some of these hard-working, brilliant women, I'll leave it to you to Google them.)

Over the years, these women have reflected particular qualities that made a great impression on me, and still do. While not necessarily “female” traits, I think they are profound and instructive for us all, men and women alike. Here are a few of them.

1) Patience and the Long Game: In 1985, I attended a Red Cross international development symposium. Then an accounting major at Simon Fraser University, I found myself surrounded by some of the most soulfully engaged people I had ever met. I was deeply moved, and would soon become a colleague of theirs, helping run Red Cross educational events. That day, I listened to passionate people discussing their impatience with the glacial pace of improvement in international development, human rights, debt relief, global thermonuclear terror: the usual sources of frustration for new activists in the international field.

There were men and women at the event, but the ones who stood out for me were the women, young and old, who appeared to live patience, and who modelled long-term thinking.

Maybe their patience came from the fact that women, in general, have experienced generations of painfully slow social progress. Or maybe it's because they had studied systems theory and were, themselves, inspired by Margaret Mead. (Systems theory looks for connections and meaning across the boundaries of what, traditionally, has been considered separate sciences.)

One way or the other, those Red Cross women taught me two life lessons: If I don't have the patience for long struggles, and if I don't constantly recognize interconnections, I will fail. I have seen the truth of these lessons for 30 years.

2) Ubuntu and Compassion: In the late 1990s, I learned about *Ubuntu* from Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*, a book about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Ubuntu*, a Nguni Bantu term, roughly translates to "human kindness." It means a person is a person through other people; my self-concept can be deceiving, but my relationships with others define my identity.

Along with systems theory, *Ubuntu* has become the lens through which I try to live my life, at home, at work, in the community, and in my activism. But reading Tutu only reminded me that I had first seen *Ubuntu* in action in the life of a 17-year-old Red Cross friend from a decade earlier.

She breathed *Ubuntu*. Her extraordinary nurturing of her younger brothers and sisters was profound. She had an almost constant, evident empathy for those who were suffering, both on our streets and in the almost hypothetical, pre-Internet faraway places of the then-Third World. She rarely had doubts about what activism should look like, because she was grounded in the idea of compassion as the vehicle for human change. She lived *Ubuntu* before most of us had ever heard of it. I don't think she had, either. Ever since, I have strived to live at her level of compassion and *Ubuntu*.

3) Focus and Fearlessness: The 21st century has introduced more highly successful women activists, who, with their focus and fearlessness, have inspired the multitudes concerned with social justice. Here are but two of my current role models.

Pam Palmater is a Mi'kmaq lawyer and professor who recently came second behind Shawn Atleo in the Assembly of First Nations national chief election. Her focus on promoting leadership roles for women, and more authentic community representation, is inspiring. She also takes the long view, understanding that change doesn't happen overnight. Still, she doesn't set low targets in the short run in her daily work on behalf of social justice.

Marjorie Griffin Cohen, a political economist and women's studies professor, has been an economics hero of mine for many years. (I took a graduate course with her a few years ago at Simon Fraser University to further delve into the contradictions in the capitalist system that I had started exploring in my Red Cross days.) She has channeled her academic talents into advocating for all those who are victimized by discrimination including precarious workers, and for global economic equality. Like Palmater, she brings two areas together – academics and activism – to build synergy in each.

Both these women have shown tremendous focus and diligence in fearlessly pursuing their goals, and

have ended up being role models for many. Including me. This is my thanks to these women, and all my sisters in this world, for helping me learn the power of patience, of taking the long view, of having compassion, of staying focused – and remaining fearless.

This piece appears in the 2014 International Women's Day issue of [Our Times magazine](#).