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A2b Exemplar 1

Am I an activist?

I woke up on the morning of the Global Climate Strike at 7am. I had spent the last few days psyching myself up for it; it had been a good number of years since I had participated in any sort of collective action and I was excited. But as I lay there, my eyes still closed, I realised that today was going to be one of *those* days.

I tried to reason with myself.

You'll feel so proud of yourself if you can push through it, it's so important, it's the future of humanity!

But the other voice forced its way through.

Who do you think you are? You won't make a difference. You feel small and weak now? Just wait, you'll realise your true insignificance when you see that you're the only person who came to the strike alone. Do you honestly think the strike will even change anything? You are pathetic.

I rolled over and wallowed in the thick, repulsive sludge of self-pity and shame.

* * *

When I first begun working on this assignment several weeks ago I felt excited to have the opportunity to engage with a question that has struck me so deeply. I had a profound sense that it was important to be raw and honest. I *want* to be an activist. I certainly know that I make individual choices in an attempt to improve the world and I'm certainly theoretically aligned with social justice values of self-determination, development from below, equal distribution of resources, collective responsibility and diversity (Ife 2016; Nipperess 2017). However, theoretical alignment and individual choices might as well be synonymous with fence sitting – real change happens through well organised collective action (Freire 2000; Falzon 2019). I believe that is where the identity of *activist* lies, in the undeniable sense that one must *do* something. It is the bodily sense of increasing pressure, of energy growing from the chest – the heart – that builds and builds until one feels as though they *must* explode and propel themselves into action or face defeat and collapse.

Time and time again I find myself at that breaking point. Regrettably though, I almost always collapse.

* * *

I'm lying on the floor. My assignment is now two days late and I don't appear to be any closer to finishing it. I've rewritten it four times now. I've spent more time crying than typing.

Just fucking get up. You're so fucking dramatic.

I actually feel really unwell, I don't know if it's a good idea for me to sit up.

For fuck's sake, you're just thinking yourself into feeling unwell. Just get your shit together and get your assignment done. You're beyond running out of time. You're such an attention seeker, ugh, it's disgusting.

* * *

I *want* to be an activist. I can't pretend that I don't understand how unequal society is; I can't unlearn how neoliberal capitalist structures force the overwhelming majority of people to live under systems of oppression; I know that there is no neutral position, only to agree with the system or fight against it (Freire 2000). I also can't deny that I have skills, knowledge and abilities that are useful for *the cause*. A part of me wants to say, "but I also need to accept that I don't yet have a stable enough sense of self to be able to cope with *the struggle*," because even without putting myself out there I'm already struggling, but that other voice keeps telling me that's a cop out.

The amusing thing is, I know that my mental health problems are greatly, *greatly* exacerbated by the oppressive neoliberal capitalist system which separates us from nature, from each other, from meaningful and valued work, from hopeful futures, from supportive communities, from genuine self-care and from genuine care for others (Hari 2018). Poor mental health is a logical and even expected response to such a bleak situation (Monbiot 2016; Cain 2018; Hari 2018). This is not by chance, this is deliberate. When you realise that you're sad, lonely, broke, don't know how to look after yourself and we've only got twelve years left to save the planet and the future of humanity – neoliberal capitalism says to you: "Poor baby! Do you know what will make it better? A tub of ice-cream, a bottle of wine, some online shopping and a Netflix marathon. Maybe a few anti-depressants too, I'm sure you could fulfil the required checklist for at least one of the two hundred and ninety-seven medically recognised psychiatric disorders." The system is presented to us as the solution to our problems, the ultimate benevolent Father, the natural pinnacle of human progress (Ife 2016). In this way it manages to pacify us and distract us from the reality that we would not need the *comfort* of capitalism if we were not living under the *oppression* of capitalism.

So, I recognise that the system has created an environment which ensures that my mental health problems inhibit my ability to overthrow the system. But how do I get out of that loop?

Perhaps I already answered my own question:

"It is the task, and *the struggle*, of the powerless to unwaveringly pursue their own humanity and through this ongoing act of love release all who are dehumanised by the chains of oppression."

Am I an activist? Well, my therapist thinks so.



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