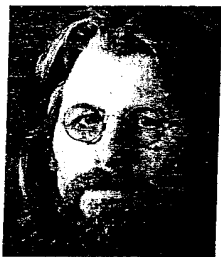


How far are we from the edge?



What is the difference between a radical and a conservative? Some people might say: About 20 years.

A little while ago, my wife and I decided to take a trip around the world to see how our radical friends were doing two decades after we had started

our own do-it-yourself community revolution.

We had all first met in New Delhi in the Seventies. We had seen those dark shadows lurking behind the bright lights that flashed 'West is best', and headed out – far out – east in search of enlightenment. After all, the Orient was supposed to be the place where people got reorientated.

We had come from all over the globe: from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Australasia. And we had banded together to build our small-is-beautiful, all-for-one-and-one-for-all model of a better world. Our cluster of 'international intentional discipleship communities' stretched from Kabul to Kathmandu like a string of precious pearls around the throat of Asia, and the community at the centre of the necklace, the Dilaram House in New Delhi, for many of us was the pearl of great price.

There we met the Messiah. The Sermon on the Mount became our manifesto. We were enchanted by a vision of heaven on earth, intoxicated with passion for God and compassion for our neighbours. We welcomed strangers, shared meals with guests round our table, tasted joy and sorrow, drank to redemption, cared for the sick, addicted and abused, and gladly gave all that we had to the poor.

Ange and I remember it as a biblical dream come true. We have never forgotten it. We have not tried to replicate the experience, but it has served as the inspiration for the simple, practical, revolutionary, Christlike way we have been challenged to live for the rest of our lives.

By the time the Nineties rolled around, we were feeling exhausted from the relentless stress involved in doing our bit for our DIY revolution. We thought it might cheer us up to catch up, over a cup of steaming hot, lightly spiced Indian tea, with some of those comrades that we had started out with in New Delhi two decades before.

Our friends were by now dispersed all over the globe, so we had to save up to buy round-the-world tickets to visit them. But eventually we took off for our 'chai and chat' tour of India, Nepal, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Britain. It was just what the doctor ordered. It was a real tonic to be able just to sit and talk over a cuppa with people we had known in our youth, who as middle-aged men and women were now struggling with the same issues in their lives as we were.

We noted that they, like us, were fighting to sustain their integrity and their commitment to family and community against immense external pressures and constant internal temptations to throw it all in. And we noted that all of them, like us, bore the scars from that battle.

We also noticed that they, like us, were still committed to causes such as human rights, social justice and community development, but with less energy and less enthusiasm as time went by. And we noticed that most of them, like us, were moving away from direct personal participation towards more indirect, professional involvement. Few of us were engaged as passionately in the work for change as we had been 20 years before.

Now, for Ange and I the question was not, 'Why are so many of us beginning to falter?' We knew full well why we were faltering. Years ago, I had written a book called *Can You Hear the Heartbeat?* and on many occasions since my friends had suggested that

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it was time I wrote a sequel titled *Can't You See the Heartbreak?* We had chosen to care, and we were crushed by the unbearable weight of despair that came with hoping and praying and working for so much but accomplishing so little.

The question was not 'Why are so many of us beginning to falter?' but 'How are some of us managing to keep the faith and continue to fight the good fight?'

To find out the answer, we paid especially close attention to the conversations we had with a few of our friends who were slogging away as fervently as ever at the task of transformation. And as we listened to them talk about their lives we distinguished three characteristics which together seemed to explain their capacity to sustain the edge of their radical resolve.

The first was their encounter with Christ. It was their continuing intimate, existential experience of the magical, mystical love of God revealed in Christ that inspired their hope in the possibility of redemption, in spite of their disappointments, and infused their wounded, weary hearts with a renewed capacity to love regardless.

The second was their commitment to vocation. They acquired the knowledge and the skills required for their work without allowing the propensities of their profession to displace their sense of calling. Refusing to sell their services to the highest bidder, they continued to serve the poor, whether they got paid a lot, a little or absolutely nothing at all.

The third was their accountability to other people. None of them were saints. They all had problems which, left unresolved, were inimical to their commitments. But instead of denying their contradictions they dealt with them by welcoming criticism from people who were painfully aware of their difficulties and passionately committed to resolving them.

The difference between a radical and a conservative is not a matter of time but one of attitude. □