

FREE EXCERPT

WIELDING THE FORCE: THE SCIENCE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

PREFACE: A NEW HOPE

Have you ever been involved in one of those discussions where someone challenges whether compassion is an appropriate response to human suffering? They may allege that compassion is a contrived emotion that you call up because of the social payback you get from people who recognize you as a caring person. Or worse, they may claim that people “choose” situations that cause them suffering, that it’s part of their growth process, and, therefore, although you may feel sorry for them, the best help you can give is to allow people in pain find their own way out of self-created suffering.

I’ve had such depressing discussions. Compassion is one component of the socially just world I’m struggling to co-create. Cooperation is another keystone in my vision and I’ve also had several arguments over the years, sometimes with people in my own family, who believe that competition is what drives social and economic development. In their way of thinking, competition is a healthy and natural part of being human while cooperation, especially in the realm of economics, just doesn’t work. Cooperatives and collectives are unfair in their very design because people who work hard are rewarded in the same way as people who work less, they argue.

If you’re an activist for social justice you’ve probably had such conversations too. Like me, you might struggle with the underlying feeling that there may be a shred of truth to these arguments and that the vision you want to create, a world full of compassionate, cooperative people contributing to each other’s wellbeing, is an impossible dream.

Well, what if hard science was on your side? What if there were biologists, geneticists and neuroscientists who say that cooperation and compassion are not only healthy for us but that they are wired into our biology? That cooperation and compassion are integral to our survival as well as our social and physical evolution?

New and emerging science seems to be making a strong argument in favour of social justice. Social science, sometimes referred to as “soft” science, has always told us that how we choose to structure our communities and allocate resources not only impacts social and economic progress but also our individual health. Now, the so-called “hard” sciences are saying the same thing. Furthermore, this new information suggests that much of what we believe about how the world functions is not entirely accurate and a paradigm shift is in order.

In this book I’d like to review some recent scientific discoveries and see what the implications are for building healthy, sustainable communities. This includes activist communities because this new information has implications for how social change advocates can be more effective in their work, including role modeling the alternatives we aspire to create. For example, have you ever wanted to join an activist group but the

unhealthy interpersonal dynamics stopped you? Have you ever participated in an action where someone (or many someones) worked themselves into such a state of rage that they violated group agreements around how the action was to be conducted? In doing so, they may have endangered people's safety and yet continued despite the risk they imposed on others. Have you ever worked in a community organization where colleagues who are theoretically as concerned for the welfare of the world as you are, treat each other and community members with disrespect and disdain?

As activists, many of us have either witnessed or experienced these situations but tend to believe that, for the most part, we understand how they occur. We've built an elaborate analysis around understanding how anti-social behaviours develop. How it's healthy and even desirable to feel anger, frustration and fear in the face of injustice. Basically, we note that unhealthy societies produce unhealthy people. We aren't taught how to cooperate; we're taught how to compete. We aren't taught how to resolve conflicts, we're taught to win them. We aren't taught to embrace difference, we're taught to fear it. We also aren't instructed on how to maintain an awareness of our feelings and manage them. As a result, many people around us, some with considerable wealth and power, role model suppression, denial and/or inappropriate ways of dealing with emotions.

Those of us from marginalized communities (racialized, impoverished, queer, differently-abled, etc.) have been hated, feared and mistreated our whole lives. So of course we're frustrated and angry. That doesn't just turn off because we become activists for social justice or community workers in a non-profit. We self-righteously claim that our anger fuels our activism and desire for change. We're entitled to our anger, we tell ourselves, especially since we channel it into doing social justice work. Meanwhile, racialized people suffer disproportionately from high blood pressure, high rates of cardio vascular disease and other physical symptoms of the injustices we confront on a daily basis (1) and there is reason to believe that our endemic anger is contributing to our unwellness.

We activists understand how unhealthy behaviours impact our work. At best they drain our time and energy. At worst they make it difficult to attract new folks into our movements and burn out our best people. Anti-social behaviours can, and do, kill groups. They also kill people, as we very well know. Such behaviours clearly present barriers to achieving our social justice goals.

Activists, to our credit, are able to share beautiful visions of the communities we are working hard to establish. We've created a variety of resources and trainings devoted to helping each other develop cooperative, consensus-building and peace-making skills. Sometimes they work. Other times, not so much. We urge each other to engage in self-care but don't usually consider it an essential part of our activist work, even though we recognize that healthy individuals contribute to the wellness of communities. And we all know that no amount of skills and resources will replace the fundamental desire to work with integrity, honesty and respect.

It's this fundamental desire that this book addresses. *Wielding The Force* will provide you with a new take on old wisdom to inform and reinforce your work for social justice. After reading this book, you will be empowered with persuasive hard science data that can be interpreted and applied using the wisdom you already possess. You will be better able to help people transform their hearts and minds - in that order – because, as the science shows us, emotions play a crucial role in our decision-making and thought processes.

I have written this book because it is my desire that people equate the word activism with peace, fairness and kindness. I want activists to be understood as grounded, compassionate and hopeful individuals. The model of activism I espouse is one that literally uses the heart's intelligence, a concept which you will understand as you read on. Information in the following chapters will enable you to ground your activism in a sense of peace and optimism that contributes to personal and collective wellbeing, thus setting the stage for the coming revolutionary shift.

Allow me to illustrate with a story.

Have you ever heard of Matthieu Ricard? If so, you might recall that this French Buddhist monk, renowned for his generosity and kindness, who also has a PhD in molecular genetics, has been dubbed by media as “the happiest man in the world.” How could anyone possibly conclude that? Well, today we can identify happiness and other emotions through new technologies that allow us to detect and quantify electrical activity going on in different parts of our brains. Our heart rates and biochemistry can also reveal our emotional states.

In 2007 Matthieu Ricard was a participant in an experiment that aimed to study what was going on in the brains of people who were experiencing a feeling they called “happiness.” As it turns out, happiness lights up the pre-frontal cortex with increased synaptic (bio-electrical and chemical) activity that signals all kinds of changes in your biochemistry, in your heart rate and at the molecular level in every cell of your body. Those changes both result from and intensify feelings of wellness and a sense of profound peace, which is one definition of happiness used in such studies. These changes are also signs of the best states of physical health.

Matthieu Ricard registered more activity in his happy brain than others participating in the study. Researchers, who were amazed at the readings he'd generated, asked the monk what he had been thinking about during the scan. Mr. Ricard answered that he had been meditating on ... wait for it ... compassion! The researchers were surprised. Compassion is not generally seen in our society as a cause of joy. And, while people in good health tend to be joyful, joy hasn't, in and of itself, been understood as an emotion that creates physical wellbeing.

Nevertheless, just as emotions like depression, anger and fear generate a physical stress response that jeopardizes health, it has become clear that feelings of compassion, appreciation and gratitude improve health and wellbeing. In fact, deliberately calling up

such feelings for a mere five minutes results in five hours of heightened immunity and lowered stress levels.

One of the discoveries that activists particularly like about compassion is that a part of the brain that becomes active when feeling this emotion is the area responsible for planning action. Apparently feeling compassion, that is feeling that you want to alleviate someone's suffering, involves an action component. So the Dalai Lama quote that often appears on my Facebook page, "It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act," has some scientific credibility. Vietnamese Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hahn was right when he said, "Compassion is a verb."(2)

New and emerging science is further demonstrating that the wellbeing of communities is also enhanced in measurable ways when compassion, cooperation and social justice characterize our relationships. This is contrary to many contemporary worldviews that uphold individualism, competition and the profit motive as the driving forces behind economic progress, social evolution and community wellbeing.

In the succeeding chapters, this book will take a plain language look at how "hard" sciences such as epigenetics and neuroplasticity not only strengthen the argument for social justice but also indicate that a major paradigm shift for all of society is in order. By examining the works of scientists such as biologist Dr. Bruce Lipton, neuroscientist Dr. Alvaro Pascual-Leone and physicist Dr. Geoffrey West, as well as the work of the HeartMath Institute, the Good Science Centre and the Institute of Noetic Sciences, I will discuss how recent scientific discoveries have major implications for how we understand and co-create healthy relationships, well-functioning communities and sustainable activism.

This information will be contrasted and framed within what I'm calling a "relational" worldview, which I will explain and explore. I will further make the case that this framework best allows us to understand and make use of the science; indeed, it is where the science is leading us. I draw a lot on First Nations teachings because it is what I know best, however, I am not suggesting that this knowledge tradition is the only wisdom tradition that exemplifies relational ways of knowing. There are many relational wisdom traditions. I will not be sharing ceremonial knowledge or proselytizing around specific beliefs and practices. What I share of Indigenous North American and other wisdoms will be what is already publicly accessible through various sources, such as films, the worldwide web, and publications.

Similarly, this book will not focus on the history of colonization or attempt to argue that the settler colonial project in North America and other parts of the world is ongoing. If needed, the curious reader and serious activist will find many resources devoted to this topic elsewhere. You can start with CBC's documentary series 8th Fire (3) and the Defenders of the Land website. (4) In any case, my purpose is not to examine or reveal the many historical and current injustices that exist in our society and around the world but to proceed with the assumption that colonialism and other systemic injustices exist and that the reader has a critical understanding of how these function and to whose benefit.

Furthermore, while I draw on Indigenous cultural knowledge to explore relational paradigms, my purpose in writing this book is not about conversion to any particular political philosophy or spiritual tradition. Although I happen to identify as an Indigenist, I have no interest in colonizing anyone else's thinking in this regard. After all, my own beliefs have shifted and changed over time and will continue to do so. Consequently, I hold no illusions about assuming that my current beliefs are superior to any others. Nor am I convinced they represent some ultimate unshakable truth that will bring wisdom, joy and peace to everyone. Each of us has our own path to follow and our own destination at which to arrive.

My intent with this book is to share information that we can collectively develop for our common benefit in the interest of improving the quality of life on planet Earth. My hope is that when you read *Wielding The Force* you will be better enabled to make changes in your life, groups and communities that promote wellbeing and social justice.

What is social justice? I can't give a one-size-fits all definition of the term, though I share some thoughts in the final chapter. Each of us must decide what social justice looks like in our own lives. Each of us must further decide whether we consider ourselves to be activists. From my perspective, mothers raising their children to be caring, compassionate and kind may call themselves activists just as much as protesters marching in the streets. First Nations Elders who teach language and culture are activists just as much as those who block roads to prevent uranium mining. Those who demonstrate to city folk how to grow organic vegetables in community gardens are activists just as much as those who stage sit-ins at government offices to advance their demands. The reasons why I believe this will become clear as you read on. Personally, I identify as an activist because I've been committed for years to social justice and wellbeing for myself as well as all other life on the planet. I've struggled as a mom, artist and community worker to rationally argue that caring and sharing make sense in terms of ensuring the survival and flourishing of the human species.

People who believe in "survival of the fittest" as well as the idea that competition and conflict drive innovation and creativity have dismissed my set of beliefs as unsubstantiated and, therefore, unworthy of consideration. Or, as the likes of Immanuel Kant, Ayn Rand and some other highly regarded philosophers might say, the perspective of a 'weak-minded woman driven by emotion'. Consequently, I am greatly excited that, in the course of researching speculative fiction story ideas, I accidentally stumbled upon evidence that my "POV" is actually well-substantiated in new and emerging (though under-publicized) scientific findings. I'm gratified to confirm that my Indigenous teachers, mentors and role models are wiser than many give them credit for as this new hard science knowledge validates cultural practices from First Nations (and many other wisdom) traditions as contributors to community and individual wellbeing. Or as my activist colleagues say, perhaps I should be grateful that the science is catching up to our age-old wisdom.

When viewed through the "relational" lens of some wisdom traditions, new science lays the groundwork for feelings of fulfillment and a sense of purpose that many scientists

now consider to be more important to health and happiness than what some people believe makes them happy, such as accumulating wealth, being consistently entertained or getting laid. Not that you can't enjoy these things but it's our relationship to life with all its ups and downs that determines our overall sense of joy and contentment – which in turn impacts our individual and collective wellbeing. The next two chapters are devoted to exploring “relationality” so don't worry if you aren't sure what that means right now.

This book is divided into nine chapters:

Chapter One: Sith versus Jedi looks at the question of paradigms, worldviews and ideologies – frameworks that help us make sense of our world. This chapter contrasts some key features of the dominant cultural paradigm as well as leftist paradigms, with those of global Indigenous peoples. This is to generate understanding of and appreciation for indigenous and other relational ways of knowing, which have much to offer advocates of social justice.

Chapter Two: Spidey Forces goes further in depth to explore the concept of “relationality” to enable the reader to grasp some fundamental differences between leftist knowledge paradigms and those of Indigenous and other wisdom traditions. It will further examine intersections and compatibility among paradigms as well as demonstrate the advantages of sharing and interacting across knowledge traditions.

In Chapter Three: My Adventures in the Jedi Academy of Life, I preface sharing my story of being an activist with a look at the issue of social location and how it might matter to the discussions the book provokes.

Chapter Four: The Internal Force deals with new hard science discoveries around the mind/body connection and discusses the implications for social change.

Chapter Five: Jedi Heart Tricks examines the role of the heart organ in the mind/body connection and its relevance to the struggle for social justice. Practical exercises in the chapter demonstrate this connection to readers.

Chapter Six: Jedi Brain Tricks looks at the implications of recent discoveries in brain science and their relevance to activism and social change.

Chapter Seven: Intersecting Force Fields explores findings about the science of relationships and interactions; our energetic connections to other life forms on the planet and the planet Herself, as well as to each other, again teasing out the relevancy for social justice advocates. This will be the longest chapter in the book because it's the meat of what concerns me: the science of human interactions.

Chapter Eight: Shape-Shifting Tricksters focuses on the critiques, concerns and limitations of the above information as it applies to social justice activism.

Chapter Nine: Activist Forces answers the question, “Now that we have this information, how do we effectively apply it in our social justice work?” This chapter argues that emerging science is informing a paradigm shift that can and should support the

transformation to social justice. Armed with this new information activists can hasten our collective transition to a kinder, healthier world.

I hope that, though we may disagree on some details you will emerge from this book transformed and better able to contribute to co-creating a new, wondrous and rEVOLutionary world. Our collective paradigm is shifting and science is firmly on the side of social justice! Like the rebels of the original Star Wars trilogy who brought down the evil Empire, activists can effectively wield “The Force.”