



# DAWSON CHURCH: Personal Disarmament



There are two types of eccentrics that I particularly adore. One is the activist. I'm sure you know one too; someone who is perpetually protesting whatever government does, no matter what it is. Perpetually grieving the state of the planet. Perpetually outraged by the scandal of the day. Seeing conspiracies everywhere. Given half a chance, pinning you in a corner to regale you with dark tales of sinister conspiracies. Even though usually broke, always giving money to worthy causes. Beset by a helpless sense of being unable to change any of the problems.

The other type is the mystic. These are the people who you see doing perfect poses in the yoga class, displaying a casual ability to bend their bodies to the most extreme degrees of flexibility. You see them buying the most organic of foods in the health food store. You see them pinning up notices about meditation classes, and talking in very quiet tones. They have a stillness about them so intense that you feel as though a hearty laugh might tear them in two.

I outraged an activist friend recently; let's call him Art the Activist. He lives in Sebastopol, California, and he's always traveling to march in the latest protest—by carpool or bus, of course. My offense lay in calling that general region the International Headquarters of the Impotent Activist. Sebastopol is a quaint and charming little town. As you drive into downtown, a sign greets you naming its sister cities all over the globe, and announcing that Sebastopol is a nuclear-free zone. I can just picture the mushroom cloud as it drifts North from San Francisco. It notices the sign,

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coughs apologetically, and murmurs, “Er...sorry. I think I’ll just detour a few miles East.”

Art dates Yolanda the Yogini, who is a mystic. She once lived as a celibate nun on an ashram for nine years, but now contents herself with meditating for four hours each day. She ekes out a living as a yoga teacher, renting a room in a communal house. She is fragile, beautiful, otherworldly, pure, and soft-spoken. Even her cat is a vegan, and insists upon eating only sustainably grown, fair farming practice, triple-washed, non-GMO, locally produced, organic foods.

The rust on the back of Art’s Volkswagen van is held in place primarily by bumper stickers. Among the many messages displayed are these: Good Planets are Hard to Find; Compassionate Objector; Wage Peace; Thank Goddess; Practice Impeachment; We Are Spiritual Beings on a Human Path; Free Tibet, and You Can’t Take Sides Because the World Is Round. While Yolanda runs from the world to her peaceful meadow of serenity, Art fumes. It is much easier for him to project his demons onto the screen of “the people in power” than it is for him (completely out of power) to deal with the demons that hold the floor of his own inner parliament.

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As I sit in my little publishing office, cranking out words by night and by day, I grapple with this question: What am I doing to radically alter the fatal direction in which our civilization is traveling? What actions can I take that spring from the pure heart of the Great Spirit that sees the whole unfolding picture, rather than the hopeless flailings of the limited human mind—which sees only a fragmentary blur? What does it mean to work on my own personal growth and enlightenment, even while the world as we know it totters on the brink of ecological, economic and political disaster? What effect does the work I am doing within the confines of my own consciousness each moment have on the world outside? Am I as powerless as Art; have I abandoned the outer world like Yolanda?

Each morning, after reading an inspirational scripture, I sit in meditation. I feel a sense of stillness and connection with the universal whole that provides an anchor to my entire day. But I cannot afford simply to sit in a smug tower of meditative bliss while the planet burns, and gaze upon the ashes with a benign smile. We cannot afford to marginalize ourselves with marginal issues like painting nuclear-free signs while genocide engulfs the Caucasus, while Nigerian women wade in the toxic runoff from a power plant in order to gather the sludge to make soap, while hundreds of species are vanishing into the dark abyss of extinction every hour.

I know, from reading their words and meeting some of them, that great spiritual masters are detached. Students bring to them their great

worries and personal problems, and the masters answer from a perspective of calm equanimity. The master is not swayed by all the problems and turmoil that so trouble the student. The master maintains an inner calm despite the turbulence of life. That is why the master can be wise; her perceptions are not clouded by the swirls of emotional attachment that pull the student off his path. The master sees the path to true change because her consciousness is unclouded.

We can't always affect our external circumstances, or directly change the course of history. Yet we can always change our internal emotional climate, and that changes everything. When our hearts relax, we are subsequently more able to approach the challenge of daily life in a more rational way.

A poor farmer came to the Buddha for help with his problems. He told the Buddha about the wilting of his crop. The Buddha said, "I can't help you with that problem." Disappointed, the farmer told the great teacher about his shrewish wife. "I have no advice for you about that one either," said the Buddha. The farmer poured out all his problems, eighty-three of them to be exact, but the Buddha could help with none of them. The exasperated farmer exclaimed, "Well what good are you if you can't help me with any of my problems?"

"I can help you with your eighty-fourth problem," the Buddha responded.

"What problem is that?" asked the farmer.

The sage responded: "Your eighty-fourth problem is craving release from your other eighty-three problems."

The farmer looked baffled, so the Buddha elaborated. "We all have about eighty-three problems," he explained. Sometimes we solve one of them, or two or three. But new ones always arise to take their places. Every person, rich or poor, old or young, has about eighty-three problems. Being content—in the midst of them—being at peace inside, despite the imperfections of the world, is the heart of spiritual work. That's the only problem I can truly solve."

This story points to one of the great paradoxes of life. Only action that springs from an undisturbed well of inner peace can pierce to the heart of a problem. When you solve the eighty-fourth problem, you see the other eighty-three in a new and transformative light. Inner peace must come first, then enlightened and compassionate social action can follow. Social action that stems from helpless emotional outrage and flailing intellectual confusion cannot truly succeed.

Defusing your inner triggers solves your eighty-fourth problem, so that you can then look upon the other eighty-three with equanimity. In a

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calm state, you are much better able to deal with both your personal issues and global ones. When opportunities for social change present themselves, inner calm allows us to notice them and be available to them. We have to be effective in the world. Yet we need inner peace as well. This is detachment. But it is also effective. It is passionate detachment.

What are your eighty-three problems? I'm sure you have as little trouble listing them as the farmer had telling them to the Buddha. Which one of them most disturbs your own inner peace? Which problems reliably make you crazy? Who in your life triggers you the most? Is it your wife or husband? When your child throws herself into your arms, do you clench up? Do you have an employee who makes you wince? Does a screaming baby make your skin crawl? Do you cringe when your wife or husband picks up the TV remote? Are you embarrassed when you see a friend crying? Do you quickly change the subject when a co-worker pays you a compliment?

**When opportunities for social change present themselves, inner calm allows us to notice them and be available to them.**

Mastering our own reactivity to these people and situations is the absolute key to peace in ourselves, in our families, in our countries, and in our world. Our first life-work is to notice who we react to the most, who pulls us out of calmness and into reactivity, and defuse that trigger. Until we master this vital skill, we are toxic bombs, continually primed to detonate whenever faced with the right stimulus. We can be disarmed—but only by ourselves, by our own choice. Dealing with our own triggering is a practical contribution you can make to global peace each and every day.

Here's a test to discover if you're dumping your mushroom cloud into the nuclear-free zone of your neighbor's consciousness. Any kind of an edge, any charge, any sense of urgency in your feelings, indicates that you're triggered.

When a bell-ringer strikes a bell, every other bell in the vicinity tuned to the same frequency vibrates as well, even though they have not been struck. The ringing bell is the external trigger; the feelings of upset or urgency inside of you are the resonant echoes. Getting this distinction right between what is actually happening in the real world, the trigger, and what is happening inside you, the emotional upheaval, is the key to solving the eighty-fourth problem.

It's easy to believe that the person or situation out there "caused" your distress. Something happened, and you feel bad. Therefore, we believe, the something that happened caused us to feel bad.

But this is rarely the case. Your nemesis Harry may say something callous, cruel, harsh and unkind to you, and you may feel angry and upset. It's easy to point to Harry's harsh words as the "cause" of your upset. But

they are not. The real cause is the Inner Harry right inside your own head, resonating in perfect frequency with the words spoken by the Outer Harry. When you've disarmed the inner Harry, when you've healed, soothed and silenced your vicious inner critic, then the words that spiteful Outer Harry says to you have no emotional impact. Outer Harry can then say the meanest things, and there's no bell to ring inside your own heart in resonance. That is how the master stays calm despite the outrages of the outer world. She has defused the frequencies inside herself that resonate with the outrages of the world.

When you aren't emotionally jangled by what Outer Harry says, then you don't need to react to him. You don't feel hurt. You don't need to take revenge on him. You don't need to defend yourself, or point out how wrong he is. You stay cool and collected—maybe even cool enough to notice how much pain Harry must be in for him to speak to another human being that way. Maybe cool enough for that noticing to lead to compassion, allowing you to laugh and say, “Gee, Harry, you must be having a bad day. What's up with you?” Perhaps Harry hasn't been heard for years, and been stewing unnoticed in a toxic brew of his own anger and frustration. Maybe your compassionate response will open a door for him to be able to share his pain. Maybe it won't. You're whole, either way, and you haven't contributed to the sum of pain in the world. You haven't tried to take care of Harry's pain. You've taken care of your own pain in an act of enlightened selfishness. Yet once your own pain is gone, you are able to offer compassion to Old Dirty Harry.

When someone does or says something that sets your teeth on edge, and you feel upset, nothing is wrong. In fact, something is very right. A part of your psyche has presented itself for your examination in order to be healed. If you feel uncomfortable, angry, or upset, give thanks! A part of your subconscious that has been split off, suffering in the dark, has come to you to be embraced, loved, and integrated into the whole of your being. Having the feeling come up is a gift from God, because it gives you access to your unhealed material so that you can heal it. Your anger doesn't come up when Outer Harry yells at you in order for you to be able to nuke him back. Your anger comes up at that time saying, “Hey, here I am, presenting myself to be healed.” If you pause, and reach within, focusing on yourself rather than on counterattacking Harry, then you have a sudden priceless moment in which to heal yourself and your old wounded pattern.

If, when we're triggered, we look at ourselves, then we seize that opportunity to heal. If—instead—we look at the other, blaming and projecting, then our opportunity to heal is lost, and the wound festers on; in Shakespeare's words, we “but skin and film the ulcerous place, whilst rank corruption, mining all within, infects unseen.” Eckhart Tolle suggests

that we be at least as interested in our own reaction as in the person who caused that reaction. In the second before you react, if you can catch yourself, and redirect your enquiry to your own feelings, you suddenly have healing within your grasp. Mastering that instant of reactivity is key.

Curbing our own reactivity may sound simple. In fact, it may be the hardest challenge we ever take on. It makes stopping logging in the rain-forest—"cutting out the lungs of the Earth," as David Brower phrased it—seem easy. Stopping North Korea or Israel from making more bombs might seem like a more reasonable goal. Try intervening in your own reactive patterns for a day, and you'll find out!

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We can't physically remove the triggers from the thousands of old Soviet warheads in Russia, which the Western powers have been disarming at a shamefully desultory pace. But every day, we can pull the triggers off our own reactive bombs.

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We saw America rush reactively into a senseless war with Iraq in 2003. While people blame George Bush, anyone who read the newspapers at that time will recall a jingoistic rush to judgment by the whole country, including virtually all stripes of public opinion, all the media, the Congress and all the organs of government. The verdict of the nation to go to war was virtually unanimous. To my shame, I went along with the tide. After a couple of months of harboring uneasy misgivings, I eventually thought that I must be the only crazy person on the block, since every commentator and neighbor seemed to believe in the rightness of going to war. Eventually I thought, "Every voice is for this war, even the most distinguished of our opposition leaders. Perhaps it really is right." It wasn't. It was a seductive group psychosis. That's what reactivity looks like on a national scale. The collective reactivity of a nation of individually reactive people is very dangerous to the world. In most regions of the world, polls reveal that citizens regard U.S. President George Bush as a greater threat to world peace than North Korea or Osama bin Laden.

Changing our individual reactive patterns is difficult. Very, very difficult. We have spent a lifetime engraving neural pathways in our brains. Taking all that wiring and rewiring it is very difficult. Especially since it's on automatic. That's why the many books, tapes and classes on personal growth and change don't work in the real world. It's easy to be loving in a seminar, or while reading a relationship book. But when Dirty Harry's in your face, the old patterns immediately take over. They're very familiar, your body's used to feeling this way, and anything else feels strange in your body. And the feelings come up so quickly that you can't stop them. So how do you find the Pause button, so that you have even a fifty-fifty chance of changing your old reactive patterns?

What to do?

Here are a few very simple yet valuable ways to stop the clock before you lash out reactively.

The first comes from Thomas Jefferson. He said, "If you're angry, count to ten before replying. If very angry, count to one hundred." The reason that a quarter-millennium-old piece of advice still works is that any pause at all interrupts our automatic patterns. It gives the flare of anger time to cool. It disables the reactive pattern before it expresses itself in angry words that, once spoken, can never be unspoken.

The second is to breathe. Shifting your attention to the breath breaks the cycle of reactivity. Take a few deep breaths, and your desire to retaliate against the person who has triggered you will dissipate. Lionel, my eldest son, learned this in preschool: "Breathe out the bad stuff, breathe in the good stuff." Perhaps nothing else he ever learned in school has been as important.

The third is to tap the endpoints of the energy meridians of your body a few times with a finger. There are thirteen of them, and the process takes under a minute. Yet I have repeatedly seen people go from bubbling anger to utter calm in moments using this technique. It's like hitting the reset button on your emotional body. You can find complete instructions on how to do this at [www.emofree.com](http://www.emofree.com); you will be amazed at the instant results you will experience if you use this method of defusing yourself.

The fourth is to meditate daily. Starting your day this way gives you a foundation of peace. It is like filling up your reservoir; when you face an arid world, its challenges do not find you dry if you have tapped into the great reserve of spirit upon waking.

The fifth is to be fully present in your body. When you're triggered, shift your attention to notice what you feel physically, and exactly where. Fully feel how your body feels. Often, the reason we jump on poor old Harry is that we can't deal with the cauldron inside us. We jump out of our bodies and into Harry's face to escape the huge emotional burst we're feeling. So staying in your bones, feeling what you feel, keeps our attention in the one place it can do the work of healing: within.

Any technique you can use to bring yourself back to consciousness, bring you back into the present moment, is going to break the cycle of reactivity. Getting emotionally triggered and feeling hot and upset isn't a signal to talk or lash back. It's a signal to grow. The bigger your feeling of upset, the bigger the signal your psyche is giving you to grow. Experiment until you find your own method of disarming yourself, something that works for you. Practice it until you're so good that nothing can shake you. Become the master of your own emotions.

It doesn't take a change in 51% of the people in a culture to shift a culture. It takes only a very small percentage changing to change a culture.

One of the most striking and amazing experiences I had was being in Central Park, New York, on June 12, 1982. Perhaps half a million people gathered that day to protest the martial policies of the government of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who was locked in a testosterone-laden alpha male staredown with Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov.

We forget, today, that a whole generation lived with a very real and concrete possibility of imminent nuclear annihilation. The U.S. was developing neutron bombs, parodied as able to kill people but avoid damaging property. Europe was outraged by U.S. proposals to deploy them there. A powerful new missile with the Orwellian name of the Peacekeeper was in development. Both sides rattled their sabres, and neither blinked.

The huge peace rally was covered by all the major television networks. Then the talk show commentators interviewed U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz. With a face graven in stone, his lips barely moving, he said, in effect, "Such protests will have absolutely no effect on American government policy." We had failed—or so we thought.

Within a year, the world gaped in blank astonishment as Ronald Reagan made a complete U-turn. He didn't just start paying lip service to disarmament. He didn't even merely start focusing on the issue. He went the whole way, declaring nuclear arms reduction the primary goal of American foreign policy and his presidency. Suddenly the values of June 12 became the values of a nation. It was a defining moment in Western civilization, and four billion people began to breathe a little more easily as the

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threat of a nuclear showdown receded. The actions of a few people can have a disproportionate influence on the whole.

Imagine, with me, three actually and genuinely peaceful nations. Imagine if most of the individuals in the United States, Great Britain and South Africa, to pick some names, every day and in every human interaction, consistently practiced disarming their own attacking thoughts and creating peace. Imagine all the mystics of all three nations providing a national reservoir of connection with the Great Spirit. Imagine all the activists of all three nations joining together to spread goodwill, and to find non-adversarial solutions to society's problems. Imagine those bells of thought being rung millions of times by millions of people each day, setting up a resonant frequency to every other peaceful person in the world.

Let's do that. Let's become the first nation in which every citizen thinks, projects, and practices peace. Start with yourself, and the world will follow.