# THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

## What's Mine to Do? Vision, Action and Mourning in the Face of Collapse

by **Miki Kashtan**

Teaching, reading, and writing for a post-patriarchal world

We live in difficult times, with overwhelming challenges that are affecting all of life on planet Earth. I imagine that a huge number of people, anywhere in the world, are fully trapped within survival mode. This includes the many people whose lives are entirely on the edge, impoverished beyond my imagination, though I've had several occasions to see with my own eyes what we have done in the world. It also includes the many people in the global north, including people in well-paid positions, whose lives, however comfortable, are still an incessant grind to keep up with everything.

This piece is written for those of us who, against all odds, have found a way to lift up our heads above the grind to face and do something about the challenges; to mobilise our resources to work for change. All of us who do it know it's a daunting task, and the likelihood of turning around everything that's putting us on the brink of extinction is small. And still we go on.

### Nourishing Our Capacity to Do the Work[1]

When we are in the flow of doing our work, the flow itself gives us enough energy to keep us going. And flow is only there for a period before it stops. Sometimes it's a difficulty that breaks the flow: a new piece of information about the world that devastates us; a project that completes and leaves us with an ache from how little it accomplished; or a request for funding that gets turned down, leaving us overwhelmed about how we can proceed with the work. And sometimes it's an exciting new possibility that breaks the flow: a new project begins with all the hope that entails; a new person joins the team and brings with them new ideas and resources; or a long-standing conflict gets resolved. Either way, it is when we are out of flow that we need support and guidance for how to keep going.

In my work, I have found that what's likely needed, in such moments, is enough of three things: vision, action and mourning. What we can then do is ask this simple question: which of these three is the one that's missing right now? Where do I need to focus my energy? With enough support, and with sufficient care in the discernment, this can lead to more capacity to stay the course without burnout. Each of the three elements is completely necessary, and there are no substitutes.

#### Vision

Vision gives us the overall capacity to maintain the faith that something else is possible; that what we see around us is not all there is. 'There is no alternative' was the four-word slogan embraced by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, as neoliberalism was rolled out. 'Another world is possible' was the retort from the World Social Forum, a four-word visionary, defiant response, asserting possibility, calling to action on behalf of change.

Without vision, our efforts for change often amount to a negation of what is, a fight against, an opposition to what we see. Even when we succeed, we either just block this or that specific

policy without creating significant change, or we end up changing who is running the show without changing the way things are done. Vision reminds us of where we want to go and why we are doing what we are doing.

## Action

Action may be the most obvious one to some of us, and not to all of us. Time and time again I am struck by how many people I encounter on my many calls seem to be lacking any sense of what they could do in the face of what's happening. Those who are part of functioning social movements have a pathway and follow it, and many more are not. Wanting to do something and not knowing what to do can be agonising. Finding action that speaks to what we want to see is never easy. As individuals, facing the enormity of the challenge, everything can seem puny. And yet engaging in action is vital to our sense of agency and capacity to contribute.

Part of the trick is to realise that we can't take a step from where we are to full implementation of vision. It's entirely and fully outside of our capacity limits, even if we are successfully engaged in a major social movement that has millions mobilised within it. Action is always to the next step, to what is possible, given where we are. The task is then to find a next step within capacity, pointing in the direction of the vision in terms of what it's aiming to achieve, and applying means that are aligned with the ends. When we do that, we increase capacity and move at the same time.

## Mourning

Mourning is usually the least attended to of the three. Mourning is what helps us be with the gap between our vision and what we see around us, including the limits of our capacity to take actions to close the gap. Mourning is one of the soft qualities that have the power to transform patriarchy, as I wrote about in my article in this magazine last year.[2] Without mourning, and fully within patriarchal conditioning, we are all too likely to use force without love. It can take various forms, all of which have happened to those working for change. It can lead people to take up arms in the literal sense. And it can lead people to give up on any vision and take to drinking. It can lead to forcing ourselves to do more than we have capacity for. And it can lead us to develop hatred towards those who think differently from us. Mourning softens all of it. Mourning invites us to look at *what is* with soft eyes, to touch the grief at the centre of our being, and to stay open to life as we slow down, attend to truth in its most naked, shed the necessary tears, and find, through that, renewed energy and capacity to imagine possibility.

Especially if we are in any position of leadership, mourning is both vital and rarely attended to. Mourning is both generative and regenerative. It is a fuel for our work. As leaders, the responsibility on our shoulders is enormous, the more so the more love we have for life and people, and the deeper our desire for change. We can easily develop urgency and despair which weaken us and leave us prone to choosing means that are not aligned with our vision, even if we have it fully articulated. We can easily forget that if our means are not aligned with our ends, we will not create the ends, even if we 'win' and reach some goal. What would give us any sense that we could realign with our ends once we have reached the goal? It's more likely that ignoring Gandhi's admonition that 'means are ends in the making' will only increase, if and when we reach any position of real power.

Mourning supports us in accepting the limits of capacity, both individual and collective, that keep humanity where we are. Releasing the tension and the urgency, and accepting the possibility that all may fail, may seem counterintuitive as a source of energy, and yet all I know who manage to do it report an increase of energy. Mourning is a composting process. It realigns us with the flow of life and gives us back all the energy that otherwise goes into fighting against ourselves, against others, or against life itself, which is what happens when we resist the mourning. Mourning is not a conceptual activity. It's about letting ourselves

be washed over, in the most literal sense of the word, by the state of the world.

## What's Mine To Do?

On the day the Covid pandemic was declared, a wave of despair arose within me. It wasn't something personal to me. It very clearly was about the horror image I had of this pandemic accelerating the collapse already happening around the world, especially in the form of people fighting with each other in the context of dwindling resources.

This was clearly a time to think about whether it was vision, action or mourning that was/were missing. My vision has been steady and strong for years, unwavering in the face of all odds, a source of energy that sustains me and my commitments. It rarely is what's missing. Although my mourning muscles are not at full capacity, I lean on mourning often, and I get clear signals when I don't. Often the signal is exhaustion stemming from ignoring my capacity limits and continuing to move in the direction of vision. That wasn't happening, either.

It was clearly action that was missing. As I was weighing my state and the state of the world in those early days of the pandemic, what I experienced was paralysis. I literally had no idea what I could possibly do to respond to the situation. Everything felt insignificant in the face of the enormity.

I was scheduled to lead a workshop on Convergent Facilitation[3] three days later in London, primarily for Extinction Rebellion activists who would be facilitating randomly selected groups of activists to decide, collaboratively, what to do when alignment within the Actions team didn't happen.

Despite the uncertainty and despite the advice of several people, those of us putting together the event were reluctant to cancel it. Inexplicably and intuitively, it felt vitally important to proceed with it. Based on looking at many considerations and engaging deeply with the participants, we chose to take the leap of holding the event as planned.[4] We had no idea this event would be a turning point for our work. While still at the event, we put together a plan for establishing a community of practitioners that would be supported and coached to increase their capacity. However small, these were steps that got us closer to a big part of my vision, which has to do with the conviction that there is no challenge big enough that people won't be able to solve in a collaborative way that integrates what is important to all stakeholders into a solution that works for all.

In times of crisis, it's not immediately obvious what action to take. We cannot take on the whole. It's beyond any individual's capacity, and presently also beyond our collective capacity. This small action that we took, with its very significant consequences within our community, clarified the question I was facing, at once simple and revolutionary: what is mine to do? This is what I hope all of us can do in difficult times: ask, and then release and listen with attentive trust.

Deep inside, we all have a cellular memory of what life is designed to be by evolution, because we come here with that given to us biologically. Can we let this vision wash over us with both the power of the possible and the mourning of the gap? Can we surround ourselves with sufficient support to be received when the challenges and obstacles outweigh the possibilities and capacity we have? Can we sufficiently accept our limitations to be willing to risk the possibility of utter failure, no matter what we do? Can we discern with sufficient care what our strengths are and what gives us energy, and then go for it?

The paralysis ended. Within days, I discovered what was mine to do in response to the pandemic. The immediate aspect of it that was a response to the pandemic per se was a 10-part series I called 'Apart and Together',[5] the first of which appeared a month later, and included this description of the answer:

> Part of what I am called to do, always and ever more so now, is to speak of the significance of what happens, and to offer a picture of what I see as possible; what a future aligned with our evolutionary makeup can be, and what we can do, individually and collectively, to increase the chances of getting there.

Each subsequent part focused on a way in which the pandemic, and the responses to it, made it harder to ignore what was already happening, intensifying already existing fractures in our social and material web of life and, simultaneously, creating opportunities for transformation.

Those opportunities have not been taken up by governments and others in positions of enormous power to influence the future of all life. As our global activities continue as before, the crises – climatic, political and cultural – multiply and intensify around the globe. In parallel, the longing for a 'return to normal' persists despite the impacts, as if 'normal' was ever working, as if it still is a possibility, as if collapse isn't already happening, as if our societies aren't polarising ever more, as if the turning towards fascism isn't happening. And, in the midst of it all, I remain mostly calm. Because, knowing what is mine to do, I also know what *isn't* mine to do. I know it's not mine to change the course of our collective actions; only to discern, again and again, what points in the direction of vision, what is my clear purpose, what is aligned with my values, and how I can use my very specific strengths within the humility of my limitations.[6]

There's nothing else I would ask of myself or of anyone else.

## Notes

1 Some of this article is based on a portion of an interview with me which took place as part of the Visionary Leadership Summit that was offered in February 2018 through www.culturewonk.com. The interview can be found at https://tinyurl.com/9uz562u (accessed 10 October 2021).
2 See Miki Kashtan, 'The power of the soft qualities to transform patriarchy', *Self & Society: International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, 48 (2), 2020, pp. 5–15 (available at ahpb.org).
3 See http://convergentfacilitation.org.
4 You can see a picture of the event at https://tinyurl.com/4psjpmkd (accessed 10 October 2021). It ended up being a small and surreal event, as we followed the two-metre recommendation in the large room we were in for the weekend. This was the very last in-person teaching event I have led to date.
5 See https://tinyurl.com/2ah8scav (accessed 10 October 2021).
6 My entire vision mobilisation structure is publicly available through my website at http://mikikashtan.org/about.

## About the contributor

**Miki Kashtan** is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (www.NGLcommunity.org), and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native with significant roots in Mexico and New York City, she is now vagabonding in search of learning about liberation and community. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology from UC Berkeley.

## SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."

**Carl R. Rogers (1902–1987)**