



The Paradox of Being a Warrior and a Monk: Subtle Activism in Claude A. Thomas *At Hell's Gate*

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ABSTRACT

Soldiers turned activists have played a pivotal role in advocating for social and political change throughout history, choosing often direct and overt forms of activism to push for their antiwar causes. While direct and overt forms of activism have been predominantly the traditional methods employed by activists, there is a growing recognition of the potential effectiveness of using more subtle and less confrontational approaches to address social and political issues. Subtle activism has gained prominence in recent years in different political and social contexts. However, in the context of war, little attention has been directed toward how antiwar subtle activism, social justice aspirations, and personal politics intersect and manifest outside overt normalized oppositional politics. This article intends to reclaim subtle activism as an exceptional form of antiwar and peace protest through a close examination of Claude Anshin Thomas' *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace* (2004). Drawing on David Nicol's subtle activism as a theoretical framework to inform the analysis, the paper argues that subtle activism offers Thomas meaningful participation in the realm of social justice, enabling common ground, such as antiwar sentiment, to come about. The paper allows for an adequate representation of veterans whose form of activism is not in line with traditional forms of activists' expressions and performances. It also helps to undermine the negative perceptions surrounding spiritual activism to fully appreciate its potential for positive social change.

Keywords: Subtle activism, spiritual activism, Vietnam War, *At Hell's Gate*, Claude Thomas, David Nicol.



Introduction

“Maybe being apolitical could end the war.”

Maxine Hong Kingston

The above-mentioned quote is where the crux of the memoir *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace* (2004) emerges. Claude Anshin Thomas' story of his war in Vietnam is no different than any other soldier, at least initially. Thomas went to Vietnam at a very early age, only eighteen, and despite the medals he won throughout his tour in Vietnam, such as the Purple Heart, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and 25 Air Medals, he felt damaged psychologically as a direct result of the horrible atrocities that he was forced to commit throughout the war. These atrocities took their toll on Thomas, as they did on many other soldiers, prompting him to seek out what could be considered less conventional measures to alleviate these issues.

The lack of resolve to a bending trauma of war, for Thomas, brought about a need for synergies between politics and spirituality in an attempt to bind up his wounds of war experience. Not only did he eventually become a peace advocate, as many others have done so before him in the like of Ron Kovic, but he became one through spiritual means, deconstructing along the process almost all the cultural narratives of healing that previously gave soldiers a frame of reference towards addressing the trauma of war. The implementation of spiritual activism in which Thomas is engaged is a set of peace protesting practices that, in many ways, are subtle and indirect.

Reframing subtle activism as a means of fostering antiwar sentiment is a struggle that many within the military community grapple with regularly. Although spiritual activism is theorized quite heavily within current social matters, the link between spirituality and activism in the context of war remains tenuous. On the one hand, spirituality utilizes an inward-looking perspective that often receives an unfavorable escapist impression of social injustices for an impartial observer (Keating, 2008, p. 53). On the other hand, activism, or antiwar activism, implies an overt and outward-looking interaction with the social world (Keating, 2008, p. 54). Little attention, thus far, has been directed toward how antiwar spiritual activism, social justice aspirations, and personal politics intersect and manifest outside overt oppositional politics.

This article intends to reclaim subtle activism as an exceptional form of antiwar and peace protest through a close examination of *At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace*. Drawing on David Nicol's subtle activism as a theoretical framework to inform the analysis, the paper argues that spiritual activism offers Thomas a meaningful participation in the realm of social justice, enabling common ground, such as antiwar sentiment, to come about. The article allows for an adequate representation of veterans whose form of activism is not in line with traditional forms of activists' expressions and performances. Allocating overt forms of activism secondary consideration may be a better way to explore the significance of other subtle means of antiwar activism, one that the broad surveys generally ignore. The paper also undermines many of the negative perceptions that come about surrounding



subtle or spiritual activism.

Literature Review

Over the last twenty years, social movement scholars have made significant progress in understanding the cultural frames that activists use to identify social problems, specify targets of action, and mobilize supporters. Integrating a spiritual perspective into a more conventional antiwar statement, however, remains a challenging proposition and represents the beginning of a social movement in its entirety. The literature available surrounding antiwar activism always touches upon overt or direct confrontational practices, whether the means are violent or nonviolent. This is not unexpected considering its immediate and macro-scale effects on the social and political realities of the world.

While the U.S. antiwar activism was substantial during the history of its early period, it culminated and gained momentum since the country's involvement in Vietnam. Charles Debenedetti (1990) contends that the term "movement" since the Vietnam War began to be more all-inclusive, allowing the formation of different communities to relate to one social cause through "action-oriented groupings" (p. 75). It is this sense of shared togetherness that led to the rise of the New Left and radical pacifism with a joint aim of directing confrontational action to redefine American values. But the history of confrontational politics goes as far back as the Second World War. B. T. Harrison (1992) argues that the postwar realities of the nuclear culture in the 1950s, the fear of communism, and the domestic realities of segregation radicalized the baby boomer generation and made them borrow practices of mass protests from "the labor movement" to bring about an aggressive peace organized protest to Vietnam antiwar efforts (p. 20, 23).

All this fervor led to an increase in religious activism during the war. While religious bodies tend to not announce positions during controversial times, James Findlay (1993) argues that during the war in Vietnam, many religious-oriented communities broke long-held traditions and facilitated religiously motivated measures to end the war (p. 306). Such a form of active politics remained mostly nonviolent but nonetheless vocal even long after the war ended. Likewise, James Smylie (1969) argues that antiwar religious activism during the war, despite being slow and different in approach, occupies a position that is neither pacifist nor radical (Smylie, 1969, p. 391). The consensus among religious bodies was one that envisioned the way to influence American policy regarding the war is pointless without direct access to the hierarchy of power and decision-making.

The reclamation of spirituality from authoritarian religion is one of the common themes that permeates literature. Although religion is supposedly a bearer of a spiritual tradition, it is an institutionalized tradition (Cosgrave, 2017, p. 600). By emphasizing dogmatic and ritualistic aspects, many religions have neglected to provide the spiritual sustenance and emotional connection that many seekers look for. The creation of alternative models of spiritual practices, therefore, has become a salient priority. Due to the wide varieties of spiritual practices, there is, on one hand, a popular trend that proposes human flourishing through spiritual means can be



achieved without recourse to religion. This dramatic configuration of religion puts emphasis on prioritizing individualism and self-expression over communal values and group solidarity. The idea of exclusive human agency, in which humans alone are responsible for designing and creating their own order, replaced institutionalized identification and belonging (Litonjua, 2016, p. 44). Given the long association between religion and conservative politics, spirituality offers a political alternative to address social issues.

On the other hand, there exists another trend that reconfigures religion as a means of fostering spiritual growth. Guillermo Márquez-Sterling (2012) asserts that it is through a certain unseen connection with “the Spirit of God” that a spiritual, introspective viewpoint may come about for affecting new management and resolution. Admitting the difficulty in qualifying the nature of this connection, he uses a more inclusive usage of the word “God” to include anything divine-oriented (p. xiii). Similarly, Avraham Weiss (2002) argues that it is through the process of continuous striving for religion that eventually leads to the restoration of someone’s spiritual self (p. 101). Both Márquez-Sterling and Weiss reappropriate religion rather than take it at face value, making the case that religion, when taken as a whole, is much greater than the sum of its parts. Whether spirituality is expressed through religious or non-religious beliefs, personal or communal rituals, simple or complex practices, Anne M. Martínez (2006) warns against the expansion of spiritual thoughts by means of extreme religious practices. This creates a sort of aggressive spirituality, wherein the line between spiritual activism and spiritual warfare can be quite narrow at times (p. 535). Spirituality is about discovering one’s own beliefs and values and allowing others to explore their own spirituality of their own accord.

The use of spirituality for political purposes has been traced in the literature by some scholars. Van der Van (2009) argues that spirituality is an integral part of a wider transformation in nineteenth century thought (p. 1098). Colonial powers engaged in a project of modernization and secularization, one that cultivates universal morality to reduce the likelihood of rebellion and civil unrest by accepting others’ belief systems and practices. Instead of trying to convert the colonized to Christianity, missionaries adopted a more ecumenical approach to finding common ground between different religious traditions, promoting that all religions lead to the same goal (p. 1106). This deployment of spirituality on the part of the colonizer is a form of depoliticization to bypass the need for political actions by appealing to the colonized spiritual needs. However, spirituality, for colonized subjects, was used to fuel anti-colonial sentiment and promote a sense of pride and nationalism (p. 1109). The opposite deployment of spirituality in the colonial context reveals that the relationship between modernization and spirituality is much more complex than originally thought. Since the turn of the twentieth century, spirituality has become an important concept that provides a link between different political, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Spiritual experiences are not limited to any geographic location or any religion. They are found in a variety of societies and cultures across the world, showing the universal and popular nature of spirituality (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 25).

A strand of literature focuses on the transformation of what is perceived as



unjust social structures within the purview of spiritual activism. For the most part, spiritual activism is a panacea, as the literature has emphasized. It shares many qualities with social activism in that it focuses on healing cultural and psychic wounds that have come about from various injustices, especially those stemming from class, race, and gender-based violence, among other things. Marianne Williamson (2002) contends that current world conditions necessitate a revolutionary kind of spirituality to infuse social activism, one in which healing principles must enable power to overflow from the self to the other (p. 44). Failing to recognize the element of universality to spiritual conviction, she argues, results in a continuous enactment and re-enactment of social problems for the individual and society at large (Williamson, 2002, p. 12). Similarly, AnaLouise Keating (2008) argues that spiritual activism draws from an experiential epistemology and relational ethics, meaning that spiritual activism is rooted in an understanding of knowledge that comes from experience and is based on relationships with others (p. 54). Through this understanding, Keating focuses on combining inner workings with public acts to culminate in a general acknowledgment that there are flaws in the world, as well as energy in the universe to address these flaws.

Literary studies on spiritual activism are predominately found in the work of numerous feminists of ethnic backgrounds. The spiritual consciousness embraced by feminists is a reaction to long-standing religious traditions that have defined women's roles for so long. By embracing a more individualistic and interior-focused form of spirituality, feminists seek to develop a way of connecting with the divine that was not constrained by traditional gender roles (Yates, 1983, p. 60). Channette Romero (2012) argues that feminist ethnic writings since the 1980s have increasingly utilized spirits and other beliefs held by people of color to envision spiritual interracial political alliances to inspire collective consciousness (p. 1).

Many scholars cite Gloria Anzaldúa as the feminist who offers an extensive discussion of a theory of spiritual activism among all feminists. For Anzaldúa, self-change, and social transformation are inextricably linked (Keating, 2008, p. 59). Self-change, in this regard, is not an end in and of itself. Without affecting change on a larger social scale, such a change remains isolated and does not have any lasting effect. Also, scholars of bell hooks find similar sentiments in the formulation of her theory of transformative revolutionary action. hooks believes that the dominant culture has become so entrenched in systems of power and oppression that love is frequently seen as a weakness. Choosing love over power, she believes, is the way to allow for a "renewal of the spirit" (Fitts, 2011, p. 116). This political/spiritual calling is a philosophy of radical acceptance and understanding, which seeks to push for social change and justice, as well as to create a sense of connection between individuals and a larger sense of community. By incorporating spirituality in their literary productions, these feminists employ spirituality as a moral compass for political engagements.

The concept of spiritual activism has historically been nebulous, but this has been by design. Being abstract in this way, it is possible to implement spiritual activism as a means of instigating change on a scale and type that simply would not



have been possible otherwise. To that end, spiritual activism encompasses a core worldview that realizes a life that maintains implications for all aspects of interconnected global operations. It also indicates a key element of social awareness of the global responsibility that one maintains for effecting social change. Manifesting spiritual activism into pragmatic antiwar sentiment requires a thorough understanding of the theoretical assumptions of subtle activism.

Methodology

A subtle approach to social change emerges from the intersection of spirituality and activism. David Nicol in his book, *Subtle Activism: The Inner Dimension of Social and Planetary Transformation* (2015), calls for a form of activism that involves subtle changes that occur at the margin and lead to the desired outcomes without having to resort to drastic action and disrupting the existing order too much. The formulation of his theory is against an old-school mechanistic belief that the most problematic part of a system is the only aspect of the system that needs fixing and correction (p. 167). This view, contends Nicol, fails to account for the fact that most modern systems are highly complex and unpredictable and that focusing on small parts of a system leads to chaos and unintended consequences. Nicol proposes instead a gentle form of intervention that considers the wider context of the system and that promotes gradual but effective change.

The rudimentary concept of subtle activism is one that employs spirituality as a form of action or a revolutionary force in its own right instead of a mere pacifying resource towards individual and collective growth (p. 11). It is distinct from the popular usage of spirituality for individual growth and other forms of socially engaged spirituality in that it views spirituality as an integral part of taking action in the world rather than simply a means to inform action (p. 171). It centers on the transformative power of the collective interiority and its capacity to create change in the collective exteriority. This is done through engaging in practices that catalyze shifts in consciousness and by leveraging the power of collective emotional resonance and spiritual mobilization to effect structural and systemic transformation.

Subtle Activism theorizes the inner dimensions of social and planetary transformation. There is a need to break one's framework into three worlds: that of the natural, objective world, the inter-subjective world of social and political relations, and that of the inner, or subjective, world (p. 47). This is an important step to take because it leads to a more retrospective understanding of the ways that one's actions in either world can have a ripple effect on the other. For Nicol, consciousness is the foundation for any successful effort to bring about planetary transformation. While it is difficult to measure the ways in which thoughts only alter reality, Nicol proposes that by believing and existing, one can take action. The idea is that by believing in a certain outcome and taking action toward it, one can create a reality that is in alignment with that outcome (p. 9). The chances of effecting change on a collective level, argues Nicol, is more conceivable if spiritual practices are directed intentionally to the problem being addressed (p. 1). Deliberate intentionality, or the ability to engage intention with a strong faith, works as a force towards desired results and



positive transformation.

The effects of subtle activism are too meager to be noticed at best or nonlinear at worst. Nicol argues that such a form of activism is not measured by mechanical standards of cause and effect but by principles of resonance and empathy where effect changes are not necessarily guaranteed near the practice of subtle activism in time or space (p. 9). This “nonlocality” effect of conscious-based activism may appear later in mind-to-mind or mind-to-matter interactions long after activism has done its part (p. 10). It takes trust and intuition to believe that such small-scale engagement (meditation, quiet contemplation, dialogue, pilgrimage) might induce change in the large social world. This does not imply that subtle activism should be thwarted in its entirety. Rather, it suggests that an integrated approach to activism, one that combines both subtle and gross forms of activism, might work in tandem to create a lasting impact on the social realities of the world.

Nicol considers in detail the ways in which planetary consciousness can be elucidated to ensure that subtle activism can occur more easily, and more certainly, to bring about results. The way for him is to avoid postmodern pitfalls in creating culturally situated realities that tend to divide rather than unite across gender, racial, national, and sexual lines (p. 161). Forming a collaborative engagement to find common ground in an all-encompassing manner is possible only with the view of oneself away from the entanglement of egocentrism and narcissism towards ensuring a sense of empathy through creating a “circle of care” (p. 156). This development, however, does not entail giving up one’s cultural identity; rather, it is a means of enabling the coexistence of the cultural self with the transnational self to consider what is morally right for all people (p. 156). Such cultivated empathy can assist in creating a culture of shared responsibility that avoids assigning accusations or blaming other external actors. Subtle activism, thus, is an attempt to rescue the traditional forms of activism from their moral limitation or “tribal mentality of “us versus them” by allowing a profound engagement with the opposition, one that has psychological sophistication, collective wisdom, and authentic transformation.

These claims and concepts build off one another, creating a sense of simultaneous personal and collective growth and healing that can help facilitate a greater level of understanding of one’s commitments to politics. In the pursuit of social change, finding a balance between the immediate impact of visible actions and the slow and steady transformation of attitudes and behaviors, a culture of peace can be achieved. As attitudes and behaviors shift to support peaceful approaches to conflict resolution, the perceived limits of what is possible politically can be expanded. When more people are open to diverse perspectives and solutions, the power of collective action can be leveraged to bring about lasting change.

Analysis

Claude Thomas’ memoir, *At Hell’s Gate: A Soldier’s Journey from War to Peace*, offers readers an intimate and introspective account of his personal transformation from a troubled soldier to a dedicated spiritual activist. The compelling narrative uncovers the harrowing experiences of war and trauma while highlighting



the potential for redemption, healing, and the pursuit of peace in a world plagued by violence. Most importantly, it serves as a powerful testament to the transformative power of subtle activism and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Thomas came to a realization that his wounds, both physical and emotional, had given rise to limiting beliefs and negative patterns in his life. These deeply ingrained thoughts and behaviors were preventing him from fully embracing his potential and experiencing true personal growth. With this newfound awareness, Thomas made a conscious decision to break free from his old ways of thinking and behaving, actively seeking out new perspectives that challenged his preconceived notions and opened his mind to different possibilities.

Thomas' journey towards antiwar sentiment began shortly after the shoulder injury he sustained from a helicopter accident and resulted in an honorable discharge from the Army (p. 26-27). After spending nine months in the hospital and in physical therapy, the U.S. Military informed Thomas of a waiver "releasing the government from any responsibility in [his] ongoing medical care" (p. 27). Though Thomas withstood a potentially disfiguring injury, he could neither claim disability rights nor receive monetary compensation for the care received. When Thomas signed the waiver, he was almost immediately discharged from the Army. All the ideals that Thomas had seemed hollow and meaningless in the face of the harsh reality he was experiencing to adjust back to civilian life. The physical pain he endured seemed to pale in comparison to the moral dilemma that now plagued him. He could not shake the feeling that he had been a pawn in a larger game, manipulated and used for someone else's gain. All this prompted slight cognitive and behavioral changes that soon manifested into rampant substance abuse combined with sexual promiscuity.

The sense of illusion grew larger for Thomas after his involvement in a Vietnam War peace movement. His primary motivation for joining the peace movement was not rooted in pacifism but rather in his resolute desire for the United States to assert victory during the war (p. 30-31). The consequences of Thomas' participation in the peace movement were far from what he had anticipated. After he and other Vietnam War veterans threw their medals over the White House fence, Thomas encountered police violence, shattering any idealistic illusions he had about the peace movement. For him, the politics of peace and the politics of war are largely the same. In other words, peace activism is only another extension of suffering. While Thomas witnessed firsthand the passion and energy that fueled these Vietnam peace activists, as they tirelessly fought for their cause, he believed that peace activism has several issues with its current form. It is direct, violent, self-serving, and short-lived. However, he found himself unsure about what alternative options exist. This uncertainty weighs heavily on his mind as he contemplates his next steps.

Thomas received therapeutic interventions from licensed clinical social workers and felt intellectually engaged with it. However, he could not shake off the feeling that something was missing. Within the depths of his being, there existed an unmet need; it lingered silently, unaddressed, creating a void that affected every aspect of his life: "During all this time, I was always looking outside myself for some salvation" (p. 28). In his commitment to healing, Thomas made a life-changing decision to enter a



drug and rehabilitation program. This was a crucial step in his recovery process, allowing him to break free from the cycle of addiction that had held him captive for so long: “After I stopped using drugs and alcohol, the obvious intoxicants, I began to be able to learn what the other intoxicants were that were preventing me from looking at myself” (p. 35-36). These “other intoxicants” were not substances that he ingested or consumed, but rather psychological, emotional, and behavioral patterns that had become deeply ingrained within him. They were toxic thoughts and beliefs, toxic relationships, and toxic behaviors that prevented him from seeing more clearly into the depths of his own being.

The earliest seeds of subtle activism within Thomas came about as a means of coping with his trauma. In his pursuit of healing, he accepted an invitation from one the social worker to attend a six day with Thich Nhat Hanh leading a meditation retreat for Vietnam Veterans at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. Thomas initially had a great deal of difficulty accepting this offer from someone that he believed to be an enemy. This dichotomy encapsulates the struggles that Thomas, and many others like him, experienced because of the indoctrination of the military. The desire for healing was mitigated somewhat by a lack of desire to engage with the enemy on this level: “I had talked intellectually about Vietnam, but I had never fully opened myself to the totality of this experience” (p. 36). Regardless of any acrimonious feelings toward the Vietnamese people, Thomas was determined to go any length to heal: “I kept coming more and more back to myself, in my commitment to heal, even though I did not understand (in any intellectual way) what it was I was doing” (p. 36). Not only he exposed himself to a wide range of different Vietnamese people, including refugees, but the retreat offered him a much-needed respite from the fast-paced life and external distractions and turned inward, immersing himself in a state of introspection and self-reflection. Silence, here, is not just the absence of noise; rather, it is a transformative experience that involved transforming his relationship with both internal and external noises, observing them with equanimity. Through this process, Thomas gained invaluable insights into his own mind, emotions, and patterns of thought. Thomas achieved some healing at the Omega Institute, but contrary to popular belief, even the healing process can be traumatic. Memories of seeing a booby-trapped baby combined with severely disturbed sleep patterns invaded his psyche (p.57). Through these unconventional and spiritual efforts Thomas began to take more and more of a clear antiwar stance toward the war.

The encounter between Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas forged a connection that would forever change Thomas’ spiritual trajectory. Hanh extended an invitation to Thomas to visit Plum Village in France and engage in a discussion regarding his combat experience and the profound impact it had on him. This proves another pivotal and immersive experience in which Thomas rebuilt himself by living with those whom he still thought were the enemy. Feeling unconditionally accepted by Thich Nhat Hanh, along with other Zen Buddhist monks and nuns, made Thomas feel compelled to apologize publicly for his involvement in the Vietnam War. It is in this instance that Thomas antiwar position began to develop and wanting to be proactive. During his subsequent talks, he established a strong connection with the Zen



Community in New York that led him to become ordained as a novitiate in the Japanese Soto Zen Buddhist tradition. This was the beginning of his path to taking monk's vows in that tradition: "the robes of fighting, were transformed into the robes of peace" (p. 49). After his ordination as a monk, attempts at protesting and activism become more organized and more thought-out, thereby enabling the antiwar cause to be much deeper in substance.

Thomas politics of subtle activism is one that requires a deep inner transformation in creating meaningful change in the social realm. It involves a time-consuming exploration of one's beliefs, values, and attitudes, with the aim of fostering a profound shift in consciousness through self-reflection and self-care. Given that Thomas entered Zen Buddhism from an exclusively Western standpoint, he understood that detaching oneself from the past and its material outcomes demanded a confrontation with American reality. The roots of trauma and violence, as Thomas believes, extend far beyond the war: "Vietnam is only an expression of something that begins inside each and every one of us, male or female. We all possess the seeds of violence, the seeds of war" (p. 35). While it is evident that war is a significant contributor to trauma and violence, Thomas unveils the underlying factors that go beyond the battlefield. These roots delve into the depths of societal, historical, and psychological aspects that shape the lived realities of the American people.

Thomas' memoir draws from a history of trauma beginning in childhood. As he delved into the recesses of his own family history, he unearthed a pattern of violence and trauma that had been silently perpetuated through generations. Recalling his earliest memories of physical and emotional abuse by his parents in rural northwest Pennsylvania, Thomas acknowledges his feeling of post-traumatic stress as leading him to enlist in the U.S. Army and fight in the Vietnam War at only 17 years old. By denying unconditional positive regard for oneself and others, Thomas' parents initiated a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle of intergenerational trauma that gradually produced health complications. For instance, Thomas' father died of "a lifestyle that was dominated by his alcoholism, his addiction to cigarettes [...], and his general tendencies toward self-destruction" (p. 9). He suggests here that conditioning oneself to suppress negative emotions and avoiding unresolved trauma are severely maladaptive coping mechanisms characterized by cigarette smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and frequent use of potentially lethal illicit substances.

While serving his tour of duty, Thomas received multiple awards, including the Purple Heart, for serving as a crew chief on assault helicopters and willfully murdering hundreds of Vietnamese people. Although he initially believed that fighting in Vietnam followed a moral imperative, Thomas admits his experiences of abuse at home conditioned him into violence (p. 4-5). Despite how Thomas felt conditioned to accept violence as endemic, he understood that people unconsciously project suppressed emotions and hurl invectives reflecting their perceived inadequacies onto others. Considering how his parents assumed their abusive behaviors had roots in love, Thomas conditioned himself to believe that killing others for peace was a patriotic act. His keen sense of social awareness allows him to explore the wider societal structures that perpetuated these destructive cycles. For example,



Thomas recalls the way physical education was his “saving grace” in high school. Yet, Thomas realized that physical education was not just about building physical strength but also about fostering habitual use of violence. The pervasive drive toward violence in the broader culture started to create a potential for violence within everyone, including himself. This revelation served as a catalyst, igniting a passionate quest for understanding and healing.

A true sense of subtle activism becomes possible for Thomas when a change to his relationship with the traumatic past occurs. Hiding trauma, Thomas believes, is a form of self-abuse. The past acts as a weight that keeps him anchored to old patterns and limiting beliefs and becomes a frame of reference that influences his actions and decisions in the present. Developing a healthy relationship with past trauma, thus, becomes an integral part of his journey towards achieving peace. Thomas starts avoiding running away from pain or seeking to escape it. Instead, he starts to embrace it and finds meaning within it to cultivate resilience and strength. By releasing all his attachments, Thomas accepts the present as a sort of “still water” enabling a sense of serenity to be achieved consistently, if the present can be acknowledged without constantly comparing it to the past in various ways (p. 64).

Thomas brings about antiwar sentiment in a way that feels more natural and less invasive, psychologically. This manifests in even minute areas, such as how he chooses to talk, along with the quantity of communication to the ways that he breathes. For example, he began to grow more mindful of meditation while eating, sometimes reciting a verse internally in the process, eating in silence otherwise. His body becomes a temple in which asceticism perpetually cleansed one of the impurities. Asceticism entails a complete renunciation of worldly pleasures and desires, focusing instead on the purification and control of the physical body. Thomas abstained from mindless entertainment, sexual promiscuity, and common luxuries, relinquishing material possessions for spiritual reasons. This is obvious when he shaved his head to live by the principle of the Buddhist philosophy of non-attachment and impermanence. In Buddhist monastic traditions, the shaving of the head is considered a rite of passage. It symbolizes the renunciation of a layperson’s life and the commitment to a monastic lifestyle devoted to spiritual practice. By voluntarily relinquishing his hair, Thomas demonstrates his readiness to detach from material possessions and distractions, embracing a life dedicated to meditation, mindfulness, and the pursuit of enlightenment.

One of the transformative steps, for Thomas, is when he commits more visibly to the cause of peace and live more directly like the Buddha in his spiritual journey. Stemming from his firm belief that peace is not merely an idea but a way of life, Thomas embarks on a vast array of different pilgrimages to different places, radiating his mindfulness outward, speaking a message of antiwar activism to places that have experienced a large amount of war, including Vietnam itself, of course, along with Europe and the Middle East. These pilgrimages were for his spiritual understanding just as much as they were for raising awareness. It is a means of bearing witness to the immense pain endured by individuals and communities throughout history. Throughout his travels, Claude encountered a multitude of spiritual teachers, mentors,



and fellow seekers. These encounters, whether serendipitous or planned, play a crucial role in his spiritual awakening and cultivation of a planetary consciousness.

Thomas exemplifies a harmonious combination of Zen Buddhism and activism by applying the ethical precepts of Zen Buddhism to his pilgrimages by foot. With each step he takes, Thomas is not merely moving physically but also spiritually. The first precept of not killing acknowledges the interconnectedness of life and seeks to preserve the delicate balance that sustains it. Thomas visualizes his connection to other microorganisms through the act of drinking water. While water is essential for the survival of countless organisms, Thomas, in an alarming twist, highlights the potential weaponization of water. Water is frequently used as a weapon by police officers during interrogation and becomes a tool of destruction. The chilling fact emphasizes the power of water and its potential to harm when used maliciously. Living a mindful existence forces Thomas to question the consequences of seemingly innocent actions. By consciously approaching every drink with reverence, Thomas offers a path towards ethical responsibility.

Thomas' subtle activism is a cumulative process, and each moment of intention and action builds upon the past and affects the present moment. Every thought, word, and action that Thomas takes influences the world around him. Whether he is engaging in a conversation, making a decision, or taking action, Thomas does so with mindful awareness of the potential consequences. The responsibility that comes with wielding such influence is obvious in his commitment to using his words to make a difference. Writing the memoir provides a permanent record of his subtle activism. Thomas is aware that the impact of his subtle activism may fade with time; the memoir, however, endures and serves as a lasting testament to the causes he champions. It can be shared, referenced, and revisited, continuing to inspire and motivate long after his initial act of writing. Even though the memoir lacks the immediacy of activism, its universal appeal makes up for it.

Thomas extends the reach of his subtle politics beyond his own personal capacity. One of his key strategies involves the creation of Zaltho Foundation, a non-profit organization, aimed at expanding the reach of his impactful initiatives far beyond what he could achieve alone. This move ensures the sustainability and longevity of his efforts. By mobilizing this collective energy, he increases the potential impact of his efforts, as well as creates a platform for collaboration and innovation to provide a structured framework through which individuals can contribute their time, skills, and resources to meaningful causes. Thomas' subtle activism principles provide a framework for other organizations to address societal challenges in a thoughtful and unified manner.

Thomas' memoir reads as a spiritual travelogue, seamlessly blending external and internal landscapes. Through his encounters with diverse cultures, ancient traditions, and scarred landscapes, Thomas weaves a narrative that invites readers to reflect on their own spiritual path. In a world where noise and grand gestures often dominate, Thomas' subtle activism stands out as a quiet yet powerful force. It is a reminder that true power does not necessarily lie in the ability to command attention but in the ability to influence the collective social field and create lasting change.



Subtle activism calls upon cultivating inner resources, connecting with others in meaningful ways, and working towards a more just, compassionate, and sustainable world.

Conclusion

The paper aims to explore the essence of subtle activism and its significance as a powerful tool for antiwar and peace protests. The analysis has shown that the version of subtle activism performed by Thomas comes about as a result of a complete life conversion. Thomas has harnessed his childhood trauma and combat experience, channeling them into transformative pilgrimages that prioritize teaching mindfulness over proselytizing. Through his unwavering determination, Thomas was able to reconcile the tensions between individual and collective subjectivity. In doing so, he not only gained a deeper understanding of himself but also contributed to the development of a planetary consciousness that encompassed all of humanity. His journey serves as a reminder of the power of reconciliation and the transformative potential that lies within subtle activism.

While there is evidence of an inner transformation alluded to by Thomas in his memoir, the implications of subtle activism are worth mentioning. The intrinsically personal nature of these subtle protests and activism, in general, can be frustrating and challenging to be implemented into a unified form. One of the key limitations of subtle activism is the inability to determine whether a shift in consciousness or a change in the collective energetic field has occurred. There is a certain key threshold of influence that needs to be crossed to ensure that there is some level of change that can be observed within the social field in some way. Too often, subtle activists engage in activism only on a limited level, which inhibits the maximum amount of social change that can come about from this type of activism. Although subtle activists have made strides toward a more interconnected world, they are still far from truly embracing a global perspective. Economic and political systems, driven by powerful vested interests, coupled with religious and national fundamentalism, continue to hold sway, maintaining the existing order and impeding progress towards a genuinely planetary future.

Another key limitation of subtle activism is the relatively smaller scale of its practice. Unlike large-scale demonstrations or organized movements, subtle activism often involves a limited number of individuals or even just a single person which restricts the visibility and reach of the protest, making it less likely to attract widespread attention or generate significant change. Its impact may be limited to addressing specific incidents or individual experiences rather than effecting broader social change. Without the attention-grabbing qualities of more overt forms of protest, subtle activism can easily go unnoticed or be dismissed as insignificant.

As activists continue to navigate the delicate balance between breakdown and breakthrough, assessing and embracing the potential of subtle activism becomes increasingly vital. More studies should seek to analyze more historical and contemporary examples of subtle activism. It is crucial to recognize the value of



diverse approaches to activism and to find a balance between inner transformation and tangible action to create positive change in the world.

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