

Self Renewal in the Nonprofit Trenches

by Lisa Hoffman

The executive director's voice on the phone was desperate. "We need to avoid a funding crisis and our planning meeting is in five days. Can you help us?" Her nonprofit protects the frail elderly from abuse.

This call reminded me why I believe that you and all of us who have made a commitment to the nonprofit community are Bohdisattvas, a Buddhist term.

A Bodhisattva vows to help everyone in the world become enlightened before she reaches enlightenment. Does the magnitude of this commitment feel familiar? What is your nonprofit's mission? To eradicate poverty, build social justice, cure cancer? Fulfilling our missions is challenging, if not impossible -- as is the vow to enlighten all beings.

How can we renew ourselves as we work to make the impossible happen on a daily basis?

Where do we find the energy to face intractable social ills while seeking to change a self-destructive culture?

These are questions I have explored for the many years of my nonprofit career. As a young development director and now a consultant, I have often felt depleted by the demands of the commitment I have made to my community. Beginning a meditation practice more than a decade ago has slowly pointed me toward a self renewal that is grounded in commonsense and inspiration.

For a Bohdisattva, energy lies in the vow itself and its day-to-day fulfillment. Focusing only on the outcome -- enlightening all beings -- is daunting, to say the least. Feeling that I am not done until my nonprofits mission is fulfilled is similarly exhausting. What is an action-minded person to do?

We could try sitting down.

Meditating, usually with my cat purring in my lap, has gradually developed my ability to meet the person or activity in front of me. This is the fulfillment of my commitment to the nonprofit community. And it is this moment-to-moment engagement against the backdrop of mission that revitalizes me.

Sometimes, when I stop and breathe for a moment, it even fills me with wonder. And gratitude. I remember that I am offering healing to this hurting world. I can make a difference.

This doesn't mean there is no stress, or that planning is no longer needed. There will still be overwhelming amounts of work, political defeat, or trying to help a homeless family with a

heartbreaking story and few resources. During these times and always, renewal lies in our vow and the next simple act of its fulfillment. I said yes to that executive director.

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