

**ROBERTO VARGAS**  
**FAMILY  
ACTIVISM**

Empowering Your Community,  
Beginning with Family and Friends



**ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR TEACHING  
LOVE IN ACTION**

an excerpt from

***Family Activism:  
Empowering Your Community, Beginning with Family and Friends***

by Roberto Vargas  
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# CONTENTS



Preface	ix
Introduction: Awakening to Activism	1
<b>PART I: <i>The Family Perspective</i></b>	<b>7</b>
1. Making Family Your Cause	9
2. Principles to Guide Family Activism	25
3. The <i>Familia</i> Approach	43
4. Family Activism and Transformation	59
<b>PART II: <i>Tools for Family Power</i></b>	<b>73</b>
5. Getting Your Act Together	75
6. Creating Family Connections	89
7. Co-powering to Battle <i>EL NO</i>	107
8. Love the Children	121
9. Learn, Communicate, and Teach	135
10. Be the Facilitator	151
11. Forming Unity Circles	181
<b>PART III: <i>Moving from Family to Community Power</i></b>	<b>197</b>
12. Creating Powerful Family and Community Gatherings	199
13. Expanding Family Action into Community Action	213

Conclusion: Praxis and Blessings	231
Acknowledgments	235
Notes	239
Index	247
About the Author	255

## PREFACE



**F***amily Activism* is about how to create a better world beginning with family and friends. The image of the young girl on the book's cover portrays a glimpse of the vision to which this book is dedicated—connection, hope, joy, and love, a healthy world supporting healthy children. The faint motif on the cover, a symbol from my ancient Mexican indigenous culture depicting “movement that blossoms,” represents a central part of the strategy for advancing this vision.<sup>1</sup> Through consciously living to become more loving families, we evolve our culture so as to make it blossom.

This writing was inspired in part by the love for life taught to me by my family. It also arises from my feeling that we all share responsibility to help heal our troubled world and leave it a better place for our children. This book will prepare you with the outlook and tools to increase your family and community power for advancing positive change. It will help you fulfill the vision of “beloved community” that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke about—family and friends committed to caring for each other, serving our communities, and healing the world.<sup>2</sup>

The goal is that we become good friends to our families, and family to our friends, purposely encouraging their growth and caring commitment. This way of living requires developing a particular outlook and specific skills, while carefully tending to those around us. Some of us already do this every day, yet all of us can become better at nurturing love and power among the folks we consider family. Those who take up this call to be a family activist are caring people who seek to make all our interactions opportunities to foster

spirit, confidence, and social consciousness. They are people who appreciate that love is not only a feeling, it is caring in action.

Family activists seek health and success for their families and all others. They take time to communicate and connect, like the parents who make dinner conversation a family ritual, or the uncle who develops a garden to encourage interaction with his mother and nieces. Family activists create opportunities to foster family connection, like the cousins who organize a “unity circle” to honor their recent high school graduates. They also promote social involvement, like the grandmother who, at every annual Christmas gathering, asks her grandchildren what they have done to serve the community. In thousands of ways like these, family activists create teachable moments to develop the confidence, social awareness, and caring spirit among their loved ones that can help us build joyful families and better communities.

The most powerful medicine we have to heal and evolve our world is our families, when we are inspired to create love and transformation. We can mobilize the power of our networks of family and friends to turn our society away from irresponsible self-destruction. This begins with preparing ourselves to be family activists able to inspire and support our families to be their best. My belief in this approach inspired my writing *Family Activism* to provide you with wisdom about how to connect with your power, your vision, and each other. It is a leadership practice rooted in our hearts and flowering in the world. It is medicine for creating thriving families bettering our world and advancing our human evolution.

There are three parts to this book:

In the world of change agents, one of the guiding concepts is “know why before know how.” In other words, understand the philosophy of your strategy before focusing on the “how to.” With this in mind, **Part I: The Family Perspective** explains the principles guiding family activism and presents the *Familia* Approach. The chapters in this part remind us why caring for our families is so important, elaborate upon the meaning of family activism, explain the importance of family power to the process of social transformation, and illustrate how we can heal and empower our families.

This part of the book will make you more conscious of what you already know and assist you to deepen your thinking about family power and transformation. Many readers will find that my “Five Principles to Guide Family Activism” reflect much of their own philosophy, as they address fundamental issues about advancing family, community, and social change. Next, the five commitments that define the *Familia* Approach to family activism will, I believe, inspire your increased enthusiasm and capacity for mobilizing family and friends to become a force for change. To illustrate the power of the *Familia* Approach, this part concludes with the story of how my family was able to move from a period of dysfunctional communication to become a loving family that supports each other and advances community service and social change.

In **Part II: Tools for Family Power**, I review principles and tools to enrich your ability to serve your family as a powerful friend, coach, teacher, and facilitator. The first chapter, **Getting Your Act Together**, describes what we must each do to prepare ourselves to live successful lives and be good models of change. The subsequent chapters present and illustrate several essential tools and principles for creating family connection, empowering others, teaching love, and facilitating family gatherings. Given the tremendous potential that family conversations and gatherings have to nurture health and growth, I provide a number of stories that illustrate facilitation tools for making your network of family or friends more connected, inspired, and committed to transformation.

Finally, **Part III: Moving from Family to Community Power** reminds us that family activism is not about engaging in one act of family kindness and then expecting changes to occur. It is about applying your talents consistently over time to assist others to grow, friends to become family, love to blossom, and your community to work together to make a difference. This part contains two chapters illustrating how the *Familia* Approach ultimately can and has influenced positive change in our immediate and larger communities. Stories illustrate how ceremonies, councils, and unity circles are used to evolve more connected communities and a more caring culture. The final chapter provides several illustrations of how beloved communities have been able to affect changes, from inspiring a

regional movement that is advancing multicultural respect to creating a project that registered thousands of new voters.

Throughout this book, you will encounter life stories to illustrate the use of various tools, principles, and strategies. Please pay attention to the details of my communication, as I am attempting to demonstrate practices that are typically best learned through direct participation. As my commitment to supporting and inspiring families began with my own family, a number of the stories here involve my parents, brothers, wife, daughters, nephews, and nieces. For this reason, an introduction to my immediate family would be helpful. My parents are Papa Everett and Mama Tita. I am the oldest son, followed by my brothers, Jack, Marcos, and Art. My wife is Rebeca Mendoza, and our daughters are Andrea and Cheli. While our family has expanded, my father and Jack have passed on to spirit life.<sup>3</sup> Many of the stories involve a number of “created families,” those networks of friends who have become family to my family. In addition, some stories come from the experience of other family activists. For a number of these illustrations I use footnotes to add acknowledgements or pertinent information. In some cases, names and circumstances have been changed to safeguard people’s privacy.

My ultimate intent is to encourage you to apply the tools presented here to facilitate and inspire greater love, community, and service among your family and friends. To assist you in this journey, every chapter ends with several “praxis” questions. Praxis is the idea that creating positive change requires ongoing learning that is best done by reflecting on our experiences and studies to determine how to improve our practice. The questions after each chapter were chosen to provide you with the opportunity to reflect on the reading and your experience, and to bring them together. This practice can be challenging, yet it will support, prepare, and strengthen you in applying the principles and tools with your family and friends. To optimize your learning, I have two suggestions: Begin a journal to note your thoughts and plans that will evolve from the reading, and, most important, identify at least one person to serve as a learning partner, someone with whom you can share and discuss the ideas and questions that will surface. As family activism is invariably

about communicating and learning with others, your own process will be more enjoyable and fruitful if you work with a partner.

In my cultural tradition, it is important to introduce oneself to initiate a relationship. Given the relationship I hope to establish with you through sharing the life learnings in this book, I offer the following introduction to tell you about myself, my family, and our evolution of family activism.

ROBERTO VARGAS  
Ventura, California  
March 2008

## INTRODUCTION: AWAKENING TO ACTIVISM



Considering the goals and principles I have shared in the preface, you might well ask, are these the unrealistic hopes of an impractical idealist? On the contrary, they comprise the vision and practice of a person dedicated to building a healthy society and a sustainable world. For more than a generation, I have sought to apply love to empower my networks of family and friends so that we can more fully care for and support others. Today, I live with tremendous joy because of the extended family I helped to develop, and because I have found numerous ways to continue expanding my circle of beloved community.

For the past twenty-five years, I have worked as a consultant providing planning, team building, and leadership development to enable proactive organizations to become their best. This work has allowed me to collaborate with fantastic people and organizations throughout the United States, and even places like Canada, Mexico, and Sweden. Whether these organizations are advocacy groups, service agencies, corporations, reservations, or universities, their commonality is dedication to advance good in the world. Most often my job is helping them clarify their vision and become more effective teams in order to more powerfully create positive change.

Culturally, I am a Chicano, a Mexican-American of Indian ancestry, and I am also very much a U.S. citizen.<sup>1</sup> I am proud of the ideals envisioned by our nation's founders, and I am committed to fulfilling our nation's potential to be a global leader of responsible action. As a Chicano whose ancestors were healers, I live committed to

community service and social healing. The stereotyping and racism I experienced as a brown youngster instilled within me a passion for justice, respect, and economic fairness for all people. This led me to discover the phenomenal importance of family activism, as I saw that every one of us has family and friends who can be encouraged to become more caring and motivated to help each other and battle for the changes required in our society. We can all be family activists!

Let me tell you a little more about myself and my family by sharing some experiences that have helped shape my path in life. One day, when I was eight years old, I escorted my *Tia* Fina home from her regular visit to our house. There was no sidewalk in our section of town, so I struggled to push my little cousin's baby carriage along the dirt path. Suddenly, a thought came to mind that I proudly shared with my auntie: "When I grow up, I'm going to build a sidewalk from our house to your house." She listened, and I felt her profoundly considering my declaration. She responded, "*Aye, gracias, mijo* (thank you, my son), but a sidewalk would be so expensive, how will you pay for it?" By the tone of her voice, I felt she had no doubt in my conviction, so I continued sharing and developing my vision in response to her occasional, but strategic questions. Our conversation ensued, and before we arrived at her home, I knew that my life's work would be to make the world better.

That day I was glad for the walking time required between our two homes because there was much to think about. My body was keyed up with excitement and discovery. I had connected with my purpose! The questions bubbling up in me were making me think like I never did before and generating many fresh new ideas.

As I thought about this, several teachers came to mind—Jesus Christ, Zorro, and Robin Hood. Jesus was about teaching love. Zorro and Robin Hood were about taking from the rich to give to the poor. I thought, "Maybe when I become an adult I can be like these heroes, but for now, what can I do as a kid?" Reflecting on how hard my parents worked, and being the oldest son of four, I concluded, "For now, the best way I can make the world better is to be a good son and a good person."

For the next several years, this question of how to be a good son and person influenced my behavior and development. Sometimes,

when faced with a choice of doing a chore or going to play, I would ask myself, “What is being a good son?” On other occasions, I might reflect on what I had done or not done, and ask, “Was this being a good person?” As a result, I slowly internalized several values that supported me in my core commitment.

At age nineteen, another formative experience arrived as my awareness of injustice in the world intensified. I found a way to visit the Chilean people who were involved in a revolutionary activism to elect a president committed to economic justice. Once there, I made contact with a student organization leading numerous self-help initiatives among the poor and offered my help. Instead of being welcomed, I was told that if I was truly committed to supporting their struggle, I would return to the “belly of the monster” and determine how to create change within my own nation, which was principally responsible for oppressing their country and so many other people around the world. Essentially, they said go home and work to make your own nation responsible. This ultimately led to my returning home and focusing my energies on healing work in my own community, which I will describe more fully in Chapter 1.

Later, another powerful experience added further dimension to my sense of purpose. The young husband of a dear friend unexpectedly and suddenly died. The impact upon Julie and her friends was devastating, and I went to the memorial service to support her. I genuinely looked forward to the officiating priest providing her with the comfort and support she needed. However, the ritual and words spoken felt empty. When the priest stepped down from the pulpit and walked out of the hall, he left all of us more saddened than when we had arrived. A feeling of powerlessness seemed to weigh heavy in the room because we had neither honored our friend who had died nor supported his wife.

I felt a deep anguish for Julie and a strong desire to say or do something to console her and honor her husband, Annu. I didn’t know what to do and felt insecure and afraid, but I decided to act. I stood, and words came. I reminded people of how Annu enjoyed being among good friends, and I invited everyone to come forward to make a circle around his coffin. As people joined the circle, I reached out to hold another’s hand and others followed. Soon we

were all holding hands and our circle started to move of its own accord until we circled Annu several times. I invited people to say final words for him, and heartfelt expressions were shared. Then we broke the circle, and several of us exchanged hugs. However awkward and short, the ceremony was genuine and touched many of us. We felt we had given Annu a little of the love he had always shared with us, and that we had given Julie the support she needed.

For me, this experience brought major revelations. The first was that we have historically transferred to the church and other institutions the authority to administer many of our ceremonies surrounding key life events, yet this doesn't mean that they own these opportunities or that their ministers or priests know how to guide them well. Many of the religious rituals surrounding events such as birthdays, weddings, or death are so steeped in old conventions that they fail to nurture our spirit or inspire us to commit to improving our world. I began to consider that we ordinary people could develop and guide our own ceremonies, and invite guidance from God or our spirit to help us create more inspiring and meaningful rituals. This revelation was liberating and exciting.

Not long after, I had a dream that affirmed my thinking. I found myself alone in the church of my youth with all the pews lined up one behind the other.<sup>2</sup> Then Jesus Christ appeared at the front of the church and told me to remove all the pews and create a space to gather the people. As I worked at moving the pews, he said that my job was to bring people together in circles. While part of me wanted to ignore the dream, the message was unambiguous—bring people together in circles and create ceremonies that foster life and love. This I have sought to do, not as a follower of any church or religion, but as a spiritual person who believes we are all part of the miracle of life.

These are a few of the experiences that prompted me onto the path of family activism, first as a son, then as a father, and now also as a friend and adopted “uncle” to many other families. One of the outcomes of these past thirty years has been to develop the *Familia* Approach to guide caring people to increase love, support, and power within their circle of family and friends. The *Familia*

Approach is a collection of knowledge and tools to encourage love and power within all our relationships, with the goal of bettering our world. The initial motivation for this approach was to support healing required within my own family. Then, as I worked with people throughout my community, our nation, and in other countries, I saw the tremendous need and opportunity we all have within our family networks to teach each other how to be more caring, confident, and skilled in creating positive change in the world.

I also grew to realize the awesome responsibility we all share to address the environmental crisis facing our world. My graduate studies in public health confronted me with the unequivocal evidence that given current population expansion, food and water limitation, and environmental damage, we will not leave our children a healthy, sustainable world. At the same time, I also agree with many leading social philosophers and activists who speak of the Great Turning, the combined efforts of growing numbers of people worldwide who are committed to positive values and a sustainable earth. These efforts are shifting the direction of our society toward becoming a life-sustaining culture.<sup>3</sup>

I have written this book because I yearn to see more joy and well-being for all people, I want to see the health of Mother Earth restored, and I want to know that she will be protected for future generations. This vision will involve millions of people doing their part to transform our culture and society. We can begin with ourselves, and then engage our families, friends, and community. Toward this end, I offer this understanding of family activism and the *Familia* Approach—wisdom and tools to enable you to share in the joy of evolving our human potential for creating a better world.

May the Creator bless us all for our vision and our efforts to honor all creation.



# PART I

## THE FAMILY PERSPECTIVE

A revolution is not just for the purpose of correcting past injustices. A revolution involves a projection of man/woman into the future. . . . (It) begins with those who are revolutionary exploring and enriching their notion of a “new man/woman” and projecting the notion of this “new man/woman” into which each of us can transform ourselves.

— JAMES AND GRACE LEE BOGGS, *REVOLUTION AND EVOLUTION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*<sup>1</sup>

On the level of significance, the family becomes the vehicle through which people can effectively contribute to the well-being of others. . . . Contributing together as a family not only helps those who benefit from the contribution, but it also strengthens the contributing family.

—STEPHEN R. COVEY, *THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE FAMILIES*<sup>2</sup>

# 1

## MAKING FAMILY YOUR CAUSE



**A**s activists or people who deeply care about others, we want our society to work for all, and our world to be safe and plentiful for our future generations. For this reason, many of us commit heart and energy to the causes important to us. Maybe our cause is to protect our environment, ensure safe schools and parks for our children, or raise funds to prevent AIDS or cancer. In our passion to make a difference, we often become so focused on our cause that we miss a key principle essential to advancing our vision. The change we desire in the world begins within ourselves and our networks of family and friends.

The idea that we must embody the change we desire is critical, and the “we” includes our circles of family and friends. Whether our commitment is for social justice or a sustainable world, family must be included. For it is among family and friends that we most experience the relationships and support that bring us meaning and joy. Yet, despite the central role that families play in our lives, we often neglect to teach love and change among the people closest to us, to care for and enlist them in creating the better world we seek.

As family activists, our work is about developing ourselves and our ability to facilitate the growth of others. Each of us can foster mutual support and power for positive change among family and friends. Fortunately, once we make this wisdom integral in our interactions with others, we open ourselves to more purposeful living, as people and as activists. We discover that taking care of family and friends is another way of taking care of ourselves and bettering our world. Given your particular family reality, this

insight may initially feel challenging, and oftentimes it is. Yet, inspiration will come from knowing you are on the right path and learning valuable tools.

In this chapter, I invite you to view yourself as an activist, and maybe pursue becoming a more mature activist who makes family part of your fundamental perspective. When you choose to view your life with this activist lens, you expand your power to make positive change for your family and communities. Additionally, when you help move your family and friends toward their greater potential, you empower yourself to create greater joy and change than you can imagine. I hope to convey this truth by introducing my understanding of family activism, sharing some personal experiences of discovering its importance, and presenting several ideas that can help you develop your ability to become a more powerful resource and change agent for your family, community, and society.

## **What Is Family Activism?**

Family activism is interacting with those close to you in a way that inspires and prepares them to serve their families and communities as a positive force for change. It is teaching and modeling love among all your relationships, extending acts of caring, thereby encouraging more folks to increase their commitment and time to advancing love and change.

An act of love can transform a relationship in an instant, or it can leave seeds of forgiveness and hope that may manifest within a day, a week, or many years later. It can implant an affirmation that empowers another whom you may never see again to live with courage, or it can kindle a connection with another that can lead to ongoing collaborations to make good happen in the world. This is the type of impact that family activism fosters.

What do the acts of family activism look like? Family activism can include seemingly minor actions, such as initiating a dialogue with your niece to boost her confidence, initiating family meetings to coordinate household chores, or requesting at a birthday party that the group “take a few moments to share with our dear friend why he is truly special to us.” Family activism might be having a difficult

conversation with a sibling about being a more involved parent, or welcoming a family friend to live in your home until he or she can find a new job. Many of us extend these acts without any thought about our motivation or the implications of our actions. We are just being family or good friends. Yet I believe these acts should be affirmed as a form of activism because they contribute to bettering our world, certainly for the folks immediately involved, and maybe for others we may never know about. And if we do these acts with an ounce of added mindfulness about their activist quality, we can potentially multiply many times over their impact in advancing love and change.

The dialogue with your niece can be the first of a lifelong series of conversations to support her leadership development. The family meeting to take care of business can be designed to also nurture a deeper family connection or to evolve an ongoing practice of analytical thinking about our political environment. Similarly, the sharing at the birthday party can be done so that participants leave feeling touched by love and inspired to increase love in their lives.

How do these acts advance social change? To create a society that truly supports life requires that many of us become less selfish and disconnected, and more caring and powerful. These major changes entail evolving our ability to feel, think, and act in more loving ways. With inspiration and mindfulness, we can learn to live and interact with each other so that we are continually cultivating a feeling of connection and a desire to support each other's well-being. As more of us strengthen our caring instinct and learn to accept our power to create change, we can become a more caring culture able to create changes in all facets of our life, from the way we treat those around us to the political and social priorities in our country.

I will draw on personal experiences to illustrate how activism directed to supporting family and friends can lead to both healthier families and social change. Within my family of birth, I worked with my parents and brothers to develop a culture of mutual connection and support so that we became both a healthier family and one very much involved in community service. The result is that between us we have touched numerous people and created dozens of programs and campaigns that have improved the lives of many.<sup>1</sup> The same is

true for the family Rebeca and I have created with our children, in which the methods of family activism have enabled us to better support each other and also be an influence of love and change in our daily personal, community, and work lives.

Finally, much of what I learned from my own family blossomed into even greater outcomes among our extended *familia*. Being a family-oriented person living hundreds of miles away from my family of origin required me to develop and expand my family. Within our new family network of over a dozen and a half families and individuals, I became the recognized facilitator of “family councils” or “unity circles” for special family gatherings such as anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, weddings, and funerals. In essence, my role as a family activist was to create sacred time for family and friends to express their truth, whether it was heartfelt words to honor another or dialogues to learn from each other’s experience. Together, we developed traditions for gathering as community in ways that were inspiring, healing, and instructive. Now we get to enjoy interacting with a new generation of young people raised in the tradition of family connection and community service.

These young people are now inspiring us. Many of them are working as teachers, counselors, planners, and community advocates, or do their occupational work and then volunteer in activities that advance community betterment. Many have incorporated into their community service the principles and practices for community building that grew out of our shared experience. These are examples of how family activism that nurtured connection and inspiration among family and friends resulted in the development of more people doing their part to advance social change.

There are more impacts. When we develop a pool of family and friends who share similar vision, commitments, and appreciation for “building community from the family out,” together we can become a force to influence even larger circles of community. Various combinations of members of our beloved community have been able to initiate campaigns, organizations, and projects with results like better education, increased multicultural respect, youth leadership development, community empowerment, and peace advocacy. As individuals and families we learned to apply activism within our

own family circles to inspire and empower each other to make family and community life better. It's this type of living, doing, and thinking that constitutes family activism.

## **Multiple Influences for Multiple Effects**

When we think of the impacts of family activism, it is important to keep in mind the principle of multiple influences for multiple effects. The change we desire in our society does not occur through a simple cause and effect process. One does not inspire another person to create change in the world in a single conversation. Most often there are multiple events that influence people to become conscious of their power and purpose to make the world better. While they begin to learn how to use their power in positive ways, they are influenced by others who are also extending their influence in the world. Central to the art of activism is to recognize this principle, and to trust that what you do will have its impact over time, as the following account illustrates.

The story begins with my relationship with Joel and Judy García, which formed during the Vietnam War era when Joel and I worked together as conscientious objectors organizing health care for the poor.<sup>2</sup> Early in the development of our families, the Garcías evolved the tradition of frequently bringing family and friends together to celebrate important events. I was often asked to facilitate a unity circle during these events to bring people together to do heartfelt sharing, thereby strengthening our sense of community and connection. At one of our gatherings, Bret Hatcher, a fifteen-year-old friend of the García sons, was deeply impacted by the experience. In his own words, this is the story of the birthday ceremony that began his transformation.

I took the side path to the backyard where the party was going on. I didn't expect anything extraordinary to happen, just another party with my homeboy's family. I saw a lot of people talking, laughing, and kids just running around. Then I heard the drum beat. Roberto, a friend of the García family, was holding a drum, with his wife at his

side burning sage. Someone said, "It's time for the circle." Roberto started speaking, saying that to honor Mario's birthday we were going to do a sage-burning ceremony to create sacred space, and open a window in time to invite our ancestors and even the unborn children to be with us! He also said people were going to be invited to share their thoughts, feelings, and prayers for Mario and the García family. Talking about the sage and ancestors definitely grabbed my attention.

While the sage burned, Roberto said a prayer to each of the four directions—east, south, west, and north. The smell of the sage was different and nice. The prayers and being in a circle felt sacred and special. All this was new to me, but it was comforting, and I could definitely feel my spirit. I started feeling very lucky to be a part of it.

Roberto invited people in the circle to say congratulatory words to Mario and his family. I just listened. People were speaking compliments, and it was all love. I could feel it! It really touched me. People were totally opening up to everyone else and even crying. It was very emotional, and I could feel the power of what was happening. It got me thinking about how the García family had always been good to me. I was feeling a strong love and friendship inside me and wanted to say something. At first I didn't because this wasn't like me. I never talk in front of groups, but I just had to express myself.

I didn't say a lot, but I did tell Mario "happy birthday" and thanked his parents for always making me feel welcome in their home. That meant a lot to me, especially when so many other people judged me by my appearance. The García family not only welcomed me and trusted me, but saw my potential.

When we finished talking, Roberto did a closing prayer and suggested that we all hug the people next to us. I couldn't believe it, but I just started hugging all sorts of people. I was feeling love around me, inside me, and I just let myself go with it. Without a doubt, the experience

opened my eyes and heart. It not only changed my life, but it changed the way I looked at life. For the first time, I felt that maybe I had a future, a purpose, and a place where I belonged.

This family ceremony and others that followed helped Bret connect with his spirit and purpose. He became enthused about his new journey. He approached me about wanting to learn more about the ceremony, and later joined a council committed to supporting men to “live with heart.” Seven years later, he had minimized his use of alcohol, and by example inspired a number of his contemporaries to temper their party ways, live closer with spirit, and give more of themselves to their families and community. He had accepted both his Mexican and Irish ancestry, and forgiven his parents for not being available during his early years. Twelve years later, Bret and his wife work, go to school, and are conscientious parents to their daughters. Bret also is an activist, learning and teaching about his culture to support others in becoming and living as good people. When he can, he supports young people in their development and the causes of environmental respect, peace, and healthy families. While he attributes his good path and success to many influences, the García family gatherings and my role in facilitating their ceremonies are paramount to him.

The impact that first ceremony had upon Bret, our dialogues that followed, and the commitments he made to live a good life provide an example of the dynamic of multiple causes for multiple effects. All these experiences influenced the parent and activist he has become, and now he is in turn inspiring and supporting the development of others.

Similarly with our other good friends we developed the tradition of making any of our family gatherings an opportunity to organize family circles to nurture connection and inspiration. And, as with Bret, other young and older people have shared how a single family gathering inspired them to be more caring, and to become family activists for their own circles of family and friends. The transformation that occurred in Bret’s life was the result of multiple influences over time. Understanding this dynamic, family activists do their



*Any gathering can be an opportunity to create circles that nurture connection and inspiration.*

part to foster the expression of love in a variety of forms, trusting that positive outcomes will result. Likewise, when we make our networks of family and friends our cause, we become more powerful facilitators of health and transformation for them, our communities, and our world.

## **Discovering the Obvious Takes Time**

Sometimes the most obvious insight eludes us until our minds and hearts are ready to understand. Each of us has a story of how we learned the importance of balancing attention to ourselves, our family, and our community in our journey to create a better world. My personal story revolves around the evolution of my activism, and pivotal in it was my discovery of the importance of making family essential to my cause.

As an eight-year-old youngster I was elated when I first saw my purpose—to create a better world! To me it seemed only fair that other children on my street should enjoy a life as good as mine. If we had food to eat, clean clothes to wear, and no worry about violence, they should also. And I felt that by being a good son and supporting my parents, I was in some way doing my part to make the world better.

When I became a teenager my world expanded, and so did the nature of my activism. Through my church I organized youth to participate in community service, from collecting food or clothing for

those in need to providing tutoring to youngsters. Later, when I learned about the causes of injustice, my outrage fueled a new form of activism. I organized students to support the United Farm Workers union in their struggle for economic justice, and to educate our communities to stop our nation's immoral war in Vietnam.

Later still, I had the eye-opening experience in Chile recounted in the preface. After a short time there observing the dedication and power of young people (ages nineteen to twenty-two years) collaborating with the working poor to provide essential housing, electricity, sanitation, education, and medical care, I was inspired. I returned home believing in my power. I also carried a focused question that guided my everyday activities: How can I create positive change in the United States while also earning a living? I finally envisioned a form of employment that would also be my activist work—organizing a counseling center to provide people with skills to take care of themselves and their communities.

I came to Oakland, California, in 1972 with this objective. Joining a local community health agency that shared a similar vision, I soon cofounded and became director of *El Centro de Salud Mental (The Center for Mental Health)*, which was dedicated to social transformation through healing and empowerment.<sup>3</sup> Central to the organizing effort was drawing together a staff committed to reinventing the practice of counseling. Our desire was to provide services to heal our families and inspire them to participate in improving our communities.

At twenty-two years old, I found myself living with the monumental challenges of directing and growing a center while reinventing the practice of mental health service. For inspiration and support, I discovered the power of the Oakland hills. I would climb to different vantage points to meditate on the beautiful panorama of the bay and on my purpose. From here I viewed the community I shared with several million people, the suburban cities to the south, the well-to-do communities across the bay, and the multiple inner city neighborhoods comprising the flatlands. Absorbing this view, my constant question was, how do we advance social change in such a complex and diverse society? As dusk became evening and the sparkle of a few lights became thousands, I would consider that each light represented a different person or family. This often

focused my question further. How do we reach all these people and make them activists for social change?

This ritual that I started as a young person continued for more than thirty-five years. Every few weeks, I would climb into the hills to seek inspiration or deeper answers to the perennial question, how do we advance the healing and change required by our communities, our society, and our world? Over the years, my life circumstances and the answers I heard moved my activism into different arenas.

During one period my professional work as a planning consultant enabled me to teach and facilitate positive change for organizations and communities in major cities throughout the United States, and even internationally, as when I worked with the Swedish government to prevent the growth of racism in Sweden. During these times I often observed that the most significant change seemed to happen when numbers of key people congregated to plan, share training, and take actions.

Then life circumstances directed me to another form of active caring. After months traveling the country helping communities to develop innovative counseling programs, I found myself emotionally and physically exhausted. I needed to return to my family home for rest and renewal. When I arrived, I was shocked to discover that my family of parents and brothers was struggling with discord. At first I felt disbelief, because my family had always been a primary source of inspiration. Then a sense of inner contradiction arose. If I truly cared about community, why wasn't I taking care of my own family? I decided to direct my attention and skills to healing the family of my origins.

This shift commenced an ongoing push and pull between focusing attention on my family or on what I considered my more "important" community activism. My prevailing perspective was that supporting family well-being was a distraction from my professional and activist work. Later, I was to learn the importance of integrating both the family and community work, yet this took time and several major life-changing experiences, most importantly the birth of my daughters.

The focus of my consultation practice was providing leadership training, but when my first child was born I realized that real lead-

ership development began with raising babies to believe in themselves and their ability to love. With vital support from my wife, I downsized my consultation practice, set up my office at home, and became an active houseparent. My activism on the home front was focused on developing the confidence of my children and their friends, as I also sought to foster their caring spirit, their interest in learning, and their inquiry skills.

Together with my wife and members of my family, we learned to live a balance that involved taking care of each other and our multiple communities, while contributing to the big-picture social change. Part of this learning process involved many more hikes into the Oakland hills, more frequently with my children, first as youngsters and then as adults. My questions were largely the same, yet often reflecting the inquiries I was hearing from the different communities with whom I worked. How do we fulfill the American vision of being a nation that models our best human values? How do we advance the Great Turning, the current movement to save our world from the path of self-destruction?<sup>4</sup>

During one of these hilltop moments came my big “aha”—*familia-first activism!* The idea surfaced that creating a better world had to start with family. Then another internal voice, the disparaging one, said, “No big deal, everybody knows that.” My insecure voice talked me into letting the idea go, but during another reflective occasion, it arose again, *familia first*, and the idea of *family activism* took hold. We must make families our cause. To create a movement that involves people of all classes and communities, every caring person must learn to see themselves as an activist. To create the community and society of our vision, we activists must accept responsibility to encourage our own family and friends to actively care for each other and our world. Ever since then I have sought to deepen my understanding of the power of family activism to advance the healing and transformation needed by our world.

## **Family Is Most Important to Us**

For most people, the combined relationships we call family are as important to us as life. When times are good, whom do we want to

share it with? When times are difficult, whom do we seek for assistance? Most often the answer is our parents, siblings, children, and closest friends. They know and care about us; they are most important to us.

Yet, for some reason, within our U.S. American society we often forget this truth. In part, this is the result of the messages we hear: *Success is about taking care of number one. The most important person is you. Life is about getting what you need and want.* But while a focus on our personal needs and success is essential, it is also imperative to recognize the significance of our family. It is time that we own certain truths about family: *I succeed because of the support that I receive. Success is about taking care of each other. When the family is doing well, life is great.*

Family is important to us for many reasons. Family brings us purpose and joy. When we take care of our family, we feel the joy of reciprocating the support we were given. We also feel part of something greater than ourselves that we want to nurture and grow. Supporting the growth and well-being of our family means to be part of our human purpose, to live life and develop our ability to be more human. Toward this end we need our family to survive, enjoy life, and succeed. We need their emotional and financial support to take care of us during our early years and then to position us for success. We need their presence to learn how to be caring people. We need their love to help us grow to love ourselves. We need our family and friends to make life worth living.

Our greatest joys involve sharing with family. It feels good to accomplish our goals, yet it feels even more fulfilling when we can share the triumphs with our family. You can feel happiness in receiving a meal prepared by your mother, or witnessing the excitement of one of the youngsters learning a new skill. These family experiences bring us inspiration and food for our souls, while energizing us to do more for others or pursue being a better person.

We also need support from our families to prepare for the long-term work involved in healing our society. My three brothers and myself have maintained activist lifestyles for at least the last twenty-five years. Ask us how we have been able to sustain our involve-

ment and we will tell you that this largely can be attributed to our *familia*, our family of origin, and later our wives and children. When we were young, the financial support provided by our parents allowed us time for study, church, or community involvement. Later, because of the traditions of communication and family councils we had evolved, we not only had each other for emotional, intellectual, and practical support, we were part of an expanded family of mutual support involving our wives, partners, children, good friends, and our beloved community.

All families, yours and those of your coworkers and friends, can be developed to become a greater source of support and activism. When we invest in making our families our cause, we strengthen our ability to create the change we desire in the world. We increase our numbers, and we have greater inspiration and joy to sustain our efforts.

## **Activists Are People Who Care**

We may think of activists as mostly people who actively organize in their community or who are involved in political advocacy. But I want to expand this understanding and say that all people who actively care for and serve others are activists. Then as caring people or activists our ultimate goal should be to express our love for the people around us as we also pursue the creation of a healthier society. This is what I would call mature activism.

My early activist years were during the late 1960s when an entire generation was marching for civil rights and protesting to end the war in Vietnam. I wore jeans and long hair like most other activists. Unfortunately, most of us got stuck in viewing activism as solely involving radical action directed toward a political or social end. Inadvertently, we squeezed out from our ranks the millions of people who are involved in other forms of active caring.

An activist is a person who cares and takes positive action. It is the person who realizes that a dozen kids may not get a chance to play soccer this season unless they find a coach, so she volunteers. It is the person who stops by his neighbor's house once a week to ensure a warm dinner for an elder. It is the young person who, hearing

racist remarks by her peers, announces that until her friends are more respectful of others she chooses to have lunch elsewhere.

The caring actions of these people are invaluable because they make our communities a better place—those who are hungry are fed, those who are sick are comforted, young people are provided opportunities to develop, and elders are made to feel valued. By serving others they are shaping and modeling the values we desire within our community, such as love, respect, and justice. These activists, whether they call themselves Christians, good neighbors, or simply caring folks, are living these values, and in the process teaching and inspiring others to live them also.

I don't know how my mother found time, yet I remember us frequently visiting elders or people who were ill when I was young. The routine became familiar. As we arrived, first there was the reminder from my mom, "We are here to bring food, so, please, you are not hungry." Next, after a quick survey of the situation, she had me cleaning the yard, watering the plants, or running off to purchase food or medicine. Finally, before leaving we were invited to share in a prayer circle.

My mother cared about and served others because she was a loving person. There was no political or social objective to her service, just the expression of her loving concern. Because of her, my brothers and I developed similar values. Then, given opportunities to study that our parents did not have, we developed deeper understanding of the causes of many of our community's problems. We learned how companies frequently exploit their workers, how corporations promote consumerism and waste, and how special interests manipulate our political system for profit while ignoring pressing needs for health care, affordable housing, and environmental protection. Our responsibility became to advance the change required to address these big problems and their underlying causes. Our challenge was to live as mature activists—to engage in both present-moment caring and the work of advancing a better society.

Maturing the character of your activism involves expanding your idea of service in distinct directions. Those of us involved in extending random acts of kindness, like my mother, could potentially

enrich our service by also seeking to understand more deeply the forces that undermine the well-being of our communities, and then possibly using our credibility to engage those we serve in conversations about our responsibilities to minimize energy waste, confront racism, or end war. Similarly, many big-picture activists could advance a better society by learning to look after those who need attention, to be more respectful and kind in all our relationships.

Making family our cause provides both service-oriented and change-oriented activists a means to grow and better complement each other's efforts. Service activists may find caring for family easy since it involves extending kindness, which they often enjoy doing. Their challenge is thinking and acting for the long-term survival of our larger community. Change activists, who may find it easier to focus on the big problems, need to engage with family and friends to "keep it real," and strengthen their capacity to relate to the daily concerns of people. Because we care, we must make family our cause, with the vision of together becoming a stronger force for positive change.



## PRAXIS

1. Why is your family important to you? How has your family influenced who you are becoming? How have you influenced your family?
2. When did you first discover the love and concern you have for others? What are you currently doing to advance the well-being of your family and friends?
3. Viewing yourself as a family activist, what might be your next steps to develop your abilities and mature your activism?

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