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# **The Abolition of Slavery Movement as a Moral Movement: Ethical Resources, Spiritual Roots, and Strategies for Social Change**

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*The abolition of slavery movement in Britain was rooted in a prophetic spirituality, an ethic of compassion and justice, and spiritual resiliency, and pioneered the development and refinement of social change tools (e.g., petitions, boycotts, etc.) and the strategic building of alliances, approaches that are now commonplace in social work practice and social movements. This article explores the spirituality of leaders in the abolition movement, and offers an overview of the tools and strategies of social change (network development, research, communications tools, and political advocacy and economic tools) employed by these leaders, highlighting their relevance for the current environmental justice movement. The article concludes with reflections on the role of spiritual resiliency in social work and the environmental movement.*

**KEYWORDS** *social change tools, spirituality and ethics, social movements, environment, eco-justice, community practice and advocacy*

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The nature and all the circumstances of this trade are now laid open to us; we can no longer plead ignorance, we cannot evade it, it is now an object placed before us; we may spurn it, we may kick out of our way, but we cannot turn aside so as to avoid seeing it. (William Wilberforce introducing the first bill to abolish the slave trade, May 12, 1789; Tomkins, 2007, p. 83)

It was late afternoon on May 22, 1787. At first glance, the meeting certainly seemed to be ordinary enough. Twelve men in somber dark clothing, nine Quakers and three Anglicans, arriving one by one, gathering in a small dark printing shop at 2 George Yard in London, England. In fact, one could reasonably claim that the meeting had a rather pathetic feel to it, with the stench of urine wafting around the meeting participants, arising from the floor of the printshop. But could this unassuming meeting in this undistinguished printshop be a turning point in human history, the genesis of one of the most significant human rights movements? Of this, there was no suggestion. And yet, as this gathering with quiet conversation and meticulous note-taking drew to a close, the abolition of slavery movement was born, opening the way for a powerful social and moral force that disrupted established structures of human cruelty and injustice and transformed human history.

For those of us combating climate change and environmental decline, the fact that this powerful social movement arose from such humble beginnings is reassuring, as it highlights the possibilities of deep social change being initiated by networks of ordinary committed citizens. But there are other reasons why it is instructive for us in today's context to study and learn from the abolition of slavery movement: the rapid pace and scale of the threat of climate change combined with the failure of political and institutional leadership to respond adequately. Not only is climate change starting to impact the planet in serious ways, it is also accelerating into "climate collapse" (Orr, 2009) as we move into dangerously close proximity to the "tipping points" where scientists warn us that humanity loses control of influencing climate change (Hansen, 2009; Weaver, 2008). In addition, biologists (Wilson, 2002, 2006) also continue to remind us with a certain vigor that we are entering the sixth great megaextinction in the history of the planet, where increasing numbers of species fall into the dark hole of extinction at 1,000× the background extinction rate, tearing at the very fabric of life. The oceans are in severe crisis through industrial overfishing as well as through absorbing the carbon dioxide that humanity is generating, making the oceans warmer, more acidic, and less hospitable to the life that has made the oceans its home for millennia (Mitchell, 2009).

In the face of the serious consequences of climate change and biodiversity loss, the inability, or unwillingness, of political and institutional leadership to substantively and decisively address these problems is of

growing concern to citizens. Although scientific research has produced technological tools by which humanity can transition to a low-carbon society and economy with a smaller ecological footprint, the collective political will in the global North has done little to take action, influenced by corporate interests of the fossil fuel sector. Nothing but a large-scale morally based social movement will be able to dislodge the inertia and the intransigent interests that currently dictate a glacial approach to a threat that demands urgent and substantive action.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL WORK

Engagement with social movements with a justice and community-building agenda is not foreign to social work, given the roots of social work in the fusion of the charity organization society movement and the settlement house movement. Both movements emerged in the late 1800s in England as responses to the negative effects of industrialization, inadequate housing in urban areas, and poverty. The settlement house movement bears the strongest resemblance to what we would now call a social movement, where the settlement houses were base communities for building up a sense of “neighborhood,” addressing issues through action, advocacy, and research (Poppo & Leighninger, 2007). Through their activities of collaborating with workers, advocating for adequate housing and health conditions in the cities, and completing research, the “settlers” lobbied for government action on social reform and justice.

Although both of these movements were critical for the emergence of social work as a profession, in its quest for professional acceptance and credibility, direct practice became more normative, while social reform and the involvement with social movements became more marginalized in the profession as a whole. Although skills in community-organizing are still taught in Canadian schools of social work, research has suggested that education about community-based forms of social work practice has been relatively marginalized in the curriculum (Lee, McGrath, Moffatt, & George, 1992). Similar conclusions have been reached regarding the relative obscurity of community practice in the social work profession (Mizrahi, 2001), where research demonstrates the decline in community activism and work with the vulnerable and poor in society (Reeser & Epstein, 1990). Through the forces demanding regulation and professionalization of social work as a profession, researchers highlight the waning visibility of community forms of activism and movement building as part of social work’s core professional identity (Todd, 2004).

Meanwhile, advocates in the community are said to perceive themselves as being excluded from mainstream social work education, leaving community workers to wonder about to what degree social work has become

detached from its historical roots in the settlement house movement and comparable social movements in its history (Wills, 1992). Rather than community activism, a majority of social work's energy has been diverted into the liberal project of social reform, especially advocating for changes in social welfare policy (Abramovitz, 1998; Schneider & Netting, 1999). At the same time, Howe (1994) argues that practice in social work has coalesced around an ethic of control and cure, effectively sidelining the ethic of solidarity, human rights, and transformation of oppressive social structures that negatively impact the health and well-being of individuals and communities.

While this marginalization of the social justice agenda of social work has continued, there is ongoing interest in the social change focus of the settlement house movement through revitalizing community practice (Fisher & Shragge, 2000), active engagement with oppression (MacNair, Fowler, & Harris, 2000), and exploring the dimensions of social movements as paradigms for community-based social work practice (Reisch, 2008). Of particular relevance is the growing interest in grassroots networks as forms of social movements that facilitate communication and the building of cohesion and relationships on a micro level (Tindall, 2004). These networks have the potential as serving as a basis for advocating for social change and building the capacity for leadership and mobilization (della Porta & Diani, 2006), as revealed in the involvement of social workers in global justice movements focused on the plight of the global South (Polack, 2004).

The fact that social movements often have religious roots in the mobilizing structures of faith communities with their resources for framing social issues (racism and poverty) through a moral lens has caught the eye of social work scholars (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Wood, 2002). The social gospel dimension of certain Christian faith communities has offered invaluable conceptual and practice resources for social action, traces of which are still visible in the forms of community practice in social work (Wills, 1992). The potential of such networks, with their inherent frames for viewing issues through a moral lens and their networks for mobilizing and engaging their communities is evident from the abolition movement in Britain, as well as other social movements, such as the antiapartheid movement in South Africa or the civil rights movement in the United States. But for eco-social workers, what could be learned from the abolition of slavery movement that could be helpful in deepening the capacity and resiliency of contemporary environmental movements?

#### ABOLITION OF SLAVERY MOVEMENT AS A TEMPLATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The genesis of this article lies in a panel in 2009 on climate change and environmental decline as moral issues with two speakers from vastly different

sectors of civil society: David Toycen of World Vision Canada, and Graham Saul of Climate Action Network-Canada. Both presenters asserted that what was needed to engage with an issue of the scale and urgency as climate change was nothing short of a social movement possessing the breadth and moral power of the abolition of slavery movement in England. Could the abolition of slavery movement in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they pondered, serve as a template for a contemporary environmental movement confronting the crisis of climate change and ecological degradation? If so, what aspects of the abolition movement could be translated into the current context?

As a public educator and activist concerned about climate change and environmental decline, I was immediately struck by the startling potential of such a comparison. Later, I came into contact with Preston Manning (2008), who had developed a training session for faith communities called “Wilberforce Weekends,” which included exploring the tools and strategies used in the abolition of slavery movement as a basis for contemporary faith-based campaigns around moral issues. As an eco-social worker and academic, I was intrigued with the rich possibilities of drawing on the spiritual/ethical resources of the abolition movement as well as their development of strategies and tactics for mobilizing support for the “big switch” from a carbon-intensive fossil-fuel society to a zero-carbon sustainable economy. But what were the *strategies, tools of social change and citizen mobilization*, and *tactics* that the abolition movement originated and developed in the course of their campaigns? Secondly, what were the *spiritual resources* and *ethical perspectives* upon which the leadership of the abolition movement drew in order to sustain their activity? And finally, how might these strategies and spiritual resources be utilized by eco-social workers and others in *projects and campaigns centered on combating climate change and ecological deterioration*? This article will offer an inventory of these resources, accompanied by reflection on their potential contribution to assisting individuals in social movements to develop deeper levels of engagement, despite the continual problems of demoralization, which often leads to a disempowerment of activists.

#### SOME KEY PROTAGONISTS OF THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY MOVEMENT: SPIRITUAL ROOTS

While the abolition movement involved a broad range of leaders through its duration from May 22, 1787 to August 31, 1838, two leaders—William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson—are highlighted as exemplars and key sources for reflecting on the strategies and tools of social mobilization. For this inquiry, I will draw in particular upon Clarkson’s (1808a, 1808b) compelling account of the movement in *The History of the Rise, Progress, and*

*Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade* for first-person descriptions of key events in the movement's history. Hochschild (2005) describes this work as "perhaps the greatest memoir of a political organizer ever written" (p. 313), where a reader can "see through one man's eyes the birth of the greatest of all human rights movements" (pp. 112–113).

As the best-known of the leaders of the English abolition movement, William Wilberforce functioned as the leader of the parliamentary abolition caucus as well as one of the consistent leaders of the movement for most of its history until his death on July 28, 1833. Respected by all as an exceptional orator, he was the public face of the abolition movement not only in Parliament, but also in the high social circles in which he circulated. Interestingly, Wilberforce was also deeply attracted to nature and spent extensive time in the country, valuing its restorative influence on his psychological and spiritual well-being, always "feeling my virtuous affections confirmed and strengthened" in the countryside (Wilberforce as cited in Tomkins, 2007, p. 33). Tomkins (2007) remarks: the "two great characteristics of his new life—the countryside and evangelical Christianity—remained the very heart of his emotional life for the rest of his days" (p. 10). Wilberforce was also active in shifting the callous attitude of English society towards animals into a more compassionate direction, as evidenced by his founding of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Although lapsing briefly in his early adulthood, Wilberforce was spiritually engaged from his youth. Influenced by his mentor John Newton (author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*) as well as a number of other Evangelical leaders (George Whitfield, John Wesley), Wilberforce was an Anglican, locating himself in the Evangelical Christian tradition as his spiritual center of gravity. At the beginning of his adult life in his twenties, Wilberforce was torn between a more pietistic and privately oriented faith centered on the individual's relationship with God, and a more publicly oriented spirituality that was vectored towards mitigating public ills and engagement in social problems. By the time he was 27, Wilberforce had opted for the latter course, encouraged by John Wesley and Wilberforce's friend William Pitt, later to become England's youngest Prime Minister. In fact, Pitt expressed his concern about Wilberforce's initial attraction to a more personal, and pietistic spirituality, underlining the desirability of committing oneself to service to the common good, saying that surely "the principles as well as the practice of Christianity, are simple and lead not to meditation but to action" (cited in Tomkins, 2007, p. 48). Although elements of his conservative spirituality remained for the remainder of his life, Wilberforce gave full expression to the activist and social reform interests of evangelical Christianity current in his day by focusing on two major missions: the abolition of slavery and the "reformation of manners," the latter focused on highlighting the moral dimensions of other existing social ills, such as poverty. For much of his life,

he lived in an intentional evangelical Christian community at Clapham with other leaders of the abolition movement.

It is indisputable that Thomas Clarkson (1785, 1788/2010, 1808a, 1808b,) was the key organizer *par excellence* of the movement, and was one of the few original leaders of the abolition campaign who lived to see its successful conclusion with the abolition of the slave trade. Clarkson was a relentless coalition-builder, who brought his skills as a writer, facilitator, and researcher to bear on the task of building a broad-based social movement in England around the issue of the slave trade. Sustained by deep spiritual roots, Clarkson himself was an Anglican clergyman, trained at Cambridge University, and later ordained as a deacon in the Church of England, although he dedicated his life to the abolition movement and never worked as a minister in a parish setting. Unlike Wilberforce who was attracted to the evangelical side of Anglican tradition, Clarkson gravitated to the more progressive and social engaged side of the spiritual continuum, being strongly influenced by the founders of the abolition movement: members of the Society of Friends, or Quakers. With their doctrine originated by founder George Fox of the “Inner Light of God” that indwelt all human beings irrespective of social standing, class, or background, Quakers were consistently and strongly predisposed to social justice issues: abolition of slavery, prison reform, pacifism, women’s rights, and aiding the poor and vulnerable of society. Clarkson’s sympathy towards the Quakers continued for his entire life, as evidenced by both Clarkson’s multivolume *Portraiture of Quakerism* published in 1806 (Wilson, 1990), and the deep abiding friendship between Clarkson and the Quaker community as a whole until Clarkson’s death on September 26, 1846 (Wilson, 1990).

## RESOURCES FROM THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY MOVEMENT: A TEMPLATE

### Slavery and Human Misery

In the 1780s when the abolition movement emerged, slavery was widespread and ubiquitous, cascading across cultures, nations, and geography. It was the mainstay and basis of economies around the world, where a majority of the people on the earth were in abject conditions; providing free labor and producing wealth for the wealthy few. Hochschild (2005) suggests that “at the end of the eighteenth century, well over three quarters of all people alive were in bondage of . . . various systems of slavery or serfdom” (p. 2). The sheer dominance of slavery as a seemingly indispensable feature of economic and social life is staggering. Far from a temporary aberration, slavery was perceived as being the norm; “freedom, not slavery, was the peculiar institution” (Drescher, as cited in Hochschild, 2005, p. 2). In his own time, Clarkson (1808a) described the institution of slavery as “a vast

belt . . . of physical and moral evil, reaching through land and ocean to the length of nearly half of the circle of the globe” (p. 19).

The most eloquent descriptions of the experience of slavery itself may be found in the testimony of slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano’s *“The Interesting Narrative.”* At age 11, Equiano (2003) was kidnapped in Africa: “alas! Ere long it was my fate to be thus attacked, and to be carried off, when none of the grown people were nigh” (p. 47). Imprisoned on a slave ship as a child, he finds himself in

a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, [and] I no longer doubted of my fate and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. (p. 55)

The physical abuse and brutality were beyond comprehension for young Equiano, “for I had never seen among my people such instances of brutal cruelty” (2003, p. 56). Finally buying his freedom in 1766, Equiano later traveled to England, where he became a high-profile figure in the abolition movement. Through his compelling autobiography, he emerged as a key public voice, putting a human face on slavery for a society that knew little about the plight or suffering of those slaves upon whom they relied for cheap labor.

### A Compassionate Response: Sensitivity to the Suffering of Others

The starting point of the engagement of figures such as Wilberforce and Clarkson in the abolition movement was the birth and growth of their awareness of the profound human suffering of those trapped in the slave trade, and their resulting compassion and sensitivity as a humane response to this suffering. In the opening of his history of the abolition movement, Clarkson (1808a) describes the surfacing of this sensitivity and compassion evoked by the suffering of others: “If one, by suffering his heart to be hardened, oppresses a fellow-creature, the tear of sympathy starts up in the eye of another, and the latter instantly feels a desire, involuntarily generated, of flying to his relief” (p. 10). But sympathy and compassion for the oppressed, as critical as those personal responses are, are in themselves insufficient to generate sustained personal engagement in a social movement.

### Moral Outrage

For the founders of the Abolition movement, the basis for their engagement arose from their keen and passionate sense of moral outrage regarding the slave trade and its associated practices. Far from dispassionate detachment,

the pattern of *moral outrage* stretches across the writings of the abolition leaders as a thematic arc. Thomas Clarkson (1808a) exemplifies this sense of outrage, and expresses it in his writings when he explores a slave ship: it “fills me both with melancholy and horror. I found soon afterwards a fire of indignation kindling within me” (p. 122). Later, the depth of Clarkson’s (1808a) moral outrage becomes evident in his riveting account of his first journey in the summer of 1787 to Liverpool and Bristol, the economic strongholds of the slave trade. In this “unforgettable record of this summer,” Hochschild (2005) remarks that the “very paper seems to smoke and burn with his outrage” (p. 113). For Clarkson, it is the conjunction of *compassion* for the victims as well as *moral outrage* regarding the perpetration of the injustice that generates the ethical energy and motivation for deep activism. Clarkson unites this moral outrage with his sense of compassion: “While the miseries endured by the unfortunate Africans excite our pity on the one hand, the vices, which are connected with them, provoke our indignation and abhorrence on the other” (p. 16).

### Deep Personal Engagement

Earlier in his life, when Clarkson is researching the slave trade for the prestigious Latin Prize at the University of Cambridge, he records his own personal experience of the psychological impact of the increasing knowledge of the slave trade on his own mental and emotional well-being. Clarkson (1808a) writes:

All my pleasure was damped by the facts which were now continually before me. It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night. In the day-time I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eyelids for grief. (pp. 108–109)

Reminiscent of the apostle Paul on his way to Damascus, a 25-year-old Thomas Clarkson records how, in the summer of 1785 and just after winning the Cambridge Latin Prize on the ethics of slavery, as Clarkson was returning

to London, the subject of it almost wholly engrossed my thoughts. I became at times very seriously affected while upon the road. I stopped my horse occasionally, and dismounted and walked. I frequently tried to persuade myself in these intervals that the contents of my essay could not be true. The more however that I reflected upon them . . . the more I gave them credit. (1808a, p. 109)

Finally, after experiencing denial, anger, and distress, Clarkson has a breakthrough that culminates in his calling to commit himself personally to the abolition of slavery:

Coming in sight of Wades Mill in Hertfordshire, I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought came into my mind, that if the contents of the Essay were true, *it was time some person should see these calamities to their end.*" (1808a, p. 109, emphasis added)

It is at this point that Clarkson experiences a midcourse correction in his life, redirecting his energies to providing leadership to the abolition movement. Shortly thereafter, Clarkson was instrumental in what was to become a hinge point of history: the founding of the abolition movement by twelve individuals at 2 George Yard on May 22, 1787.

### Spiritual Roots of Engagement in Social Movement & Activism

For Clarkson, Wilberforce, and Equiano, the sustaining foundation for their engagement in the face of seemingly insurmountable forces and social inertia lay in their sense that the abolition of slavery was a moral issue, grounded in a personal faith that nurtured their activism. Equiano (2003) describes in his autobiography how he became a Christian, drawing on both the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament, concluding his book with the ethical mandate of the prophet Micah (6:8) to "do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God" (p. 236); itself a tripartite configuration of justice, compassion, and spiritual roots.

Similarly, Clarkson perceived his compassion and sense of justice, which nurtured his life-long engagement in the abolition movement, were the fruits of a robust and vital spirituality through which he perceived the Divine compassion within every human being. Clarkson (1808a) suggested that

every generous sympathy that arises in our hearts, as the offspring of the Divine influence for our good, convinced that we are born for ourselves alone, and that the Divinity never so fully dwells in us, as when we do his will . . . [and] than when we employ our time in works of charity towards the rest of our fellow-creatures. (p. 21)

### Applied Spirituality: Economics and Social Power as Life-Support Systems of Slavery

The spirituality of the participants of the abolition movement was not politically naïve, nor was it unaware of how social issues intertwine with the hegemonic dictates of the economic order. Although both Wilberforce and Clarkson were aware of this reality, it is Clarkson who writes most clearly about international trade, commerce, and the English economy as the life-support system of the slave trade. Although other social evils may have

arisen from ignorance, Clarkson (1808a) points to the economic well-springs of slavery, arguing that “the evil in question began in avarice. It was nursed also by worldly interest . . . It was interwoven again into the system of the commerce and of the revenue of nations” (p. 19–20). When Wilberforce gave his inaugural speech in Parliament advocating the abolition of slavery, it was quickly met with forceful economic counter-arguments for maintaining slavery, threatening the economic ruin of the country if the institution of slavery were to be abolished (Tomkins, 2007).

At first glance, interest in the economic underpinnings of a social ill, such as slavery in the 18th century or climate change in the 21st century, might seem unusual. But as Hebrew Bible scholar Brueggemann (2001) points out, precisely such a heuristic exists in the key paradigm of the Hebrew Bible: the shift from Pharaoh’s empire of slavery to the covenant community founded at Sinai. Similar to England’s institutions of slavery embedded in an intransigent political economy, Pharaoh’s empire and economy was built on corporate wealth produced by the Israelite slaves who did not themselves share in the economics of affluence enjoyed by the wealthy few (Brueggemann, 2001). In the Hebraic paradigm, the collective suffering of slaves became a public reality, demanding a substantive change in the surrounding social power arrangements and economic production of wealth in Egypt. The Biblical account in the book of Exodus describes how God responded to the cries of suffering, and through ecological plagues and political confrontations, became a destabilizing force amidst the political and economic structures in Egypt. This regime change was enacted through the human agency of leaders (Moses), leading to both the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and the invitation to enter the alternative covenant community at Sinai (Brueggemann, 2001). This paradigmatic narrative of political, economic, and religious transformation in the Exodus narrative was well-known to the leaders of the abolition movement. For instance, Thomas Clarkson (1808a) records how, in the early stages of the abolition movement, his first sermon in Manchester, an early stronghold of the abolition movement, was based on precisely this narrative of the Mosaic covenant community of justice and neighbourliness as a liberation movement from slavery.

## STRATEGIES AND TOOLS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE ABOLITION MOVEMENT

This small group of people [forming the abolition of slavery movement] not only helped to end one of the worst of human injustices in the most powerful empire of its time; they also forged virtually every important tool used by citizens’ movements in democratic countries today. (Hochschild, 2005, p. 6)

The achievements of the English abolition of slavery movement are nothing short of a remarkable hinge point in human history. The tools of social change that civil society has inherited from the abolition movement are an invaluable legacy that has been further refined by later social movements. The strategies and tools may be divided into several categories: (a) internal movement-building, organizational maintenance, and coalition-building, (b) investigative research, (c) public education and communications strategies, and (d) direct political advocacy and economic tactics.

### Internal Movement-Building, Organizational Maintenance, and Coalition-Building

One of the first actions undertaken by the founding group at the outset of the campaign was to build a widespread *series of local abolition committees* across England as a distributed form of locally-based engagement and leadership. Much of the basic structure was already in place through the existing network of local Quaker “Meetings” throughout England. As the abolition movement evolved, leadership in the campaign became decentralized and distributed in a variety of centers, with specific areas and cities, often taking the lead on specific forms of action. After Clarkson visited the proslavery strongholds of Bristol and Liverpool, Clarkson (1808a) was pleasantly surprised to discover “a spirit arising among the people for the abolition of the slave-trade” (p. 207) on his first visit to Manchester and a nascent abolition committee. This *distributed form of leadership* gave rise to not only different initiatives, but also a diversity of perspectives on the issue itself, as evidenced by the second generation activists, such as the Quaker Elizabeth Heyrick (Tomkins, 2007), who led the stream of the movement that made linkages between slavery and other oppressed groups, such as women and the poor.

The other factor that precipitated the emergence of local abolition committees was the wide-ranging *travels of Thomas Clarkson* himself, who traveled thousands of miles by horse, coach, and boat across the breadth of England, giving speeches, building relationships with local committees, and sharing vital campaign information. Clarkson’s (1808a, 1808b) own *History* provides a vivid first-hand account of these journeys through the eyes of the organizer *par excellence* of the abolition movement. Later, as the movement evolved, teams of speakers were trained to perform these functions of awareness-building, sharing of information, and the consolidation of motivation and morale for participants in the movement as a whole.

Another necessary movement-building objective important for the continued maintenance of the campaigns was that of *fundraising*. Here again, the Quakers provided a basic network of donors across the country. Although Quakers were excluded from Parliamentary politics, many Quakers

were active in commerce and in the business community, not only providing funds themselves, but also making connections to donors sympathetic to the abolition cause who wished to provide much-needed financial support.

In what is now a key strategic goal indispensable for community-based social work practice (Bishop, 1994; Lee, 1999; Todd, 2009), the abolitionists built a *broad spectrum of allies* across a diversity of professional groups (e.g., doctors, printers, and lawyers) and economic classes (Anstey, 1980; Ditchfield, 1980). The abolition movement was intentional and highly strategic in extending its reach into diverse religious communities that were particularly responsive to the appeals of the abolitionists, such as the Baptists, Methodists (Hochschild, 2005), and other Dissenting Reform churches (Drescher, 1980; Walvin, 1980). Not only did the abolition movement reach across sectors in English society, they also built strong relationships with abolitionists in other countries through existing networks of Quakers in the United States (Clarkson, 1808a).

### Investigative Research

From its inception, the abolition movement centered their attention on *detailed and exhaustive research* into the impacts, economics, and legalities of the slave trade. In the 1780s in England, few were aware of slavery, the suffering it caused, or how the English economy was deeply implicated in the slave trade. Even before the start of the abolition movement, individuals were researching different aspects of slavery. As a doctor who boarded slave ships to provide medical care, James Ramsey witnessed the disturbing conditions and treatment of slaves, giving eloquent testimony in his *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of Slaves* (Hochschild, 2005; Tomkins, 2007). Unlike other slavery literature of the time which was abstract polemic, Ramsey's book as a witness was stunningly direct, describing beatings and infants abandoned in ditches. As the young Clarkson was entering his advocacy calling, it was Ramsey who provided an eyewitness account for Clarkson. During the same period, Granville Sharp, another cofounder of the original committee, was researching the legal loopholes in English legislation that could be used to intervene on behalf of slaves seeking redress for physical abuse and freedom (Hochschild, 2005).

It was Clarkson (1808a), along with other abolitionists who painstakingly researched ship's logs, sailors' lists, and trade digests, and collected testimony from witnesses from all over England for both his speeches and the Parliamentary committees. Clarkson and a team of researchers carefully compiled economic research and gathered testimony as evidence of the impacts of the slave trade. Clarkson (1808a) also recruited doctors, such as Alexander Falconbridge, to collect information, documents, and eyewitness testimony while attending to slaves on ships, acting as silent "sentinels to be stationed in the enemy's camp" (Clarkson as cited in Hochschild,

2005, p. 115). Some doctors recorded their information and eyewitness testimony in Greek or Latin, so that it would remain hidden from sailors on the slave ships, later translating the information back into English for the Parliamentary committees and the steady stream of pamphlets proliferating through England.

### Public Education and Communications Strategies

Before the London committee was formed in May of 1787, Clarkson (1785) was already thinking strategically about his prize-winning essay on slavery that garnered such acclaim at Cambridge University. He decided to rewrite and publish the essay through James Phillips, a Quaker printer, distributing it through the emerging network of abolition committees across England. Clarkson (1808a) records how what started as a small trickle of publications soon became a veritable torrent of pamphlets and essays, and later a succession of books, educating readers about the horrors of slavery and inspiring citizens to become engaged with the abolition movement. One of the socio-cultural factors of the time that assisted the abolitionists was the high level of literacy and the large numbers of individuals who read much and often in coffee shops with a bewildering array of newspapers from all over the country. For the abolitionists, the intentional and steady stream of publications as well as the increasing coverage in newspapers served to proliferate information about slavery and the proposals for the abolition of slavery (Clarkson, 1808a). The proslavery party quickly recognized the formidable influence that the printed word exercised in the battle for public opinion, and created its own publications to counter the abolitionist tide. Through figures such as the ex-slave Equiano, book tours also surfaced in the campaign as a means to give public profile to the ideas of abolition, becoming another crucial tool of social change. Equiano's book became a bestseller, reprinted in eight editions, and translated into German, Dutch, and Russian (Hochschild, 2005).

It was not only the printed word that became the medium for mobilizing public sentiments against the institution of slavery. The abolitionists pioneered the use of images and logos to galvanize and focus the public's awareness of slavery. Josiah Wedgwood, the originator of the famous pottery, deployed a craftsman to design a medallion with a slave kneeling in chains with the inscription "Am I not a man and a brother" which soon became visible everywhere as hatpins, cufflinks, and broaches (Clarkson, 1808a, p. 223). Such a medallion was the forerunner of buttons now used in modern political campaigns. Another example of the innovative use of images to vector the public's imagination toward supporting abolition was the diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*, which depicted a cross-section of a boat with the tiny stalls used to house slaves on their journeys to the slave plantations in the New World (Tomkins, 2007). Clarkson (1808b) writes that

“this print seemed to make an instantaneous impression of horror upon all who saw it . . . and was therefore very instrumental, in consequence of the wide circulation given it” (p. 59). In an age prior to the advent of photography, this image spread like a virus in poster form throughout the nation, burning the imprint of suffering that slaves endured in the slave ships on the consciousness of the ordinary citizen. In the struggle for public awareness, these images were powerful tools of mobilizing public opinion.

The abolitionists also pioneered other approaches to public education that galvanized the public’s attention. While walking the streets of Bristol and Liverpool, Clarkson (1808a) spied “different iron instruments used in this cruel traffic” (p. 188) on sale in the shop windows: handcuffs, thumb-screws to torture slaves, and clamps used to pry open the mouths of slaves trying to starve themselves. Clarkson purchased these instruments of “punishment and confinement” (1808b, p. 16), using them as teaching tools in his frequent tours through regions of England. Even earlier than Clarkson, Granville Sharp was utilizing the legal arena as a means of not only protecting individuals caught in the slave trade, but also as a way of giving public profile to the issues of slavery. In a famous episode, Sharp highlighted the incident involving the ship *Zong* in November 1781 where the crew threw 131 slaves overboard to drown because the cost would be less than if the captain allowed the slaves to die a natural death. What caught the public’s attention was how the court action was not centered on 131 murder charges of the individuals cruelly thrown overboard to drown, but on the settling of an insurance dispute.

### Direct Political Advocacy and Economic Tactics

In this cluster of campaign strategies, direct political advocacy and economic pressure tactics were developed to influence key decision-making in the political domain to press for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce was the undisputed leader of the abolition forces in Parliament, laboring steadfastly for over forty years on the issue through the ebb and flow of public support. When in his sixties, Wilberforce passed his mantle to Thomas Buxton, another Evangelical Christian who was already a seasoned activist campaigning for causes such as prison reform and the poor; Buxton’s wife being a sister of famous prison reformer Elizabeth Fry. Through the duration of the abolition campaign, Wilberforce led a group of Members of Parliament (MPs) to utilize the legislative body as a *de facto* public square, where the arguments for abolition of slavery could be given a strong visible profile through debates and legislative interventions. The abolitionists decided to strategically focus their attention on the House of Commons rather than the House of Lords, concluding accurately that their prospects of moving legislation through the lower house was substantially better than if they attempted to do so through the House of Lords.

The antislavery campaign pioneered several techniques of public lobbying and political influence, including mobilizing citizens to gather petitions on large stiff parchments, and to write letters to influence their MPs in support of abolition (an unknown practice until the advent of the abolition movement). Although the Quakers had originated these forms of political advocacy, it was through the abolition movement that the scale and sophistication of petitions and letter-writing reached new heights with leadership from Manchester and other cities. By the conclusion of the 1788 Parliament, scarcely a year after the original abolition committee had met to launch the abolition campaign, 103 petitions against the slave trade signed by more than 60,000 individuals had been submitted to Parliament. As the campaign matured, large numbers of women began to sign and circulate petitions as a way of exercising their citizenship in a society that excluded them from voting. So did individuals in specific geographic regions, such as the Scots (Hochschild, 2005). As the abolition campaign proceeded, petitions and letters to members of Parliament became more prominent as tools of social change, with faith communities, especially the Evangelicals and the Dissenting churches (Baptist, Methodist), sending a greater proportion of the petitions and letters as their communities became engaged.

The other form of political advocacy that was developed by the abolitionists to put pressure on decision-makers and the proslavery lobby was the sugar boycott. Although the term did not come into usage until a century later, the sugar boycott erupted as a massive protest spontaneously from the grassroots after 70,000 booklets were sold across the country in only four months. As a direct response to Parliament's refusal in 1791 to pass the abolition bill, the boycott moved onto centre stage of public life in Britain, even though Wilberforce withheld his support and the abolition committee remained silent for years. However, Clarkson (1808b) encouraged the leaders of the sugar boycott, insisting that the boycott was a measure to support the abolition of slavery "which the people were then taking into their own hands" (p. 171). During his travels, Clarkson notes how the boycott permeated all ages, classes, and sectors of society, and estimates that there were "no fewer than three hundred thousand persons had abandoned the use of sugar" (p. 172), an estimate that historians (Drescher, 1977) argue is probably quite accurate, although Samuel Bradburn, a Methodist minister, set the total at closer to 400,000. However, the significance of the boycott exceeds numbers of participants, as impressive as those numbers were. In a society where most citizens were disenfranchised and excluded from decision-making, the boycott signified that the public was reclaiming their right to act as citizens. Notably, the boycott was focused on slavery as a whole, rather than the slave trade, which had been the strategic focal point of the original abolition committee, thereby broadening the horizon of concern. Finally, women were increasingly engaged with the sugar boycott; yet another sign that women

were beginning to see public engagement in public issues as their right, reflecting a harbinger of larger social changes of inclusion to come.

All of these strategies and tools of social change that were either initiated or developed by the abolition movement are available as resources to social and environmental movements today. When environmental advocates or eco-social workers “wield any of these tools today, we are using techniques devised or perfected by the campaign that held its first meeting in 2 George Yard” (Hochschild, 2005, p. 7). In general, environmental Non-Governmental Organizations confirm that they do indeed utilize these strategies and tactics in their own advocacy, implicitly acknowledging their indebtedness to the courageous and innovative abolitionists 200 years ago. But Hochschild (2005) also insists that from “their successful crusade we still have much to learn” (p. 7). His exhortation to learn from this movement poses an interesting question: What could we learn from the abolition movement beyond the contemporary adaptation of the tools of social change? Could resiliency and compassion, and the role that spirituality plays in nurturing these qualities, be yet another lesson to be learned?

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: SOCIAL MOVEMENT, COMPASSION, AND SPIRITUAL RESILIENCY

Perhaps the true indicators of the forces that successfully challenged the slave system and forced it to turn the corner toward contradiction and destruction should not be sought in the elites of trade and Parliament, but in the regional and local networks of social and religious life. (Drescher, 1977, p. 185)

As historians have explored what sustained the abolition movement over several decades, many acknowledge that one cannot overlook the contribution that spirituality of its key leaders may have played in the ability of the abolition movement to continue over five decades from May 22, 1787 to August 31, 1838. Clarkson was the only one of the original twelve members of the abolition committee that met in May 1787 left alive when the slave trade was abolished. Wilberforce also displayed remarkable stamina through his leadership of the Parliamentary wing of the abolition movement over four decades until his death in July 28, 1833. It is true that the abolitionists solved the problem of succession by allowing younger members of the movement to take up the mantle of leadership, including the Quaker organizer Elizabeth Heyrick, and Wilberforce’s Parliamentary successor, Thomas Buxton. But this is only part of the answer. How do we account for the stamina of the leadership, such as Clarkson and Wilberforce, as well as the ability of the movement as a whole to sustain itself through considerable resistance and “push-back” over several decades?

## Spirituality, Social Movements, and Social Work

Through her examination of such archetypal organizers as Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire, social work educator Sarah Todd (2009) highlights how the “most influential organizers of our time have understood the significance of people’s interior lives when mobilizing for social change” (p. 171). Through tapping into their inner dynamics and emotional resources, Todd argues that members of social movements are able to access reservoirs of energy and passion that nurture the individual’s commitment to action. Effective community organizers and social workers can facilitate members of social movements to identify and access these interior resources upon which they will rely for their continuing involvement. Todd draws attention to Freire’s insight that “overcoming oppression requires internal work to see the interconnectedness of all human beings and to recognize the inherent humanness and value in all of us” (p. 178). Todd makes direct links to spiritual practices of integrating mindfulness and passionate politics, a perception shared by other social workers (London, 2009; Lysack, 2009).

By drawing on the work of mindfulness educators (Salzberg, 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 2005), Todd also traces the interior emergence of compassion as a person becomes aware of the discrepancy between one’s interior disposition and the exterior world, precipitating discomfort and emotional pain as these two realities collide with one another. Spiritual practices, such as mindfulness, have the potential of intensifying the awareness of the contradiction or dissonance between one’s inner and outer worlds. As this disparity continues, choices arise as to how one will respond to this contradiction. In her reading of Salzberg (2002), Todd proposes that the “opportunity to name injustices and change inequities and hate-filled situations does not fade, but instead we consider the possibility of whether we can work for change without prejudice or fear, without destroying ourselves with our anger and frustration” (2009, p. 180). This description of the painfully emotional conflict between the inner and outer worlds bears resemblance to Clarkson’s (1808a) account of the clash between his Christian ethics and spirituality and his awareness of the suffering of slaves. He writes:

All my pleasure was damped by the facts which were now continually before me. It was but one gloomy subject from morning to night . . . , I sat down disconsolate on the turf by the roadside and held my horse. Here a thought came into my mind . . . , it was time some person should see these calamities to their end. (p. 109)

As a person becomes realigned to a commitment to act, then the focus becomes how to alleviate suffering and change the social and economic structures that maintain this suffering. The abolitionists were able to awaken this sense in others, producing a massive sea-change of opinion

about slavery from passive acquiescence to conscious opposition and moral outrage about the plight of slaves in another part of the world. While acknowledging the role that religious faith played in the abolition movement, Hochschild (2005) highlights their belief that a “human being had a capacity to care about the suffering of others” (p. 366), placing their hope in human compassion. For Clarkson, Wilberforce and others, the approach to mobilizing others was “through the vivid, unforgettable description of acts of great injustice done to their fellow human beings” (p. 366). As a Buddhist teacher, Salzberg (2002) underlines that the goal of mindfulness as a spiritual discipline is to grow in one’s awareness of the suffering of others and to seek to relieve that suffering. Similarly, in her explication of mindfulness and engaged politics, social work academic Todd (2009) stresses that mindfulness awakens compassion and deepens one’s belief in the capacity of others “to understand and work to end suffering” (p. 183), which then serves as a wellspring of passionate commitment to ending the injustice.

### Spiritual Resilience in the Face of Opposition

Spirituality provides a deep resilience, an interior capacity to withstand shocks or threats from the outside, for those involved in the leadership of a morally-based social movement. For the abolition movement, several key figures were subjected to threats and personal attacks. James Ramsey, the doctor and Anglican priest who wrote a early key antislavery text that influenced both Clarkson and Wilberforce, was subjected to a prolonged and relentless public attack and intimidation through the newspapers and on the floor of Parliament, probably contributing to his death at 55 (Hochschild, 2005). In his first mobilization tour of England in 1787, Clarkson (1808a) received several threatening letters, and narrowly escaped physical assault on the docks of Liverpool. Just before his death, the 86-year old John Wesley warned Wilberforce about the ferocity of the resistance that he would likely encounter in his antislavery activities:

Unless the divine power has raised you . . . , I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villainy [of slavery], which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? (as cited in Tomkins, 2007, pp. 92–93)

Although social work has a long history of community practice stretching back to its origins, Walz and Ritchie (2000) lament that social work has ignored spiritual resources, such as Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, or soul force of righteousness; the root of moral courage in the advocate’s encounters with resistance or violence. Similarly, social work educator London (2009) draws

parallels between Gandhi's practice of *satyagraha* and *kwimenya*, or self-knowledge, as practiced by the ecological activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Wangari Maathai (2010). For both Gandhi and Maathai, spirituality provides the essential roots for a steadfast commitment and a resilient advocacy in the face of opposition and violence. Similarly, Clarkson's writings (1808a, 1808b) as well as Equiano's (2003) autobiography and Wilberforce's (Belmonte, 2002; Metaxas, 2007; Pollock, 1977) letters provide eloquent testimony to how their interior spiritual lives nourished their activism and engagement with the abolition movement. Such lessons of resiliency will be crucial for the climate change and environmental movements of today. The abolition movement provides just such rich resources for the journey.

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