

A NEW GENERATION OF SOCIAL ACTIVISTS IS EMERGING  
AT THIS CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN OUR PLANET'S EVOLUTION.

THESE YOUNG LEADERS ARE NOT SIMPLY IDEALISTS—  
AND CONTRARY TO SOME STEREOTYPES, THEY ARE NOT MIRED  
IN DENIAL OR DESPAIR ABOUT THE CURRENT WORLD SITUATION.  
RATHER, THESE ACTIVISTS ARE ACUTELY AWARE OF THE INNER AND  
OUTER FORCES THAT PERPETUATE THE DESTRUCTIVE VELOCITIES  
IN OUR WORLD. DRAWING ON GANDHI'S TEACHING TO BE  
THE CHANGE THEY WISH TO SEE, THEY ARE ON A JOURNEY TO EMBODY  
A HOLISTIC, LIFE-AFFIRMING VISION. THIS IS A GENERATION  
TAPPING INTO THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION IN ORDER TO  
REVISION, REWRITE, AND REVOLUTIONIZE THE HEALING  
AND TRANSFORMATION OF OUR PLANET.

TARRA  
CHRISTOFF

# Generation

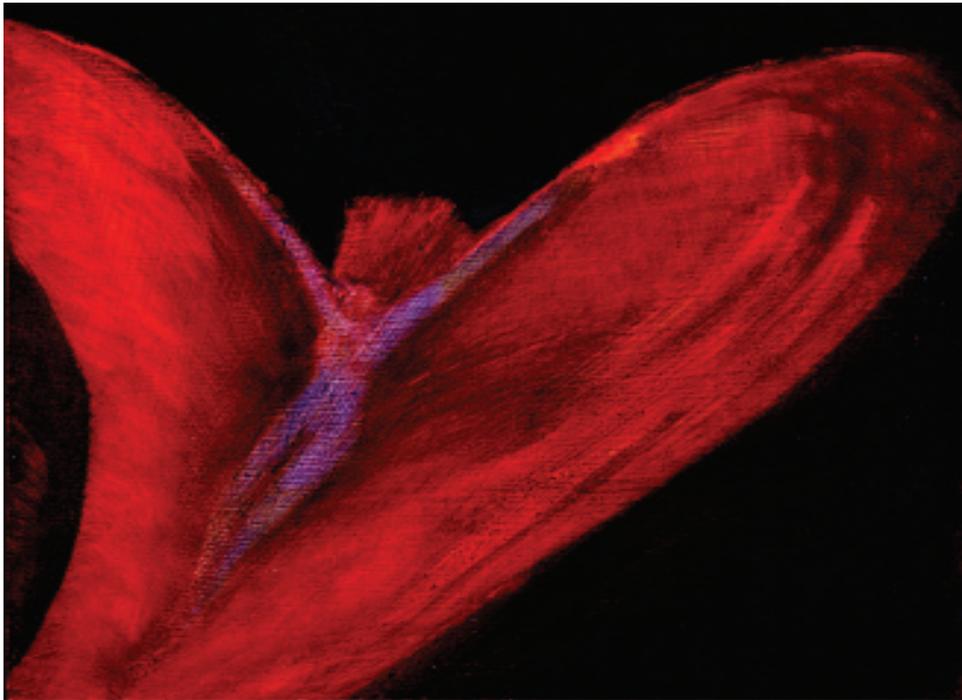
## AN EVOLUTIONARY JOURNEY

Today's young advocates for change recognize the many rich traditions they have inherited, and they know they stand on the shoulders of pioneers who have fought throughout history to create a more just and inclusive world. At the same time, they see that the world is different now. They face complex realities of environmental destruction, oil addiction and depletion, an unsustainable consumerist culture, a global corporate economy with rising poverty, and daily reports of war and terrorism. Yet they are also living in an era when continuing advances in communication and technology support their organizing efforts and sense of global interconnectedness.

"Our generation has heard the call to embody a new cultural identity," says Luke Taylor, 19, who will be attending Stanford University in the fall. "We are in a transition phase of our evolution where a collective creativity is coming to the foreground." Taylor is a facilitator and training coordinator of the Awakening the Dreamer Symposium in the San Francisco Bay Area, one

of many symposiums growing in number throughout the United States and other countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. Participants explore the links between three of humanity's most critical concerns—environmental sustainability, social justice, and spiritual fulfillment—to facilitate shifts in perspectives and choices around the habitual actions they take each day.

Ocean Robbins, 32, founded YES! (Youth for Environmental Sanity) in 1990 when he was 16. Through school assemblies and conference presentations, training workshops, camps, youth jams, and action guides, YES! connects, inspires, and empowers young change-makers worldwide to join forces. Seeing both the planetary destruction occurring and the huge numbers of people working for change, Robbins observes: "We were born with the possibility beating in our hearts for a world that is more humane, more in harmony with the earth, and more aligned with the forces of sustainability and justice. I think we are an immune system that is responding to the crisis of our time."



SIS ILLUSTRATION / VEER

# Awakening

A supporter of youth-led projects and a founder of NextNow Collaboratory, a synergistic web of relationships focused on social transformation, Claudia Welss shares a similar observation: “I believe every generation is born uniquely capable of facing the challenges of the world they’re born into. It’s part of evolution’s intelligence. This generation is so incredible because the challenges are so incredible, and a big part of their gift to the world is to model the fuller realization of a potential we all share.”

## INNER CHANGE, OUTER CHANGE

For this new breed of activists, inner transformation and social transformation are inseparably meshed. An eclectic mix of spiritual teachings and traditions informs their engagement with the suffering of the world—from meditation, yoga, and indigenous practices to personal growth workshops, the creative arts, and various somatic practices.

Isaak Brown, 18, got an early start in his spiritual practice. Throughout his teen years, Brown served as class

president, worked to clean up the ocean, and volunteered as an HIV and health peer educator at his high school. When he was 17, he read Christopher Queen’s *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Wisdom Publications, 2000), which led him to a teen meditation retreat and the discovery of Vipassana meditation. “After the retreat, my service changed to a spiritual practice,” Brown recalls. “I no longer run away from fear or pain, particularly the pain of what society is doing to us. I bring compassion and nonduality to my work.” Today he lives in Seattle, where he is involved with the Americorps program known as City Year, which unites youth of all backgrounds for a demanding year of community service and leadership development in 16 U.S. communities, as well as in Johannesburg, South Africa. Brown also teaches meditation to middle-school students and assists the Buddhist Peace Fellowship with teen meditation retreats.

Shilpa Jain, 33, of Udaipur, India, works with a movement called Shikshantar, or The People’s Institute for Rethinking Education and Development. She points

out, “The intention is to question what we can do to live in alignment with our values and convictions and to challenge the institutions that are taking control of our lives. We look at how we can regenerate diverse localities and cultures, as well as other ways of knowing and being outside the dominant model.” Shilpa has also spent the past four years organizing and facilitating world youth jams for YES! She explains that Jainism informs her work through its concepts of “*anekantavaad*, which means a respect for diversity and many paths,” and “*ahimsa*, which means an absence of violence.”

Many of today’s young activists are influenced by the practice and philosophy of yoga. They recognize that an

integrative approach to personal and planetary transformation is an embodied one. Yoga teacher Seane Corn, for example, is on a campaign to “take yoga off the mat and into the world.” Corn’s activism began in her twenties, when she focused on women’s issues, particularly the sexual abuse of girls. Today she is engaged in “cause-related marketing” for YouthAIDS, which uses media, pop culture, music, theater, and sports to reach 600 million young people in more than sixty countries with life-saving services. Her vision is to tap into the \$1 billion that 20 million yoga practitioners spend every year. “If we’re all part of a global consciousness,” says Corn, “we have an innate responsibility to do something about social crises. We start by healing what is within us; then together we can start a global campaign for compassion.” She emphasizes the Hopi wisdom that guides her: “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

## YOUTH GROUP AND ACTIVIST WEB SITES

Action Without Borders  
[www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)

Bioneers  
<http://youth.bioneers.org>

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Youth Program  
[www.bpf.org/html/current\\_projects//teen\\_program/teenretreat.html](http://www.bpf.org/html/current_projects//teen_program/teenretreat.html)

Challenge Day  
<http://challengeday.org>

The Evolver Project  
[www.evolverproject.com](http://www.evolverproject.com)

Global Youth Action Network  
[www.youthlink.org](http://www.youthlink.org)

Interfaith Youth Core  
[www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)

The Network of Spiritual Progressives  
[www.spiritualprogressives.org](http://www.spiritualprogressives.org)

One World Now  
<http://oneworld-now.org>

Pioneers of Change  
<http://pioneersofchange.net>

Taking IT Global  
<http://takingitglobal.com>

World Spirit Youth Council  
[www.worldspirityouthcouncil.org](http://www.worldspirityouthcouncil.org)

YES!  
[www.yesworld.org](http://www.yesworld.org)

## RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS WISDOM

Like Corn, many young activists are returning to the wisdom of our ancestors for guidance. They are exploring how indigenous traditions can be integrated into their paths, embracing deep ecology and earth-based ritual as an integral part of their activism.

Marcella Eversole, 33, is a cofounder of Spiral Muse, an organization that organizes international events to promote healing and partnership between indigenous and nonindigenous women and coordinates women’s circles to nurture leadership. “In 2004, I attended an International Women’s Council in Guatemala, and this experience woke up something very deep inside me,” Eversole says. “The indigenous leaders there structured their communities so that the spiritual, social, and political were all interconnected. They said that their ceremonies have been preserved for precisely this moment in human evolution, when the human spirit must be nourished to face today’s ecological challenges.”

Heddi Lorraine Neale is the president of Tinamit Junan Uleu/Earth Peoples United, which is guided by traditional Mayan initiatives for developing sustainable local and international alliances. “Most of us have lost the ability to cultivate deep relationship within ourselves, our communities, and with the earth itself, and therefore we cannot enable our communities to work together to meet our needs and ensure our survival,” Neale observes.

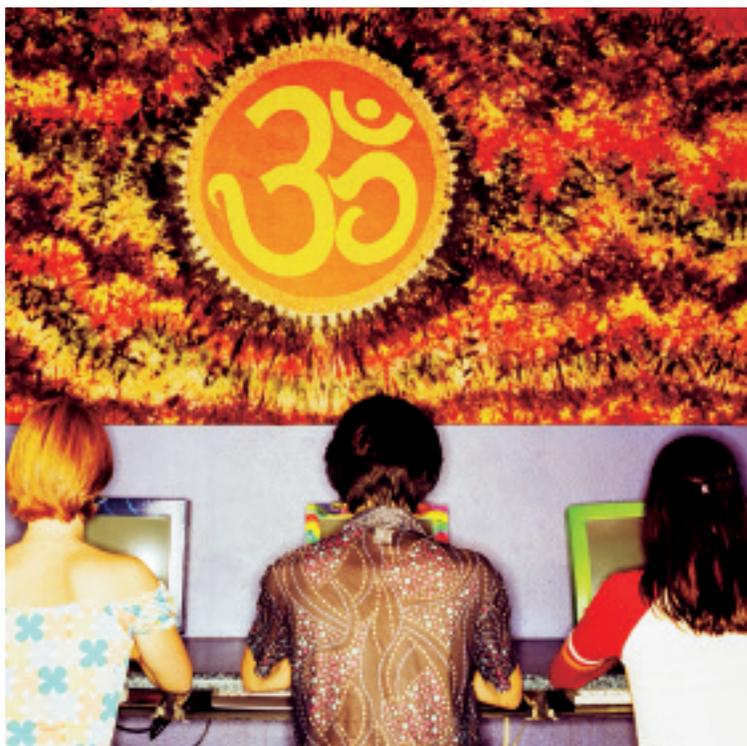
“Indigenous wisdom has maintained its connection to the elemental and natural worlds and its relationship with the cycles of the cosmos. Unfortunately, many ancient traditions are being lost to a world that is becoming increasingly separated from the natural rhythms of time. There are few elders who still maintain the wisdom gained from a lifetime of living in the ways passed down by their ancestors. The wisdom they’re now sharing is some of the last, and they share it, hoping they can wake people up to see, feel, and understand the bigger picture.”

The young are listening, and they are reclaiming the sacred teachings through ceremonies, shamanic journey-work, vision quests, nature retreats, and many other forms. With reverence and humility, they are returning to the source of wisdom and learning to lead.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY: VIRTUAL AND REAL

At the heart of this generation’s approach to social transformation is community. Through community they fulfill a desire to connect to a like-minded tribe and mobilize around issues that matter to them. They also recognize that working through the inevitable challenges of community is an important part of spiritual development. The rugged individualism of past generations has given way to a neotribalism, where activists see their web of relationships as a microcosm of what is possible on the macro level.

In the age of cyberspace, new communities emerge at hyperspeed. Says Erik Davis, author of *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Serpents Tail, 1999): “There is a return to tribalism that is similar to the communal experiments of the 1960s. Much of this has emerged from the rave movement—and even the focus on raw food. The way of this generation is to throw themselves into collective communities through the Internet and to create affinities. There is experimentation with group culture and new social forms. Neotribal networks help these activists get things done outside the consumerist, individualistic mentality.” Davis is currently working with fellow editor Daniel Pinchbeck on *Evolver*, a new magazine committed to a positive vision of transformative culture and social engagement. Like Davis, Pinchbeck sees this generation leveraging the possibilities inherent in new media technology, and he notes that they do it at the blink of an eye: “Every time there is a



STOCKBYTE PHOTOGRAPHY / VEER

new media technology, it contributes to a whole new political and social structure.”

Among the innovative ways to merge spirituality and social change, David Nicol, founder of Citizen Circle at the California Institute of Integral Studies, is excited by the potential of “subtle activism”—engagement in collective spiritual practices that energetically shift the collective consciousness: “A prime example is the phenomenon of global meditation, in which hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions of people gather around the planet at the same time for a period of shared silence and shared intent for peace on Earth. These kinds of practices, using leading-edge Internet social networking and collaborative technologies, have an enormous, though mostly untapped, potential to help tilt things in a favorable direction.”

## THE POWER OF THE ARTS AND IMAGINATION

The generation awakening is embracing its relationship to the arts and media, which have always held the potential to ignite the imagination and reshape culture. This is a generation that loves to ritualize, beat drums, move their bodies to an eclectic range of music, write poetry, and use media, technology, and community events to share vision with an international tribe.

Poet Lyla Johnston, 16, recently led a peace walk

through her hometown of Taos, New Mexico, and helps to run her high school's recycling program. She has won numerous poetry slams throughout the country and took first place in the National Anti-Tobacco Second-Hand Slam in New York City, sponsored by Do Something, an organization that makes community service among the young "as cool as sports." Johnston says, "Poetry is one of the most powerful forms of activism I've ever seen; it appeals to not just the logical part of an audience but also to the emotional. I write about anything, from the relentless actions of advertising agencies, to the war, to the potential of the people."

Derrick Ashong, 30, is a Harvard-educated scholar, change-maker, musician, and actor, who started the Sweet Mother Project. A group of artists, social-change leaders, and educators from around the globe use the tools of popular culture—music, film, and television—to stimulate cultural empowerment for the people of Africa. At the forefront of the project is Soulfège, a band fusing funk, reggae, hip-hop, and highlife. "Music is a profound reflection of the human spirit," says Ashong. "[It] can be a movement to change the world."

## AN EMERGING GLOBAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The consciousness rising in this generation is one of nonduality, based not on the stereotypical activist's "us-versus-them" thinking but on interconnection and a sense of oneness with all of life. "The twenty-first century is giving way to a strategy of 'whole-systems change' that seeks to transform the world at multiple levels simultaneously—individually and collectively, culturally and structurally," says Joshua Gorman, a member of the newly forming World Spirit Youth Council. "This is an ecological mode of thought that views our planet as a holistic living system and human society as an integral matrix of social spheres."

Ryan Feinstein, 21, directed the 2006 Youth-in-Action Quest for Global Healing Conference in Ubud, Bali. Feinstein links the interconnectedness of all life to humanity's need to evolve to "a mind-set that allows for all perspectives and beliefs to be heard. For example, to never learn about the Islamic religion or never be exposed to anyone who is Muslim makes it easy to maintain a perception of Muslims as 'terrorists.' A global consciousness means we embrace and try to understand everyone."

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As remarkable as this generation awakening is, they are not immune to the difficulties inherent in activist work, such as garnering financial support and resources. Often, they find themselves reinventing the wheel, unwittingly overlapping services with other like-minded groups. Building alliances with similar organizations and mentors to leverage their resources in the most efficient and sustainable ways is vital.

There is also the challenge of bridging different worlds—business, nonprofit, and government, for example. Like shamans, these young leaders must walk among many realities. Sometimes this results in a powerful fusion, as with the growing movement of social entrepreneurship where businesses embrace social responsibility. Other times it is challenging for the language of one sector—such as a business—to communicate in the language of another sector—such as a nonprofit. And as many traditional structures come tumbling down, the new ones that have yet to take shape require skills and capacities not traditionally valued in a capitalist culture—collaboration, empathy, humility, courage, nonduality, compassion, and reverence.

This generation also faces the deeper challenge, one shared by many of us, of bringing their spirituality and values into their worldly work. The prognosis is hopeful, though, as many create new forms of work through healing modalities, complementary therapies, green businesses, life coaching, and a host of other "social profits" committed to making a difference. Circle Center in Fairfax, California, is one example: It's a hub that houses a healing center; a space for classes, workshops, and circles; a small shop; and a community house with a collaborative garden. It serves as a focal point for a growing web of healers, teachers, visionaries, and artists helping to incubate collaborative projects such as the Global Health Foundation, a network of holistic healers who have experienced breakthroughs treating youth for mental health and attention disorder issues.

As for the challenge of burnout, Jonathan Gustin, 32, who founded Green Sangha, believes the term "activist" itself is problematic. "If I brush my teeth, it's self-care. If I work to change the destruction of the forests, it's

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considered activism, but actually it's self-care. Caring for the forest is caring for my body; we are one with the planet." He underscores the importance of thoughts, words, and actions rooted in love: "The challenge is to stay humble, because it's easy to become a fundamentalist."

## THE HOPE OF VISIONARY ACTIVISM

Members of generation awakening are embodied, emboldened revolutionaries taking a stand for a new world, and they are a growing force in the global movement for a just, inclusive, and sustainable future. "I think the best part of our generation's form of activist work is the fact that we are working to create something new," says Karen Berzanski, 27, who recently created K-Turn Productions, an organization in New York City employing media, youth education, and community outreach programs to promote a better vision for our world. "We are not fighting against

systems that aren't working; we are forming new ideas and projects that we hope will naturally and organically become the norm."

Van Jones, founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, California, who regularly works with today's youth, commends their power and promise: "This next generation is open to a wisdom-based approach to solving problems. We are seeing a generation emerging in an age of hybridity, where things are coming together in new ways. This generation isn't limited by binary thinking; they talk about 'ands.' They don't see a stark difference between inner and outer change. And they seem to be especially equipped to help the human family navigate the choppy waters we've inherited at this moment in history." 

**TARRA CHRISTOFF** is a life coach and group leader with an MA in psychology. She completed a training program in socially engaged Buddhism through the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Christoff is writing a book about global healing through embodied activism and can be reached through [www.tarrachristoff.com](http://www.tarrachristoff.com).



## A G I F T T H A T P A Y S Y O U



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—CLAIRE RUSSELL  
VISIONARY CIRCLE MEMBER

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85	9.5%	\$5,294
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