

Striding into the Sea: Five Steps to Addressing Tough Social Challenges

Adam Kahane

For the past fifteen years, I have focused my attention on answering one question: How can we address our toughest social challenges? Our two most common ways are the extreme ones: war and peace. Either we try to push through what we want, regardless of what others want—but inevitably the others push back. Or we try not to push anything on anyone—but that leaves our situation just as it is. Neither of these ways work. We need a better way: a way beyond war and peace.

A few years ago I had some dental surgery. The day afterwards, I was boarding an airplane and I banged my head against the overhead compartment, which sent a terrible shooting pain into my jaw. I went back to the dentist's office and complained to the nurse that when I hit my fist against my head, it *really* hurt. She looked at me calmly and gave me the most sensible advice I have ever been given: "If it hurts," she said, "then stop doing it."

Our most common ways of trying to address our toughest social challenges hurt, and we should stop doing them. We need to find an uncommon way.

My colleagues and I have over the past fifteen years been working on developing such an uncommon way. We have been helping teams of business, government and civil society leaders act together to address tough challenges that all of them want to address but that none of them can address alone. We have worked in this way with all kinds of teams, on all sorts of challenges, in all parts of the world: in Guatemala, to implement the peace accords; in the United States, to reform health care; in Canada, to shift to a low-carbon economy; across Europe and the Americas, to make food supply chains more sustainable; in South Africa, to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic; in India, to reduce child malnutrition. We have had some successes and some failures and much learning.

If you focus on one question for long enough, then eventually an answer will come to you. Here is the answer that has come to me: If we want to be able to address our toughest social challenges, then we have to become bilingual. We have to learn to speak fluently two languages that are not translatable one into the other. We have to learn to speak both the language of power and the language of love. The answer that has come to me is simple—but it is not easy.

Now this answer requires a bit of explanation because the words power and love are defined by so many different people in so many different ways. For many people they connote, respectively, oppression and romance. But I am using two particular and unusual definitions, from theologian Paul Tillich, that in my experience explain a lot of the dynamics of social change. Tillich said power is "the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity." So power in this sense is the drive to achieve one's purpose, to get one's job done, to grow. And he said love is "the drive towards the unity of the separated." So love in this sense is the drive to re-connect that which is whole, which is one, but which appears fragmented.

Power and love are two orthogonal axes that together delineate the space of social change. If we want to be able to understand and address tough social challenges, then we need to be able to recognize and work with both of these vectors or poles.

The reason power and love are challenging to work with is that each of them has two faces. Power has a generative face and a degenerative face, and love also has a generative face and a degenerative

face. Italian feminist Paula Melchiori pointed out to me that we can see these two sets of two faces clearly if we look at stereotyped gender roles. The father, embodying masculine power, goes out to work, to do his job. The generative face of his power is that he can create something valuable in the world. The degenerative face of his power is that he can become so focused on *his* work that he forgets about his connection to other people, and become a robot or a tyrant. By contrast, the mother, embodying feminine love, stays at home to raise the children. The generative face of her love is that she literally gives life to her child. The degenerative face of her love is that she can become so protective of the child that she forgets about its need for self-realization and so stunts its growth.

Our power becomes degenerate when, because we are afraid of being hurt, we cut off connection. Our love becomes degenerate when, because we are afraid of allowing or contributing to others being hurt, we cut off action. Our fears hold us back from being able to address our toughest challenges.

Let me illustrate these two sets of two faces with a provocative example. Over the past few years, I have been working with a team of leaders from across the deeply divided Jewish community in Israel: from the left and right; religious and secular; politicians, business people, activists, and rabbis. They are looking for answers to the tough question: What kind of society can we envisage, to which we and our descendants would be proud to belong, and in which we could live in friendship with our non-Jewish neighbors?

Jewish-Israeli society exemplifies the two-faced phenomenon of power. On the one hand, we see the inspiring drive of a people, rising out of the near-extinction of the Holocaust, to realize themselves with increasing intensity and extensity. On the other hand, we see the violent conflict that this drive, set next to the analogous drives of others, can produce. I observed this same two-faced phenomenon during the meetings of the team itself, with each of the participants seized by the drive to realize themselves, to be true to themselves, to argue their point of view passionately—and the conflict that this drive can produce.

Then I noticed, during the team's third workshop—held in Eilat, beside the Red Sea—the other two-faced phenomenon: love. One morning we were having a long, heartfelt dialogue about inclusion and exclusion within Israeli society. It seemed to me that every part of that society feels excluded: the religious, the secular, the settlers, the gays, the Russians, the Arabs. I could hear the pain in people's voices, but I couldn't make out why this conversation was so important to them. Then suddenly I saw what *wasn't* there. It's like the joke about Sherlock Holmes and Watson on a camping trip. In the middle of the night, Holmes wakes Watson up and asks him: "Watson, what do you see?" Watson is used to these tests of his skills of observation and he starts to answer, "I see the twinkling stars, I see the rising moon, I see the passing clouds..." but Holmes interrupts him and says, "No Watson, you idiot! Someone stole our tent!" The pain in the room was the pain of the longing for what *wasn't* there: for a sense of inclusion, of connection, of oneness. This is the phenomenon of love: the drive towards the unity of the separated. This love both nourished and constrained the team's work. And this two-faced love is also present, both nourishing and constraining, in the larger society, in the longing of Jewish-Israelis to be united with one another and with their non-Jewish neighbors, and vice-versa.

Paul Tillich's most famous student was the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. In one of his last speeches, King spoke about the imperative of reconciling power and love. He said: "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. This collision of immoral power with powerless morality constitutes the major crisis of our time."

My own experience bears out King's analysis. Power without love *is* reckless and abusive. If I act to realize myself without recognizing that you and I are one, then the result I will produce will at best be

insensitive, and at worst oppressive or even genocidal. And love without power *is* sentimental and anemic. If I recognize our oneness, but don't change my actions or enable your actions in accord with this recognition, then the result I will produce will at best be ineffectual, and at worst deceitfully reinforcing of the status quo.

The reason we need to be bilingual, then, is that power and love are exactly complementary. Love is what makes power generative instead of degenerative. And power is what makes love generative instead of degenerative.

Power and love therefore constitute not a choice to be made, but a dilemma to be reconciled. We have to learn to see and approach the world with both of these distinct orientations. We have to learn to speak fluently both the language of power and the language of love. This is easy in theory but difficult in practice. In my work, I have observed many more examples of unilingual, reckless and abusive power without love, and unilingual, sentimental and anemic love without power, than examples of bilingual power with love. Jungian psychologist Robert Johnson made the same observation: "Probably the most troublesome pair of opposites [that we can try] to reconcile is love and power. Our modern world is torn to shreds by this dichotomy and one finds many more failures than successes in the attempt to reconcile them."

So how *can* we learn to be bilingual? We can learn to be bilingual like we learn to be bipedal—like we learn to walk on two legs. We can't walk on only one leg, just as we can't address our toughest social challenges only with power or only with love. But walking on two legs means neither moving them both at the same time, nor always being in balance. On the contrary, it means moving first one and then the other, and always being *out* of balance. It's like the scene in the movie *The Wizard of Oz* when the Scarecrow gets down from his pole and tries to stand up and walk. What I have observed is that learning to work fluently with both power and love involves progressing through five Scarecrow-like steps: from falling down, to hobbling in place, to lurching dangerously, to stepping deliberately, and finally to dancing fluidly. Let me take these one at a time, and give you an example of each from my own experience.

The first step is *falling*. We fall down when our power and love are disconnected: when our power is without love and our love is without power. Between 2004 and 2006, I worked in India on a project aimed at reducing child malnutrition. Forty-seven percent of Indian children are malnourished, and thirty-eight percent of all the malnourished children in the world are in India. The project was motivated by an enormous loving impulse to reach out and help these children. At the same time, the project involved enormous power dynamics: between the well-off, well-fed project team and the poor, under-fed children and their families and communities; between government officials, corporate executives, and managers of non-governmental organizations; between foreign donors and consultants and local stakeholders; between bosses and subordinates, high class and low class, old and young, and men and women. This context created a lot of fear, both of hurting or subjugating others, and of being hurt or subjugated. I certainly felt that fear, and found myself being sentimental and anemic on even-numbered days, and reckless and abusive on odd-numbered ones. Our power and love became polarized and disconnected, and we all fell down painfully, and the project collapsed. Then we picked ourselves up and reorganized the project and tried again.

The second step is *hobbling*. We hobble and don't get anywhere when our power dominates our love, or vice versa. I observed this in Israel, where at every scale—individual, community, and nation—the fear of being hurt, the existential fear of being erased, is greater than the fear of hurting others. So at every scale, power dominates love. There is a painful Israeli joke that says: "If force doesn't work, use more force!" The result is a war of the parts against the whole—among individuals, among communities, and among nations—and a situation that is terribly and tragically stuck.

The third step is *lurching*. We lurch forward by taking power as far as we can, almost falling over, and then taking love as far as we can, and so on. I first started working in South Africa in 1991, in the middle of the transition away from apartheid. To work in South Africa is to wrestle with how in practice to address our toughest social challenges: how to effect what in Afrikaans is incisively called *regstellende aksie*, “right-putting action.” Over the years, I have noticed a repeating cycle of power and love. The final years of apartheid were filled with violent conflict, including riots, assassinations and massacres. Then many people made many efforts to bring the various conflicting parties together in negotiations and dialogues, and a peaceful transition to democracy was effected. Then the focus shifted, with many people turning their attention to building up their own organizations and their own lives, and gradually differences and dissonances increased, until by the middle of this year many people thought the country was going to fall apart in corruption, conflict and chaos. But then, again, many people started to speak out and hold meetings and launch initiatives aimed at bringing everyone’s attention back to the good of the whole, and now things seem to be back on track. This lurching feels unsteady and dangerous, and it could certainly end up going too far in one direction or another and fall over. But there is at work here a homeostatic cycle between centrifugal power and centripetal love.

The fourth phase is *stepping*. We put one foot in front of another deliberately when we are paying careful attention to effecting the transitions from power to love and back again. Five years ago I participated in launching the Sustainable Food Lab, a consortium of 70 food companies and non-governmental organizations, from across Europe and the Americas, that is working to accelerate the shift of sustainability-produced food from niche to mainstream. What I have observed in this project is how crucial and difficult the transitions are, and what painstaking design and support they require. The transitions from power to love have been facilitated by a series of unorthodox processes—learning journeys to different parts of the food system; a 72-hour silent retreat in the desert; workshops with lots of time for heart-to-heart dialogue—all aimed at helping the team both to see through each other’s eyes the larger system they are all part of, to resolve conflict, and to build trusting cross-system relationships. The transitions from love to power are difficult in a different way, because now we need to move from an intellectual or emotional or spiritual connection to collaborative action, in which each of us needs to commit our time and resources and energies to implementing the initiatives that we have said need to be taken. Here the key processes are practical ones: paying attention to individual and organizational interests, building prototypes and pilots, and learning our way forward. These transitions between power and love don’t happen automatically: they require deliberate attention.

The fifth and final step is *dancing*. We dance when we are able to shift from power to love and back again with unconscious competence, so that the two phenomena become a fluid and beautiful whole—just as most of us are able to walk with unconscious competence. I have observed such flow over the past year in working on climate change with a group of politicians and business people and activists in Canada, on an initiative aimed at shifting the country towards a high-efficiency, low-carbon economy. What has impressed me is that the leadership of this project is completely comfortable with both the love aspect of their work—trying to reconnect global human and ecological systems—and also with the power aspect—paying attention to the economic and political and cultural interests of each stakeholder. Climate change is the toughest of all social challenges and requires both 100% of our love and 100% of our power. I am not certain that this particular initiative will succeed in making a difference on climate change. But I *am* certain that success can only come through tri-sector initiatives of this sort and with this flow.

Let me reiterate, then, what I have learned from the past fifteen years. If we want to be able to address our toughest social challenges, we need to become bilingual and bipedal. Power and love are not the same, but nor are they opposed: they are complementary. We need to learn to move from

falling to hobbling to lurching to stepping to dancing between power and love. This is easy in theory and difficult in practice.

All of these learnings applies at all scales of social interaction, not only the global and national but also the organisational and individual. As organizational leaders, we need to learn how to exercise our power— achieve our mission, get our job done, meet our schedule—*while and through* exercising our love—connecting with others who have a stake in what is going on. And as individuals, we need to learn how to realize our true selves, to live our own lives, *while and through* being open to and in relationship with others. My personal experience is that these two drives—to realize myself, and to unite the separated—are in permanent dynamic tension. To be fully alive is to exercise all of our power and all of our love.

The hardest part of becoming flowingly bipedal is healing our weaker drive. For some people the weaker is power and for others love. While I was working on this speech, I got a call from a friend of mine who had had an illness that resulted in him having lost half of one of his feet. He had been in the hospital for six months, had had ten reconstructive operations on that foot, and was slowly learning to walk again. I asked him what the hardest part of this was and he answered, “I have to consciously unlearn the habits that I learned to protect myself from hurting my damaged foot.” If we want to be able to flow between power and love, we also have to consciously unlearn the habits that we have learned to protect ourselves from being hurt or hurting others. Here our challenge is not so much to avoid being afraid, but rather to have the courage to be afraid and, nevertheless, to stride forward.

My middle name is Moses and so I have always taken an interest in my biblical namesake. The Book of Exodus tells the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and of the Red Sea parting so that they could cross towards the Promised Land. This text contains the puzzling sentence that the first persons who stepped into the sea got their feet wet. One of the rabbis on the Jewish-Israeli team explained this to me by saying that when the Israelites got to the Red Sea, it was not yet parted, and so they sat on the bank and wailed for God to make a path for them. But then a young leader named Nahshon walked into the water, up to his neck, and it was this courageous act of striding into the sea that created the path.

So how can we get to being able to flow between power and love? The way is long, the terrain is rough, and there is no map. What we need is to summon up the courage to step forward, to use both of our legs, to put one foot in front of the other. This is the only way to part the sea and to cross towards the Promised Land. This is the only way to learn to be able to employ power with love. This is the only way to address our toughest social challenges.

kahane@reospartners.com
www.reospartners.com