



GROUNDING OUR INNER LEADERSHIP: An Interview about Spirit and Sustainability with Gihan Perera

This is an interview with Gihan Perera, co-founder and Executive Director of the Miami Workers Center, about spirit and sustainability in the social justice movement. It was conducted in April 2008 by Neelam Pathikonda, former Spirit in Motion Director, as part of a multi-year research project by the Movement Strategy Center.

Neelam Pathikonda: Hi Gihan. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. So, how long have you been involved in movement work?

Gihan Perera (GP): My uncle and aunt were political; I used to roll with them when I was five. I started a peace and justice club in high school in 1986. I grew up in Southern California and went to Berkeley from 1988-1992. I had heard and imagined that Berkeley was where the activists were; even though I didn't quite know what that meant. I did college radio and student activism. I took African history and got my consciousness sparked to another level. Then the first gulf war happened and changed my life forever. But to test my commitment I felt I needed to get out of the bay area. I went down south to organize textile workers with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textiles Workers in Georgia and the Carolinas. That was in the early to mid-90s.

Neelam: What has sustained and inspired you these 20 plus years?

Gihan: Continuous learning about the world, other peoples, and myself. And being in relationship with others on a similar path, who struggle with same issues, engaging around visions and values. That sense of community, identity, and belonging has sustained me. To claim belonging has been in opposition to the alienation I often felt here in the United States, as an immigrant from Sri Lanka with little community of my own.

It's also about the adventure and possibility of change for myself and the communities that have adopted me and that I have forged. It is the excitement of creating power and possibility where there is assumed to be none. People change in the process of community politics. Struggle in the form of campaigns and consciousness raising is a lot of hard work but it's engaging. It's about being active versus being passive.

Neelam: In those years what has been most challenging or frustrating to you?

Gihan: There have been long periods where my work was isolated from personal, family, and social relationships. I felt like I couldn't make a difference in political work unless I sacrificed and

marginalized everything else. I was a living martyr, and my method was Left Puritanism. Even though the search for community and power brought me to the work, the work itself became incredibly alienating.

It was also really hard when I couldn't find a line of vision from our current daily practice to where I thought we should be going. We need to be clear about why we are doing the work, and have a long-term vision for making change. So in that sense, a Left world view really helped me continue to make the connections between our current reality, an analysis, and a vision. But that line of sight is always a challenge to maintain in the throes of daily tactical decisions.

I found that long hours of hard work are very challenging when they aren't returned by the reward of making a concrete impact. In some sense, I was always waiting for the next 'victory' as gratification for the sacrifices I was making. Many times our hard work paid off. Sometimes that was winning a campaign. Other times it meant seeing a leader make a real breakthrough in their understanding or practice, or seeing them overcome something that had been really difficult, like speaking out in public. But even then, living for those victories often becomes addictive; they become fixes for unsustainable practice instead of true milestones. They cannot be what sustains you daily. There had to be something else between short-term victories and long-term vision.

Neelam: Do you have a spiritual practice?

Gihan: No. In fact, for a long time I equated spiritual practice with religious practice, and because of that I was actually anti-spiritual. I have had a resistance to organized religion. My political awareness was in many ways a process of undoing my religious background. And in my 'undoing' my religious training I became super engrossed in understanding the world materially, historically, and politically, rather than as the will of God. In that process, I felt that religion had been the curtain over my eyes from seeing the material reality of the world and the historical material forces of race, class, and gender behind our historical tragedy.

In reducing spirituality to the historical role of religion, I was throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Over the last few years I have begun to rediscover my spirituality, in my own way. I realized that I had been denying the power of my own spiritual essence.

Neelam: Can you describe that process?

Gihan: Well, sustainability and spirituality for me is the feeling of inner peace and appreciation for my role in the world and who I am in it. In so much of my political work, the benchmark of that was external. It was intellectual, and I mentally related it to my impact on objective conditions. However, so much of what I felt was my purpose was so non-related to those benchmarks. What was important was the *quality* of how I did my work; that was what ended up determining whether victories felt real or hollow. In the Left, we are often fixated on objective reality when in fact it is the subjective forces – consciousness, will, trust, risk, and spirit that determine whether we are able to move things forward.

Even though I knew that instinctively, I had not been able to make that an explicit part of my politics. Then two years ago, I did the Rockwood year-long leadership training. I went there because we were hitting an organizational crisis and I was at a personal plateau. The Workers Center was doing amazing work, but it had to grow beyond a small group of people who had a lot of shared experience and political clarity. To reach our potential, we had to be able to bring more people into

the organization to take up the work and own the organization. Instead we kept losing people. We couldn't keep staff, even great, brilliant political people. We had hit a wall.

I initially thought I needed management techniques to fix the problem. I thought that since I had come in as an organizer, I just needed to learn to be a manager, to create systems and supervise better. I thought I needed a movement MBA to figure out the crisis.

That was not what I got. The trainer, Robert Gass, focused instead on being internally centered, and 'leading from the inside out'. I nearly walked out. Between that objective, and the touchy-feely methods, I felt it as spiritual hokey pokey and generally a waste of my time. I stayed in because I finally felt that I had to do something for me, and I had heard and seen many others have breakthroughs through the process. And I figured that I had not clearly figured it out, so I might as well be humble and patient.

It was six months into the program that I finally got it. The trick wasn't systems and supervision skills, but my internal practices of leadership, being in a centered place to make good decisions. It seems so simple now, but I just couldn't see it before. It was a paradigm shift around how I lead, and how to build organizations and a movement. The starting point was a re-grounding myself in my own inner leadership capacity and being.

Neelam: How has it influenced your vision and leadership in the movement?

Gihan: It changed a ton for me. I have been deeply committed to Left ideology. But I realized that sometimes it has allowed us to have a method that becomes formulaic and mechanical. Our brain overrides our instinct when often our instinct is politically on point. In fact, I found that for me, adhering to what was supposed to be Left was often based out of fear. Being just angry and oppositional, for example, was often a crutch to not have to make hard decisions. Instead of allowing myself to dwell in the risk of new ways, methods, and realities, I would be happy being the loyal opposition; it was safe. I learned that in the balance between head and heart there was a place that was perhaps even more radically transformative. I started to trust myself and my experience. Then I started to shift how I was in the organization and in movement relationships, how I did vision work, how I built and nurtured my capacity to do this work well.

I think I've been much more open in the organization since then – how to grow, relate to allies, take chances on people. I am much more willing to trust my instincts and heart around strategy and alliances, which is what I always thought you wanted to avoid.

There had been a conflict between my heart and my head. I was shutting down my heart, even though the times that I was the strongest politically were grounded in heart and instincts. I learned that your head plays tricks on you. The smarter you are the more you'll be able to outsmart yourself. I was always in a mental loop about my decision making; trying to make sense of it all. Frankly, that's not good enough to build a movement and make real change. It's your heart that keeps you honest. I needed to ground myself internally to make honest sense of my experience. It is the fortitude of that inner place that is my spirituality, but I didn't then recognize that as spiritual practice.

Neelam: Say more about how it changed the organization.

Gihan: I started doing more mentorship with staff. In addition to supervision we have established a practice of coaching with other staff. We are beginning to recognize the importance our personal, political, and spiritual alignment with our work and worldview in order to be effective. This is different than just technical and political development. It is alignment training, and it is a work in progress

The staff development process is deep on organizing and political theory, but we now include trainings on personal mastery, alignment, and how to build from our values. This is all in recognition of how hard it is to be an organizer in these times, when the movement is weak and the opposing forces so strong. People in this work have to be able to be able build their internal fortitude to be externally effective. And it recognizes that we have to build a team that is able to do both.

The culture of the organization shifted significantly. We started building a culture of alignment around mission, vision, and values. This used a combination of approaches, including political skills training, but the glue was the inner work – spiritually and emotionally intelligent work.

The challenge is how do you move from training and individual practices to actually solidifying those as the systems of the organization. I left the first Rockwood with part of it, but I wasn't in a sustained space where those lessons were being reinforced. My ability to retain the new methods started falling off because I wasn't in a community of practice that kept them honed. It still felt ad-hoc.

Then I went through a second year-long training with Robert Gass on inner leadership and spirituality. It was funny, materially I had recognized my spirit, but I was resistant to seeing myself as a spiritual person.

The switch was a Peruvian shaman who came in to do a ceremony for the summer solstice. I was prepared to just calmly sit through it, without judgement. And then I saw that he was reading people – who they were, where they were coming from, their essence, without a word. That was a really good organizing skill, so I was taking copious mental notes. He put me in the ceremony circle, and I got read too. He spoke to my soul. It was a very deep experience, an epiphany. Later, he took me aside. He broke it down.-He said that the reason people need faith is when there is a gap between what you know to be true – your experience and what your understand-- and what you believe to be true – your vision, and what you hope for. He explained that when you're in full alignment between nature, your self, and society then there is no gap. The past, present, and future are aligned in the moment. And in that place there is no need for faith, your actions in the moment are fully aligned with your purpose in the world. The search for spirituality is to find and live in that space, to live in the present with full alignment with the past and your destiny.

Neelam: What do you think about the current political moment – what about it requires a spiritual response?

Gihan: I recognize that what I experienced was spirituality, but I still hesitate to define it that way. People define it in so many ways, including spirituality being the negation of material reality. I hesitate on saying I'm spiritual, because spirituality often means you don't have to deal with the realities of power and privilege.

But I am convinced that in this political moment we do need a renewed way forward. We need to be able to put ourselves in a mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual space that allows us to open up to new ways of doing things and relating to each other. Unless we let go of our over-reliance on purely an intellectual approach and begin to use and nurture our inner knowing or spiritual wisdom I don't think we will make it.

Practically, we are starting to take much bigger chances while holding on to our core values and politics. An example is at Scott Carver homes where thousand of African-American families were displaced through a HOPEVI project. For years we were the standard bearer for outside opposition. But a year ago we took that tactical opportunity to sign an agreement with the county that called for one-for-one replacement of all the housing and a right to return for all displaced residents. Currently, we pulled together a development team and are bidding on being the developer of the site ourselves. Instead of just fighting bad developers, we have chosen to take the chance of doing it ourselves – with all the dangers and opportunities that it signifies. That would never have been a political risk we would have taken before.

This moment, is like being on a trapeze. It takes an inner faith and courage that allows you to let go, fly, and take hold of the next bar. If we don't, we will continue to hold on to smaller, and smaller gains. In letting go, there are possibilities we haven't conceived of yet; ways to carry on traditions, approach relationships, form alliances, that may be surprising to us. If we don't let go, we will never discover them.