

Hello friends of Tooker,

Below is a piece written by Tooker on Earth Day, 2002. At the time he was suffering from severe depression; the piece was a private exercise for his therapist.

Tooker spent his entire adult life doing inspiring and often successful work for a greener, healthier world. In 2001, in his own words, he "hit a wall". For the first time in his life, he battled burnout.

I am circulating this article because I think it contains some important messages for all of us who are working for a better world.

For those interested in further discussing these ideas, there has been an Activist Support Forum Discussion set up at <http://www.planetfriendly.net/forum/viewforum.php?f=21>

Angela

April 22, 2002, Earth Day

Letter to an Activist
by Tooker Gomberg
An exercise for his therapist

Dear Activist:

It's another strange day for me. Things have been strange for 8 months or more. I used to be an activist. Now I don't know what I am. Did you ever read the Kafka story about the guy who wakes up and he has turned into a cockroach?

My mind is in a fog - I can't think very clearly. Making a sandwich takes a long time - I have to concentrate on every step along the way, and I am moving very slowly and deliberately. I feel like I am stunned, and spaced out most of the time. Today is Earth Day, but I feel I am on another planet.

I have been spending lots of time in bed, mostly sleeping, dozing, and dreaming.

It feels like my mind has melted down, though I am told that it comes back once the depression lifts. Whenever that is. For some people it seems to be months, for others years, and others never get out of it.

But I am writing to you about activism, not the frightening impacts of depression.

Amory Lovins, the great energy efficiency guru, once called me a Hyper-Activist. I guess that's what I was. I lived, breathed, and focused on activism. It kept me thinking, inspired, interested, and alive.

But it also allowed me to ignore other things in life that now, suddenly, I realize I never developed. This makes me sad and despondent.

I used to enjoy cooking, but stopped. I always liked kids, but never really thought about having kids of our own. Changing the world was more important, and having a kid would interfere with our life's work of changing the world.

I didn't develop my mind in a broad way, earning about music and art and theatre and poetry, for example. It was focused on changing the world. I never really thought about a career - I was living my life, not worrying about the trappings and credentials of the boring, status quo world.

Maybe I was living in a bubble of naiveté, doing my own thing, unconcerned that my perspectives and actions were so different from "normal". I never wanted to be normal anyways. Normal got us into the mess we're in.

So now I find myself, with my sliver of being smashed to smithereens after being assaulted by police in Quebec City, a security guard in City Hall, and various other security guards during the mayoralty race. And numerous arrests.

Or maybe it was the tear gas, and last summer's smog. Maybe I pushed my brain too hard, and overstressed it with the run for Mayor of Toronto, or the passport burning, or 20 years of pushing against the juggernaut. And maybe Sept. 11 firmed up my worries into a real fear that working for change was really dangerous.

Or it could be a physiological response to too much coffee, stress, and smog. Maybe I've burned out my adrenal glands. Maybe my brain is poisoned from so much thinking about tragic ecological issues, pondering bad air, and getting frustrated at the slow rate of improvement and the rapid destruction of the living world. Could my brain have been damaged when I was close to dying with heat stroke in Vietnam in 1998?

I should have developed a deeper kinship with my family and with people. Don't get me wrong - I had lots of friends and acquaintances in the activist world. But they were not deep friends of the heart. I neglected my heart, and how I was feeling about things, about people, about situations. Now that I'm in crisis I don't really have the language to connect with people. The silence is easier than trying to explain what I'm going through, or to relate to other people's issues or problems.

So what advice can I offer? Stay rounded. Do the activism, but don't overdo it. If you burn out, or tumble into depression, you'll become no good to anyone, especially yourself. When you're in this state, nothing seems worthwhile, and there's nothing to look forward to.

It's honorable to work to change the world, but do it in balance with other things. Explore and embrace the things you love to do, and you'll be energetic and enthusiastic about the

activism. Don't drop hobbies or enjoyments. Be sure to hike and dance and sing. Keeping your spirit alive and healthy is fundamental if you are to keep going.

I never really understood what burnout was. I knew that it affected active people, but somehow I thought I was immune to it. After all, I took breaks every now and then and went traveling. And all my work was done in partnership with Ange, the great love of my life.

But in the end, when burnout finally caught up to me, it was mega, and must have been the accumulation of decades of stress and avoidance. And now I find myself in a dark and confusing labyrinth trying to feel my way back to sanity and calm.

So beware. Take this warning seriously. If you start slipping into the hole of depression and you notice yourself losing enthusiasm and becoming deeply disenchanted, take a break and talk with a friend about it. Don't ignore it. The world needs all the concerned people it can get. If you can stay in the struggle for the long haul you can make a real positive contribution, and live to witness the next victory!