



NICK CARPENTIERI

“THIS BUILDING MAKES ME drunk,” Andrew Harvey says. *We’re standing in the middle of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unity Temple, a century-old experiment in sacred architecture in the wealthy Chicago suburb of Oak Park. Autumn light pours through the glass ceiling onto cream walls, dark wood, and muted carpet. The temple has the solemn simplicity of a Zen shrine or a New England meetinghouse. It was this project, Wright said, that made him realize the heart of a building is its space rather than its walls. “I love this man,” Harvey says. “This is unity consciousness.”*

*Harvey is a renegade in the world of the sacred. An Englishman raised in India, he has spent much of his life attempting to unite the spiritual traditions of East and West. And like the brilliant but acerbic Wright, he has stirred his share of controversy. In his book *The Sun at Midnight* (Tarcher), Harvey attacks the guru system as corrupt, using his own former teacher Mother Meera as an example. His openness about being gay has rattled many in the largely closeted religious world, and he has even taken the Dalai Lama to task for his stance on homosexuality. Harvey has little patience with what he calls the popular “vulgarization” of ancient spiritual traditions, from yoga and Tantra to Buddhism and Christianity. He says, “A lot of people prefer the marzipan mysticism of the New Age,” which predicts that a change in consciousness will occur by “good vibrations.”*

*With his unruly hair, British accent, and engaging manner, Harvey seems more enthusiastic schoolboy than spiritual *bête noire*. Though fifty-five years old, he charges through Wright’s masterpiece with youthful vitality. Afterward we walk back to his cozy third-floor apartment, which he calls “my treehouse.” Adorning the walls are a Black Madonna from Venice, a Tibetan tanka tapestry, and a page from a Persian manuscript.*

Harvey’s curiosity about faiths of all sorts began when he was a boy living in India, which had then only recently shaken off the yoke of British colonialism. Though sectarian violence wracked the nation, Harvey describes his household as having been a place of tolerance where “everyone felt free to worship in whatever way they wanted.” His English parents were tolerant Protestants; his Catholic nurse imbued him with a love of

Mary; the Hindu servants would take him to their temple to hear stories of Krishna; and the family’s Muslim driver spoke of the greatness of Allah. One night, after his parents had left for a dinner party, six-year-old Andrew sat on the balcony and watched as their inebriated cook played a small drum until he was drenched with sweat, then began to chant in a strange tongue. Intrigued and frightened, young Andrew asked the man if he was all right. The cook explained that he was thanking God. “God is everything,” he said. “God is everywhere.” It dawned on Harvey then that “I could be with God directly and talk to God directly whenever I wanted to.” He also concluded that each person in his multicultural house was worshipping the same God.

*Harvey spent his school years in England, eventually attending Oxford University, where he studied the theme of madness in Shakespeare and Erasmus and at twenty-one became the youngest Fellow ever admitted to Oxford’s All Souls College, a prestigious humanities-research institution. Though his intellect was well-fed, Harvey felt alone, despairing, and even suicidal. In 1977 he left Oxford to return to India and found his way to the remote Himalayan region of Ladakh, where he met Tibetan Buddhist sage Thuksey Rinpoche. Harvey’s book about the experience, *A Journey in Ladakh* (Mariner Books), won critical acclaim for its portrayal of one of the last traditional Tibetan Buddhist societies.*

*Harvey then moved to Paris and began an exploration of Sufism — the mystical tradition of Islam — and the poems of thirteenth-century mystic Jelaluddin Rumi. That led him to write *The Way of Passion* (Tarcher), in which he describes Rumi’s work as “strange, fabulous, ornate, baroque, and tremendously mysterious.” Other works on Rumi followed. Along the way Harvey became an ardent follower of Mother Meera, an Indian woman he heralded as an incarnation of the divine. He broke with her in 1993 after she asked him to forsake his male lover. (This point is disputed by Mother Meera’s supporters.) Since then Harvey has denounced her and other gurus as phonies more concerned with money, sex, and power than with matters of the spirit.*

THE ORDINARY DECENCY OF THE HEART

ANDREW HARVEY ON SACRED ACTIVISM, THE DIVINE
FEMININE, AND LOVING GEORGE W. BUSH

ANDREW LAWLER

Shortly before his father's death in 1997 Harvey had a mystical experience of Christ that renewed his fascination with Jesus and Mary. He took a provocative look at Jesus as a radical mystic in *Son of Man* (Tarcher) and explored the divine feminine in *Return of the Mother* (Tarcher).

Having encountered the limitations of both gurus and romantic love (he is no longer with the man he married in 1994), Harvey is devoting himself to melding spiritual disciplines with activist efforts in order to promote peace and justice. He calls the concept "sacred activism" and envisions "an army of practical visionaries and active mystics who work in every field and in every arena to transform the world." His vision is wildly ambitious and at times feels both messianic and apocalyptic. But sitting at a Frank Lloyd Wright–designed table in his living room and listening to him describe sacred activism's potential, I found his enthusiasm hard to resist.



ANDREW HARVEY

Lawler: Why are you so critical of organized religions, including even their mystical aspects?

Harvey: Religions keep alive fantasies and dogmas, and what passes for mystical instruction most of the time is folly. There is a horrific way in which people use spirituality to sign off from the ordinary decency of the heart. I've been walking with famous Sufis who tell me I'm crazy for stopping and talking with beggars in the street. One said, "Why are you giving that beggar money? He's just going to drink with it." I said my responsibility was to help, and the beggar's responsibility was to look after himself. I couldn't force him to spend the money on food, but I also couldn't pass the man and not give him something. If you're not capable of being gracious and recognizing the pain another person is in, you're not a spiritual practitioner.

Lawler: How did your parents come to live in India?

Harvey: My father's family went to India in the 1820s, and my mother's family moved there in the 1920s. My mother still lives in south India, in a little cottage surrounded by jacaranda trees filled with monkeys, and she runs a charity for disabled children. I asked her recently what she was going to do on her eightieth birthday, and she said she was going to throw a party for the children. She has a huge heart.

My father had a deep sense of justice. He was a police officer and was in the Imperial Service Order as a young man. I went to see him when he was dying in 1997. We hadn't ever quarreled, but we'd lived such different lives. When we spoke about Jesus, however, I realized he was a mystic: he trusted absolutely, surrendered, and prayed every day. He had never told me any of this, because men don't talk about that sort of thing. I realized that I'd been roaming the world, looking for sages, and there had been a real sage right there at home, reading the *Daily Telegraph*, and I had missed him. But I didn't miss him in the end. I think my father's sense of justice and service, combined with my mother's wild heart, is what has given me

my passion.

Lawler: How did your father's death renew your connection to Christ?

Harvey: On the Sunday before he died, I went to church. It was the Feast of Christ the King, and this roly-poly Indian priest gave a simple sermon in which he said that Christ is the mystical king of the world, not because of his miracles, but because he sacrificed everything and he loved and believed beyond reason. When the priest had finished speaking, I looked up at the crucifix, and it came alive.

There was this torrential flow of molten fire between Jesus and me. I can only describe what happened as: he took a knife and slashed open my heart. I felt I was going to die, because of the ferocious violence of his love. It was ecstatic and blissful, and it was terror itself. I saw Jesus in his glory, but still with the wounds, because the awakened state contains the shattered state. You're not sprung free of wound and heartbreak; rather, they are deepened but contained within a vaster consciousness.

Then I went outside, and there was this desperate young man with no legs and no arms, and I looked into his eyes and saw the same Christ that I had seen on the cross. I lifted him out of the puddle, gave him whatever money I had, and made sure he got some help. As I was staring at him, I heard this terrifying voice say, "You've been playing with your mystical experiences. You have used your grace to inflate your own ego, to write books, and to become famous. Don't you understand that this is obscene? You must do everything you can to speak up for those who have no voice and to rouse people to divine service. You have to give yourself over to that."

It was scalding. I felt seen, stripped naked, but also inspired and empowered.

Lawler: Was that the start of your concept of sacred activism?

Harvey: That was the beginning. I've always loved that quotation by French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin: "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire." Sacred activism is the fusion of the mystic's passion for God with the activist's passion for justice, creating a third fire, which is the burning sacred heart that longs to help, preserve, and nurture every living thing.

Lawler: So mysticism alone is not enough? It must merge with activism?

Harvey: All mystical systems are addicted to transcending this reality. This addiction is part of the reason why the world is being destroyed. The monotheistic religions honor an off-planet God and would sacrifice this world and its attachments to the adoration of that God. But the God I met was both immanent and transcendent. This world is not an illusion, and the philosophies that say it is are half-baked half-truths. In an authentic mystical experience, the world does disappear



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and reveal itself as the dance of the divine consciousness. But then it reappears, and you see that everything you are looking at is God, and everything you're touching is God. This vision completely shatters you.

We are so addicted, either to materialism or to transcending material reality, that we don't see God right in front of us, in the beggar, the starving child, the brokenhearted woman; in our friend; in the cat; in the flea. We miss it, and in missing it, we allow the world to be destroyed.

Lawler: How does a mystic become an activist? It seems an oxymoron.

Harvey: The mystics as we know them will be praying as the last tree is cut down. They are junkies of ecstasy and bliss,

and they're hooked into the iv of their own self-created mystical experiences. There are too many bliss bunnies running around, presenting the divine as a kind of cabaret singer in hot pants, available for any kind of fantasy you may have. Then there are the activists, who are noble and righteous and give their lives to their cause, but they are divided in consciousness. They demonize others and often burn out. Neither mystic nor activist balances transcendence and immanence, heart and mind, soul and body, presence and action.

Lawler: But don't many traditions — from Christianity to twelve-step programs — consider service a spiritual necessity?

Harvey: Yes, it's essential to all the major traditions, from Buddhism to Judaism. In Hinduism it's what the self does when it recognizes itself in all reality. In shamanism, being in tune with nature leads to serving all living beings. Service is the central message of Christianity, though it's been lost for the most part.

Sacred activism isn't anything new, but we need to bring an urgency and intensity to this message at this moment, because there is a worldwide addiction to money and power and a worldwide depression that affects even people who claim to be religious but have secretly given up on the human race.

Service, as it's usually understood, is not going to be enough.

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Working at soup kitchens, helping stray animals, looking after old women, sitting by the deathbeds of young men who are dying of AIDS — all these are honorable actions, but we have to go farther. What's required now is inspired, radical action on every level.

Lawler: Can a mayor, a congressperson, a CEO of a major corporation be a sacred activist?

Harvey: If that person is prepared to do some dangerous and disruptive things, yes. I don't think a CEO could be a sacred activist if his or her company was strip-mining or spreading toxic waste. A sacred activist would risk everything to transform those policies.

Lawler: If we want to move beyond the idea of individual service, it will require organization. But can you organize mystics?

Harvey: Absolutely you can. The great revolution that has to happen for the world to be saved will be organized through networks of grace. Look at South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a court in which victims of apartheid could give testimony and perpetrators of violence could request immunity. Look at how the people of Rwanda have come together. I am working with a child soldier from Sierra Leone who was tortured and raped. He wants to go back to his country and bring together all the people who went through the same experience, so that they can mourn together and help each other and use their tragic experiences to remake their country.

For people to come together, they must first be broken by what is happening. When people allow the horror and pain and sorrow of this time to go through their heart like a spear, the thought of hiding away in their private devotions becomes repulsive. They need to turn their love into action.

Lawler: So this will not be a hierarchical approach?

Harvey: No, the Divine Mother doesn't like top-down organization, because it is often authoritarian and patriarchal and driven by an agenda. The kind of organization I'm describing is compassionate, egalitarian, and driven by the heart. When people devoted to a cause come together and pour out their creativity, "mother power" is born. Grace comes down, creativity flourishes, and amazing things happen.

Lawler: Creative, passionate people don't always agree.

How can sacred activists work out their differences?

Harvey: If sacred activism becomes a normal way of functioning, there will be more sensitivity, clarity, and wisdom, and less divisiveness. If people differ, they will be willing to go through a process of consensus, and once a decision is reached, their hearts will be united. We have seen glimpses of this. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to turn large numbers of civil-rights activists away from violence and toward reconciliation and peace. Many African Americans thought he was crazy at first, but he convinced them by personal example and indefatigable commitment. The same is true of Gandhi. Many Indians thought he wasn't standing up to the British. And some Tibetans believed the Dalai Lama was soft on the Chinese, but they've been convinced by his example.

Lawler: Yet there are compassionate environmentalists at odds over whether to support nuclear power. We're human, and we get attached to our particular solutions. How do you mediate that?

Harvey: Painfully and slowly, as it has always been done. All divine visions are hard to embody. They require hard work. You have to keep looking at your own shadow — and sacred activists have two shadows: they have the shadow of the mystic, longing to escape into the light and leave the world behind; and they have the shadow of the activist, which is full of denunciation and divisiveness and anger. But if you examine those two shadows long enough, something amazing happens: the mystic's shadow gets purified by the activist's, and vice versa.

Lawler: How do these shadows manifest in you?

Harvey: I wouldn't be so disturbed by the mystic's addiction to transcendence if I didn't know something about it. I have felt that shadow in myself that says, *Only God is real. The rest is illusion*. It comes from a psychological desire to escape the complexities of my past. On the activist side, I understand how easy it is to project my own failings onto others, to demonize the CEOs and George W. Bush and not recognize that every time I catch a plane to go and talk about saving the environment, I am polluting. Every time I think of President Bush as a psychopath who doesn't deserve to live, I'm committing a kind of murder.

Lawler: Author Anne Lamott writes about the necessity of loving George Bush.

Harvey: She puts an image of him on her altar. I've been trying to love him myself. I understand the temptation of anger. I am a passionate person, and passion's shadow is anger — ferocious and lacerating. Though I feel sacred activism needs the power of anger to fuel its work, we also need to purify and transmute that anger.

(end of excerpt)