

AN INTERVIEW WITH VAN JONES

A License to Be Human

Being an activist is as much about the self as it is about problems in the larger world

THE STARTING POINT might sound familiar: a favorite hillside bulldozed, an ancient grove of redwood trees felled, a loved one killed on the streets, a loved one dying of lung cancer, a country's resources squandered, its principles trampled. Anger and outrage are the typical response, compelling you to attend meetings, write letters, paste flyers, organize people, blockade entrances, perhaps even go to jail. It seems as if you have no choice. The war is on. But what if the war is not just on the outside, but also churns within you? What if you share more with the wrongdoers, and the larger society that sanctions the wrongdoing, than it's convenient to acknowledge?

In the last decade, a new generation of moral leaders have begun to envision a more reflective approach to saving the world. Loosely termed the "reverence" movement, this current of activism has had a wide range of devotees—from redwoods activist Julia Butterfly Hill to former gang member Aqueela Sherrills, who organized youth in South Central Los Angeles to secure a historic truce between the Bloods and the Crips. There is no joint website, no blueprint of tactics, no manifesto of what to do or how. But those at the heart of the movement agree on one thing: being an activist can't just be about being right or showing others how they're wrong.

Van Jones, the executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reforming

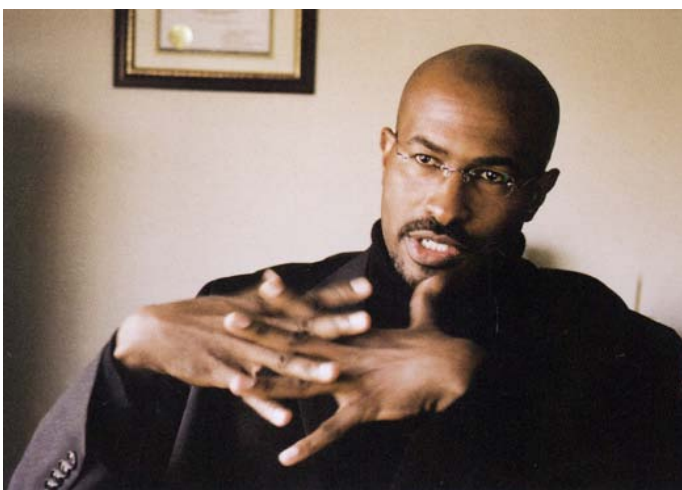
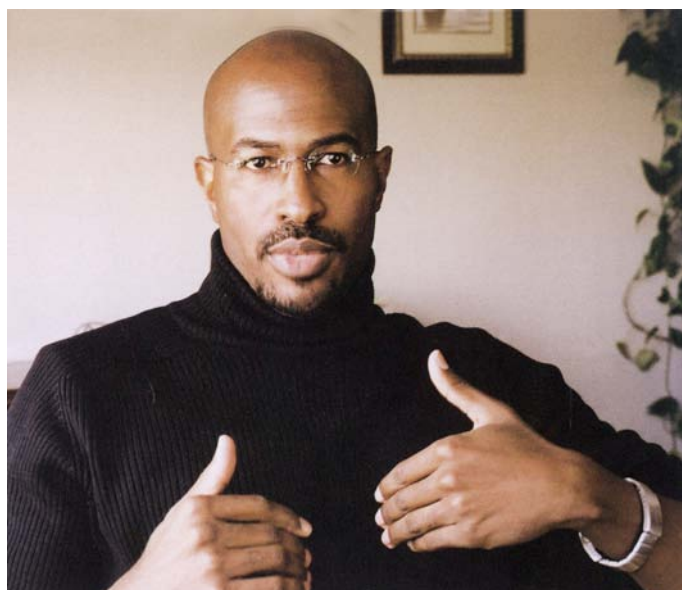
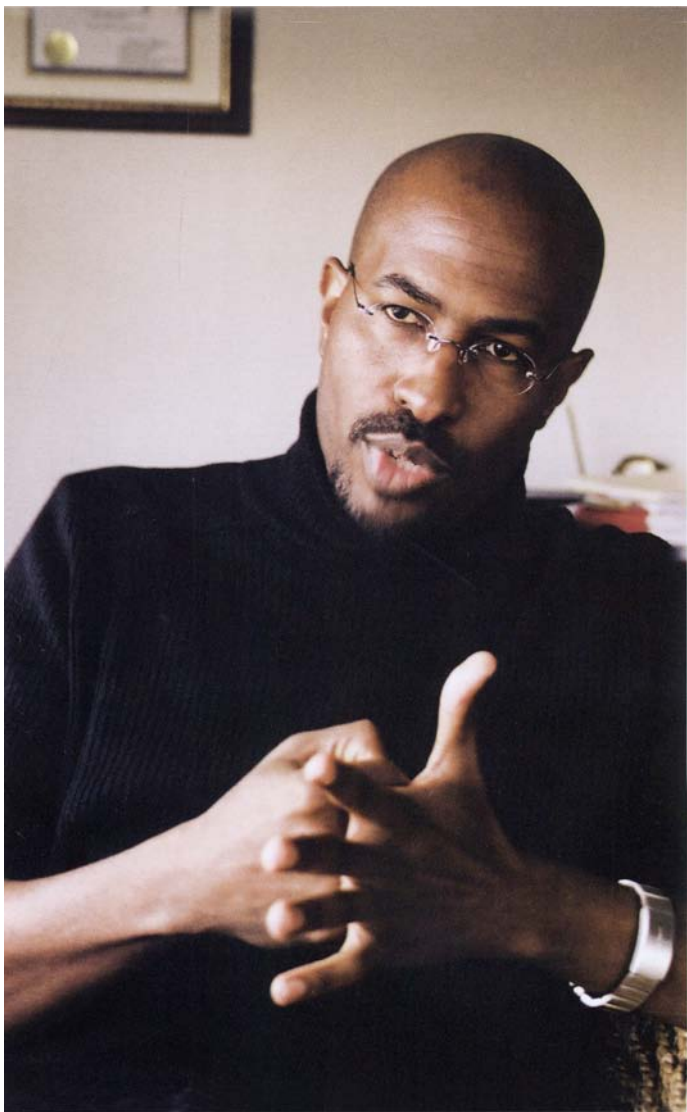
the nation's criminal justice system, says: "A reverence perspective is, at the end of the day, taking corrective steps to further enhance the beauty of others and the beauty of yourself." This simple reformulation demands of its practitioners as much personal honesty as any spiritual pursuit. But it can produce surprisingly effective results within individuals, their organizations, and in the larger world. *Orion* Features Editor Laird Townsend talked with Mr. Jones at his office in Oakland, California.

Laird Townsend: *Where does the idea of a reverence perspective come from?*

Van Jones: It's really Aqueela Sherrills's idea. Aqueela and his brother led the effort to establish a successful peace treaty between warring gangs in Los Angeles in 1992. And going through that really deepened him spiritually. Then his son was killed—shot to death by a young man in the neighborhood. Aqueela had to walk the path of forgiveness in the wake of that, and arrived at the idea that we need a reverence movement, so that people have more respect for life.

LT: *To transcend the fighting?*

VJ: To hold a reverential perspective even in the midst of confrontation. Sometimes it's good to be passive and polite; sometimes it's good to interrupt business as usual with protests,



et cetera. I think it's a huge mistake in a society as unequal and unjust as ours to primarily put the onus on oppressed people to be saints. I think that's wildly unfair. But there's been an addiction to the politics of confrontation among a certain tier of activists. Speaking truth to power, confronting injustices is a good thing, but when people start to use confrontational tactics in their own coalitions, their own organizations, then you have a movement that is too injured internally to play a healing role externally.

I think we've all been in situations where people have been shorter with each other, sharper with each other, meaner to each other than we should have been. The results have been less unity, weaker organizations, more brittle ties, collapsed coalitions. If you ask people what their actual experience of being on the left is, lots of people say, "Oh, we're saving the world, blah, blah, blah." I say: "No, no, no, what's your experience—like,

Thursday?" They say: "Oh, it was horrible."

It's like the difference between using diesel versus solar as your energy source. Anger is a messy fuel that eventually causes more problems than it can solve.

LT: *So the reverence perspective also implies introspection?*

VJ: Usually whatever the external thing is that we're fighting, there is an internal manifestation of it. For instance, I'm challenging the incarceration industry. But there are ways in my own life that I'm punitive and unforgiving. So I want society to be rehabilitative and give people second chances, but I'm not that way myself. I think that people who want to change society have a double duty. We have to be willing to confront the warmonger within and without, the punitive incarcerator within and without, the polluter within and without, the greedy capitalist developer within and without. We have to really look at how we are—



combative, punitive, self-destructive, greedy; we're passionate about changing that in the external world, even as we enact it in our internal world and in our relationships with each other.

If you can figure out how it is that you're like your target, it doesn't necessarily give you any answers, but it's the right question to ask. "How am I like my target?" opens up a different world of possibilities in terms of how I am going to relate to my target.

LT: *And we activists need to relate to our targets differently?*

VJ: We have this whole David and Goliath syndrome. If you're an activist, that has a positive side: you want to confront unjust authority, fight against long odds, hold out the possibility of miraculous outcomes. And that's a good thing.

But there's a shadow side to David and Goliath, which is that there's got to be some big mean *other*. You've got to be the small underdog all the time and there's got to be some confrontation between absolute good (you) and absolute evil (the other). If you're an activist then you know what I'm talking about; you

know what it's like when you try to lead a meeting and somebody's got to challenge you on every point. You know what it's like when you get everyone riled up to attack the mayor, and the mayor doesn't show up, and everybody attacks you. It's part of the toxic stuff that we're playing with.

Also, you have to have enough respect to realize that Goliath has probably figured out the slingshot thing by now. So to continue to do the same thing over and over again, which is what we've been doing since the '60s, keeps us from being creative. And it's probably going to yield worse results over time.

LT: *Keeping it in the realm of metaphor, how do you approach Goliath differently?*

VJ: There's a way of being in conflict like a barbarian, and a way of being in conflict like a ninja. I think that we need a lot more ninja energy and a lot less barbarian energy. When it's time to fight, you want to be as surgical and precise with your intervention as you possibly can be. You want to use just as much conflict as required, just as much force as required and no

more. There's a call for a wiser kind of warrior. Less wild, beligerent. More grounded, more dignified.

The other thing is, it could be that you're just in the wrong book of the Bible altogether. It could be that it's not really about David and Goliath; it's really about Noah. The kinds of really serious challenges that are coming up will feel more like what happened down in New Orleans. It's easy to say there's an evil Goliath called George Bush who's letting bad things happen to good people. But even if George Bush were to leave the planet, we've still got major, major climate destabilization to deal with. And so it could be that we need to figure out new ways to win—to be open to the possibility that sometimes we can win Goliath over to helping us build the ark.

We have so many mixed metaphors, it's humorous, but I'll throw a few more at you. Among social justice activists we have this view that spaceship Earth is really slaveship Earth, and there's this incredible need to free people from exploitation. The slave revolt movie that most people have heard about is *Amistad*: righteous enslaved Africans stick up for themselves and take over the slaveship. It's really a metaphor for the last century's version of revolution; the people at the bottom rise up and take over slaveship Earth. But I say that if for whatever reason you look out and you notice the name of the ship is not *Amistad*, it's the *Titanic*, you suddenly have a very different set of leadership challenges. Now you've got to not only liberate the captives, you also have to save the ship. If you try to deal with that from a position of outrage and confrontation, you'll last about twenty-three seconds. A reverence perspective, where you're really, really committed to saving all the life on board as sustainably as you can and as effectively as you can, is really the only approach that will work.

LT: *But you're talking about saving a society that doesn't necessarily want to be saved . . .*

VJ: Suicide is another way to look at it. Suicidal economy, suicidal foreign policy. It looks homicidal, and it is. But it's also deeply suicidal.

LT: *What makes the economy appear homicidal and how is it suicidal?*

VJ: It's obscured from U.S. eyes sometimes: "Look at all these nice cheap sneakers." We force people to work in production lines in horrible, brutal conditions, killing them when they resist—and wipe out whole ecosystems to make way for cash crops or mines. If you look at the way the economy works, it takes living things and turns them into dead things and calls them products. The faster it does that, the more economic growth you have. So if you zoom in on it, it's homicidal—it's destroying ecosystems and lives. You can't keep doing this indefinitely. At some point either you or your grandkids are

going to have to deal with the consequences, and they're just starting to come due—from running the country on a credit card to the melting of polar ice caps.

LT: *So where should environmentalists focus their energies?*

VJ: There's already a big countercurrent. It looks like a bunch of static at first. But if you look deeply enough you see that there's a coherency—people taking different approaches, but for the same aspirations: so that we have healthy communities, and people's daily work can be adding to the health of their communities and ecosystems. As Dan Carol of the Apollo Alliance and others have said, we need a Green New Deal. You have problem-makers in the economy: the warmongers, polluters, clearcutters, the incarcerators, despoilers—and we all participate in those economies of destruction. Then you have the problem-solvers, trying to create a politics of reconstruction: coaches, counselors, art instructors, solar engineers, organic farmers, permaculturists. The problem-solvers get pennies from the government compared to the dollars for the problem-makers. You want to move the government from the side of the problem-makers to the side of the problem-solvers.

LT: *What would that look like?*

VJ: You're working in a factory; the water comes out cleaner than it went in. You drive a car; only air and water come out, because the engine is designed not to pollute. You go into the store; it's owned locally and sells affordable products made locally by people who are paid well. Right now we go to a corporate franchise to buy products that are made by people who are poorly paid. The products are shipped all around the world at great expense—and 50 percent of that weight will be in the trash can the minute you unwrap it. It's mostly packaging—not to mention the waste in petroleum or emissions to get it there. We have an extraordinarily wasteful society.

LT: *Your work takes on what you call the incarceration industry, especially as it relates to juvenile detention. How is that related to conservation?*

VJ: Putting a generation of kids in a prison is like clear cutting a forest. We deeply believe we have a throwaway planet—throwaway species, resources, neighborhoods, nations, continents. Young people and adults in prison have been thrown away as well. Once they're outside the circle of people who deserve dignity and respect, then they can be preyed upon. The prisoners can be worked—in the South in the fields like enslaved people: Angola in Louisiana is a classic example. Or by big corporations here in California: Microsoft, for some of their packaging; Victoria's Secret and United Airlines, for telemarketing orders.

It's complicated. Often prisoners feel better about having that opportunity than sitting in a cell or working for the state making license plates and furniture. But when you get out of prison, those companies are never going to hire you because you are a felon. The entire incarceration process is destructive of people and people's spirits.

It also destroys communities. When you take a young parent away from a family, leaving behind a two year old who takes years off the lives of grandparents, and then throw that person back into the community with no resources, you're not helping the family reintegrate the person. You're making the community worse. You're making it harder for families to recover from the mistakes anybody makes. Politically, it destroys those communities as well. In New York State they count you in the county you're incarcerated in. That allows a congressional district around a prison—usually white and rural—to claim a bigger population and access to more congressional clout, even though incarcerated people can't vote. Meanwhile, the community the prisoner came from will have less congressional clout. It's further disenfranchisement.

But it's all related. The polluters, the clearcutters, the incarcerators, they're all enacting the same story: money is more important than life, and we have the technology or the guns to protect ourselves from any consequences of our heedlessness.

LT: *And so this is where the reverence perspective comes in?*

VJ: The reverence perspective promotes a restorative approach to the economy and to politics. It's a rearticulation of our better wisdom, a rearticulation of things that have been a part of human consciousness for thousands and thousands of years—indeed, things that have allowed us to be around for those thousands and thousands of years. The ancient understanding of limits and consequences needs to find its way back into modern discourse. But a return to that wisdom requires the deepest possible changes—and those start at a personal level.

Activists have gotten trapped by “either/or,” which says that since ultimately there are real limits to our freedom under the present system, we have to change the system first. “I'm going to change them, and then I'm going to change me,” as opposed to saying, “Well, I've got to change both them and me, and probably the first step to changing them is changing me.” You do need a structural analysis to understand the way capitalism works, but you can't do all your work from that perspective. The transformation that we seek in the world is very deep. In order for us to be in service to that, our transformation has to be very deep as well.

LT: *The new generation of moral leaders, people who have become an effective force in their own right, people like yourself, Aqueela, Julia*

Butterfly, Latifa Simon of the Center for Young Women's Development, Jody Evans of Code Pink—what distinguishes your work, or your approach to the work?

VJ: I think we're all trying to be honest with ourselves, about ourselves, and our motives, however mixed. I think this newer crop of people is not trying to create an image of ourselves as flawless saints and, in fact, the opposite: we're deliberately trying to tell on ourselves as much as possible. We confess as much as we accuse. The confessional quality, the unmasking quality, gives other people license to be human. Other people can feel that it's okay that they have dirty laundry. That eliminates a lot of the posturing: people wanting to be more revolutionary than thou.

It's a real leadership challenge to inspire people to take collective action based on shared motivations and at the same time stay human doing it, to avoid becoming self-righteous, other-blaming banshees. One thing that I know from my own experience is that demonization and deification are the same process, two sides of the same coin, and if you set yourself up to be deified, then you can't be mad when the other half demonizes you. The idea that either you're this egomaniac who's only out there for yourself or you're this pure martyr with no personal ambitions or desires—both of those are false.

You have to be willing to state the truth, even mixed motives. Like myself: on the one hand I want to help everybody, and on the other hand I'm the child of a somewhat turbulent upbringing trying to prove myself to myself. So once you put that out there, the weird ego-driven parts have a lot less power. It doesn't go away, but it just doesn't have the same ability to sneak around under the table to determine outcomes. Put it at the table along with everything else and then you can feed your ego appropriately without it causing a lot of chaos.

LT: *Can you tell me what personal experiences have led you to some of these insights?*

VJ: Just screwing up my own life: womanizing, crashing organizations and coalitions over my ego, self-destructing with someone else's ego. All those disaster stories that you can tell from the perspective of “I was victimized.” But if you're looking at it through the lens of a video camera, it looks like your own conduct helped to create the outcome. I've been practicing progressive activism on the left for twenty years—I'll be thirty-seven this month. So that's most of my life. Most of my wisdom now doesn't come out of reaction to mean people at the bar or selfish people at the mall. Most of my life has been spent interacting with other people who are supposedly trying to change the world. And I've got just as many scars, and just as many enemies, and just as much conflict in my life as somebody who's worked in a corporation. And that can't be all everybody else's fault.

LT: *I've heard you say, "Based on my confession I'm inviting you to a higher place than me." That encourages other people to transcend where you happen to be in that moment.*

VJ: Yeah, that's one way to climb a mountain range. Get as far as you can go and then help someone else climb above where you are. This is a collective process. Those of us who are doing this work are standing on the shoulders of pretty impressive people. Ella Baker, an indispensable organizer in the movement associated with Dr. King, used to say: give light, and the people will find the way. But she also said strong people don't need strong leaders.

I think people have this image of somebody with a cape and a rod and a staff and all the answers. And my experience has been that whenever I've been in that mindset—more often than I'd like to admit—that's usually the beginning of some awful farce. And then when I'm not doing that at all, when I'm just trying to be present to myself and understand what's going on, all of a sudden people start wanting me to take on more responsibilities. And then I'll hear that I'm a good leader from somebody, and that wasn't what I was trying to do. I was just trying to help or be of service or be present or make an observation—just trying to assist.

LT: *So that's the best way to be effective?*

VJ: If I can do something myself and make a big difference, I'll do it. Often people will not make a change that they can make, even if it's small, waiting for some other person—if only the mayor would do this, or Bush would do that, or if only somebody in the red states would understand this then everything would be fine. Those kinds of conversations I don't find to be constructive. You know, for a while Nelson Mandela could only make a difference inside a cell. But look at the difference he made in the world by focusing there for more than two decades.

That's the difference between the real giants of the last century and a lot of what we see now. You lose one campaign and you want to give up and move to Canada. That's not the way. It has to be a protracted struggle. And part of that struggle is looking at the shadow side, the broken part of ourselves as activists in these movements. We have to stop seeing that as a distraction from the real work and start seeing it as part of the real work. If you don't have those kinds of conversations that really look for error in yourself and in your cause, then your cause over the long term begins to lose power and lose persuasiveness.

I'm not saying we should only look within. If all you're doing is navel-gazing then you're not carrying out the mission either. I'm saying we have to both confess and accuse, we have to be able to look within and without, fight for changes both in society and within ourselves. ✎

A Poet Friend Tells Me Nature Imagery Is Dead

What if it wasn't just an oak tree?
If there was a teacup on the big, low
branch and Allison hoisted me up
to sit and drink tea with my feathered

friend, is that dead? What if it wasn't
a robin sitting on the other side of my saucer,
chatting about the lower Cascades'
different shades of green? If the robin

was full of seed and swelled till he burst,
would you say the imagery matched
our violent culture? I'd like to see
the half-digested sunflower seeds

spewed on the branch, if for nothing more
than the textured gray upon brown.
Salmon berries hedge the footpath.
Allison eats them from the bush

and her fingers drip with the juice
of the labor of it. It's all been said.
We don't believe in love poetry.
But maybe it's not love poetry

(damn it) to say the oak existed,
one afternoon, while two women
picked berries and skipped work
and played out the odd two-step

of the long married and childless.
There was no tea, no robin; just her
hip flask of vodka, the finches and
sparrows, and a million shades of green.

—Lilah Hegnauer