

## Politics aimed at the heart

By Ruth Ostrow

MASSES of people became very disheartened when their peace marches and protests went unheeded by leaders during the lead-up to the Iraq war. I often heard people saying: What was the use of trying? The world hasn't changed. My answer was : Yes, but look at how many people lobbied for peace. Tens of millions took to the streets, not just the proverbial hippies, Greenies, and lefties but your average French, Italian, Australian citizen, taking time to make a stand. The leaders may not be listening yet, but the world has indeed changed.

And it has. While leaders do what leaders do, while economists, military strategists and global corporations do what they do, there is a groundswell movement afoot which testifies a growing awareness, consciousness and eagerness to find more equitable solutions to world issues.

The movement is loosely called heart politics and it is marked by all the artists, politicians, academics and average joe citizens around the world who are becoming empowered to bring their hearts into the political arena in these troubled times.

Looking up heart politics on the internet, one can find a host of linking international sites advertising gatherings and events in many countries under this banner.

Heart politics, according to one site, is deeply a non-violent movement with its roots in the philosophies of political leaders such as Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King in the US. Heart politics values patience. It is about slowly changing the world.

Radio National announcer and author, Sandy McCutcheon, who was speaking at a heart politics conference recently held in Byron Bay, calls it compassion activism. McCutcheon spoke passionately and compassionately about all the ways we can bring our hearts into the political arena and use kindness, tenderness and empathy to enact social change.

He said that while we may all feel swamped by the sheer number of injustices, wars, and problems in the world today, we should not be overwhelmed and thus fall into inaction. Rather we can each choose a cause that resonates with our hearts, whether it be a global issue or simply devoting an hour a month to a local community concern and just open ourselves up to give what we can.

Nor should we be disheartened by the time it takes to enact change, absorbing ourselves in the joy of helping, rather than awaiting the outcome. Such acts have magic in them, he said. The protests didn't stop the war in Iraq, but look how carefully America and Britain thereafter prequalified all the targets to avoid civilian casualties, and at how many European leaders changed tack.

The heart politics movement was started by Fran Peavey, a human-rights activist based in California, who has been working for social change for more than 30 years. The concept comes from her book of the same name. Her latest book is *Heart Politics Revisited*, (Pluto Press) an inspiring account of how powerful changes can come about by the cumulative effect of many small and life-affirming actions made by ordinary people.

Heart politics is the marriage of opposites. Politics is the development and exercise of power, sometimes thought of in terms of strategy or scheming. It is a word that connotes hardness or toughness and is definitely a brain word, she writes.

Heart, on the other hand, is a soft word involving feelings, tenderness, questions, and openness. Heart in politics does not accept alienation in organising and always recognises a deep relationship of all beings. Strange, fresh options arise when these two words -- heart and politics -- sleep in the same bed.

A number of prominent speakers lent their voices to the movement at the recent heart politics conference I attended, including renowned eco-economist and executive director of the the Australia Institute, Clive Hamilton, who looked at down-shifting, otherwise known as voluntary simplicity -- people reducing work hours and consumerism in favour of quality of life and fulfilment.

There are other groundswell movements afoot not directly aligned to heart politics but nevertheless expressing the same principle -- people becoming politicised through compassion.

For instance, Anita Roddick -- founder of the Body Shop network -- has put together a new book outlining what she terms A Revolution in Kindness (distributed by HarperCollins). It's a compilation of stories and essays from various well-known people looking at how compassion and spiritual activism can change the world. As the Dalai Lama says in the book: "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness." Meanwhile, I spent last Sunday sitting cross-legged, singing songs of peace, at a sulha -- an indigenous Middle Eastern gathering of reconciliation. A group of Jewish and Arab peace activists get together once a year, in Israel and in other countries, to break bread, share wine and song, as a step towards fostering understanding and trust.

Of course, sitting and singing does not end centuries of violent struggle overnight. But as with all actions, there is something powerful in the sending out of positive, loving energy. It is the first step towards significant change.

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