

Cultural Activism: What Can We Learn from *Momo*?

“Don’t just do something, stand there.”

—Sandra Janoff and Marvin Weisbord

In setting out to render social change possible in all our circles—from the groups of which we are a part, to organizations, institutions, and communities of various sizes—we can either embrace a dualistic perspective in which we stand against external situations, or else feel that we are both part of what needs to change and promoters of the change itself. The latter is the purpose of what we will call here “cultural activism” (others call it “sacred activism” or “spiritual activism”). A well-known example of cultural activism is the nonviolence of Gandhi, or of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. Those who engaged in this nonviolent resistance internalized other modes of being, discovered new realities while actually reaching remarkable success. In carrying out this conversation I allow myself to move to the imaginative plane and take the character of Michael Ende’s *Momo* as an example of the goals we can reach.

The approach explored in these pages doesn’t stand at odds with the promotion of the ideas of social threefolding; on the contrary, it supports them with the cultivation of an awareness of the forces of destiny at all levels of reality.¹

The Unique Child

Momo has no extraordinary powers, least of all great intellectual abilities. But she has listening and playing skills. From this it follows that Momo always has time. Momo knows how to live from and listen to the current of time from the future. Ende tells us:

No, what Momo was better than anyone else was listening.

Anyone can listen, you may say—what’s so special about that?—but you’d be wrong. Very few people know how to listen properly, and Momo’s way of listening was quite unique.

She listened in a way that made slow-witted people have flashes of inspiration. It wasn’t that she actually said anything or asked questions that put such ideas into their heads. She simply sat there and listened with the utmost attention and sympathy, fixing them with her big, dark eyes, and they suddenly became aware of ideas whose existence they had never suspected. Momo could listen in such a way that worried and undecisive people knew their own minds from one moment to the next, or shy people felt suddenly confident and at ease, or downhearted people felt happy and hopeful. And if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo. And, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong: that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way.

Such was Momo’s talent for listening. (Chapter 2: Listening)

¹ For more about this complementarity, see list of readings at the end.

Momo's capacity to listen is accompanied by the prodigious memory generated by her interest. And just as she knows how to listen, Momo also knows how to play. "The children had a special reason for enjoying their visits to the amphitheater as much as they did. Now that she was living there, they found they could play better games than ever before. They were never bored for an instant, but not because she contributed a lot of ingenious suggestions. Momo was there and joined in, that was all, but for some reason her mere presence put bright ideas into their heads. They invented new games every day, and each was an improvement on the last" (Chapter 3: Make Believe).

Momo brings to the surface the best of those around her without having any desire to change them. She never gives advice. It is precisely because she listens with a genuine desire to understand and connect that those who have been heard can understand themselves. And that's how they can change if they want to.

Listening and playing form a natural complement, one looking at the past, the other facing the future. When I listen, I make room within myself to the current of time from the past, to gravity. In fact, really listening means making room for what usually causes us pain, what we want to avoid knowing in ourselves: the pain of the other, our pain, the pain of the world. To really listen involves a small dying that invites us to a resurrection. And play helps this resurrection.

With play I open myself to what is unexpected, I render possible transforming an obstacle into a possibility, I find a solution even when there does not seem to be one. Playing is actually another kind of listening: a listening to the stream of time from the future.

When it comes to playing and listening, Guido Guide and Beppo Streetsweeper, her two best friends, act as a polarity with Momo in between. Beppo has listening skills, but he does it with too much gravity. He has little ability for play and levity. Guido is naturally predisposed to playing, but he does it too lightly: he is willing to sacrifice the truth in the process. He also has little listening ability. Ahriman's henchmen, the "men in grey", can subdue Guido with great ease, Beppo with more difficulty. They cannot touch Momo except by inflicting on her great suffering. From that suffering Momo can realize the trials humanity is undergoing.

Momo shows us the ultimate archetype of transforming our karma, personal and collective. Momo is the one who can live in the current of the future in a natural way and must fully know the current of the past and how it can ultimately subjugate humanity. Momo represents the innocent childhood feminine. Little Momo recognizes herself inside everything and everyone. She does not know separation, to such an extent that she can faintly hear the music of creation, the music of the spheres. Her growth consists in knowing the condition of complete separation from the divine of modern humanity. She must pass from primordial innocence to an innocence tempered by experience and thus newly conquered. For this reason she has to face an experience of extreme loneliness.

The Road to Becoming Social Change Agents

To become social change agents we must listen deeply and try to escape harmful dynamics and what they entail. Life-negating dynamics are those in which engagement with others estranges us from ourselves and others and creates the

weight of new negative karma. Life-affirming dynamics bring order and healing into our karma.

When we are part of any group, we act differently than we do on our own. We may either act from the best of ourselves or engage in behaviors that undermine us and everybody else. Among dynamics that block the life of a group, organization, or community are the Ahrimanic ruthless pursuit of the bottom line on one hand, or the Luciferic clinging to grandiose slogans and mission statements with no correspondence to reality on the other. In between these are all the ways in which we collectively lend ourselves to illusions, withhold information or dress it up, create protected niches for ourselves in the workplace, dominate by subtle bullying or accept to cow down, unload on the newcomers, etc. These are the outer garments, as it were, with which the double of the organizations clothes itself.

We can't simply overcome life-negating dynamics, partly because we are part of them. We can't

- deny them and oppose them, or
- sublimate the experiences, pretending that we are not part of them, that we stand somehow above them.

Rather we can

- transform them within us, even just a little at a time, and
- stage different dynamics with allies who realize the weight of life-negating dynamics and want different and more affirmative dynamics.

In this case too, Momo serves as an example. When a man in grey comes into her presence to enroll her as a customer of the Timesaving Bank, Momo tries to really listen to him: "She could understand what other people meant and what they were like by getting right inside them, so to speak, but with him this was quite impossible. Whenever she tried to read his thoughts she seemed to plunge headlong into a dark chasm, as if there were nothing there at all. It had never happened to her before" (Chapter 7: The Visitor). Momo feels the cold of this inhuman presence, but even in this case she does not pull back. The girl senses the role of these men in grey in the behavior of all those around her; she's the first to do so. And it is also because of her intensity of listening that the first man in grey who speaks with Momo betrays himself and gives away all the deceptions plotted by his peers—the deceptions of the adversary powers, under which many of Momo's friends operate. When she reveals her findings to her friends, some think there are possible, fast solutions.

In the story the contrast between a political approach and the cultural one is embodied once more in the differences between Guido and Beppo. Guido believes it's sufficient to understand the issue to unite the people against the men in grey. He enthusiastically organizes rallies to alert the population about what Momo has discovered. He cannot fathom the deeper hold that the sinister spiritual beings have upon the souls of one and many, including himself. Beppo is highly skeptical; Momo seems to simply watch, probably fathoming that this is a step of awareness, though not a sufficient one. Predictably the rallies that the children hold are easily countered and discredited by the men in grey and those they hold under their sway.

If we want to transform dynamics that block life into dynamics that promote it, sooner or later we will meet with the “collective doubles”—of a group, an organization, a community, a culture—that we cannot oppose but only change with integrity and empathy. When we meet them we will feel all the weight of the time and karma that comes from the past. We will realize how we too are immersed in this reality. It will be difficult for us to operate as freely as we would like. We will know feelings of anger, helplessness, confusion, etc. These feelings can be transformed into the sadness—not self-pity—of our primordial condition of separation from the spirit, of which the doubles are one of many manifestations. The sadness of separation, which we accept in ourselves, becomes the instrument of knowledge and resurrection. The weight of these realizations is hard to bear; this is why cultural activism is better pursued alongside conscious spiritual discipline. Many cultural activists realize that through a spiritual path we can better face the challenges of social transformation because we can present an ever-so-slightly-changed Self in the moment of need. This modest, but constant, increment makes the whole difference.

The Haudenosaunee legend of the White Roots of Peace offers an example of the transformation of the larger cultural double. Prior to the deeds of Deganawidah and Hiawatha, the cultural double is one that promotes black magic, cannibalism, and continuous warfare. Hiawatha has to fully confront and suffer the weight of this reality—through the remorse for his previous life as a cannibal and the deaths inflicted upon his daughters and wife by the black magician—in order to transform it, under the inspiration of the Peacemaker, Deganawidah. Once he accepts the message of the Peacemaker, Hiawatha is sorely tested; he will face a long darkness of sorrow before being able to offer consolation and transformation.²

The change agent is the one who is willing to have the experience of this condition of separation and the pain it causes to all those who are part of it, at least until the group, the organization, or part of them, want to face it together. The cultural activist can invite those who want to make this collective confrontation inviting, to approach it with curiosity. This is where the ability to play comes in. Playing means prefiguring the future with levity and bringing this lightness into the present. Playing consists of bringing creativity to the moment, adding an element of surprise, unmasking with humor, forcing the opponent to put himself at risk, offering an image and/or experience of the future, finding an unexpected way out, etc.

How Momo operates this change from the currents of the past to the currents of the future time is made clear when she crosses the threshold into the domain of Professor Hora.

When Momo steps from Never Lane to Nowhere House, she enters a new order of reality; she crosses a threshold. In arriving at the Never Lane, it is neither day nor night. The light “was a radiance that outlined every object with unnatural crispness and clarity, yet it seemed to come from nowhere—or rather, from everywhere at once” (Chapter 10: More Haste, Less Speed). In Hora’s domain the food is of a different nature than physical food: it can give energy to the weary, and one could go on eating

² For a study of the White Roots of Peace and its significance see Luigi Morelli, *Spiritual Turning Points of North American History*, Part 2, Chapter 3.

without feeling weighed down. And Professor Hora can appear young or old, dressed in clothes of the past or of the future.

Everything that holds sway on Earth is reversed as Momo crosses the threshold. She follows the tortoise, Cassiopeia, an animal that can foretell time, but only half an hour ahead. Momo marvels at how it is possible to both proceed very slowly while moving ahead so fast. On the contrary the cars of the men in grey come practically to a standstill when they keep accelerating. Before entering the house, Momo is opposed by a strong current and wind. She must do everything in reverse: "While walking backwards, she was also thinking, breathing and feeling backwards—living backwards, in fact" (Chapter 10: More Haste, Less Speed). As cultural activists, even before we cross the threshold, we need to reverse many of the premises we hold dear.

The political activist can refer to a program. He can accumulate signatures, hope to introduce political changes through the ballot box, initiate a referendum; in essence try to see what can be changed in the surrounding world. And all this undoubtedly serves. The approach here outlined doesn't oppose it. The cultural activist's transformation journey takes us into the collective through the personal. We cannot keep ourselves on the side lines, at a comfortable distance. Our world will only change if we are first willing to radically change the way we see it, and then change ourselves, the way we relate to others, and the way we take action. This is the difference between a classical social activist and a cultural activist. And more can be achieved if we follow Momo, which is to say if we embark on a conscious path toward initiation.

Further Frontiers in Following Momo's Example

Once we have addressed the regressive dynamics we play in concert with others in groups, organizations, or communities, Momo teaches us the next step: looking directly in the eyes of the beings who use these dynamics. In Momo's story these are the beings who have convinced the population at large to see all of life in terms of time "well used" or wasted, who have squeezed out any notion of play, conviviality, and spaciousness.

The First Visit to Nowhere House: Imagination

When Momo first crosses the threshold into Nowhere House, Hora shows her the crisimograph, which serves for recording crises in humanity's history. The watch is formed of two superimposed spirals rotating slowly in opposite directions. Hora indicates that few people can read the crisimograph and therefore know how to recognize such turning points. If the turning points are recognized, great things become possible. The story hints that Momo is such an individual, one that has arrived "uncommonly punctual," meaning one who comes at the right time to confront a large crisis. Hora indicates to Momo that she is in his domain because she has the ability to faintly hear the music of the spheres, the same music she will hear fully after death.

The first test of Momo is that of a riddle in which she has to recognize the nature of time. After she resolves it, Professor Hora reveals that his task is to send human beings the span of time that is allotted to them, and that the multitude of clocks in his domain are imperfect copies of what all human beings carry inside themselves.

Hora wants to show Momo where the time comes from, and she is thus presented with the imagination of a golden dome with a circular lake underneath. Here she witnesses how a gigantic pendulum swings in the direction of a large water lily—an “hour-lily”—at the edge of the lake. At each oscillation of the pendulum, a lily first forms and then dissolves. While one dissolves another one emerges and comes to full bloom at the opposite end of the lake, and the cycle repeats itself, slowly advancing along the shores of the lake. Each hour-lily is more magnificent than the previous one.

From the top of the dome comes down a shaft of light, and Momo realizes that she not only sees it but can hear it. The sound is a weaving of manifold harmonies. The child recognizes it as the faraway music she faintly heard while watching silently the starry dome of the heavens. The longer she listened, the more clearly she could make out sounds, such as could have been produced by gold, silver, and all other precious metals. “The sun and moon and planets and stars were telling her their own, true names, and their names signified what they did and how they all combined to make each hour-lily flower and fade in turn” (Chapter 12: Nowhere House).

Here Momo has an inkling of the secrets of time, of how birth and death are ruled by the movements of Sun, Moon, planets, and stars. Professor Hora comments, “What you’ve just seen and heard wasn’t everyone’s time, ... it was only your own.” “So where was I?” asks the child; “In the depths of your own heart,” Hora replies (Chapter 12: Nowhere House).

Momo is impatient to tell what she’s seen to her friends, but she must first let the experience take root in her heart and learn to wait. For this purpose Hora induces her to sleep for one year and one day, returning to Earth when everything has changed, as Cassiopeia later reveals to her.

When Momo awakens, the vision is the first thing she remembers very clearly: the hour lilies and the voices of Sun, Moon, planets, and stars, and the words associated with each hour lily. Thanks to her great memory, the child can repeat the words and even sing them, though the meaning still eludes her. Cassiopeia tells Momo that she has returned by choice, though she doesn’t remember wanting to leave.

Momo has lived in this Imagination and let it mature, so that she is now in the process of lifting it to Inspiration. For the process to be complete, she has to face the havoc wrought by the men in grey upon humanity. She, who first intuited the role of the grey men in the behavior of her friends, has to learn to recognize their intentions and being from within.

The Second Visit to Professor Hora: Inspiration and Intuition

Momo is now facing the collective karma of humanity; she is under the constant surveillance of the men in grey. She is made to suffer to such a degree that she can only ask reprieve from her jailers. What sustains her are her memories from Nowhere House. But a wealth that cannot be shared or fully enjoyed is such that “She felt as if she were imprisoned in a vault heaped with priceless treasures—an ever-growing hoard that threatened to crush the life out of her” (Chapter 16: Loneliness). She wants to go back to see Professor Hora and stay with him forever, but for that to happen she has to wait for the right time. She first has to face the condition of humanity to the full

extent and have the courage to say yes to it all. At other times, the weight of loneliness is such that she wishes she didn't have any of her special knowledge.

Through her harrowing loneliness the child comes to a tipping point: she meets boys and girls she knows at the "children depot." She learns that they are taught to "play" in a way that is deadening, a way that serves the utilitarian purposes of the men in grey. This is the absolute opposite of what she was doing with them at the amphitheater. Momo is taking a further step: she is willing to lose her freedom in order to be with them. But the men in grey fear this outcome, and one of them confronts the child to show her how much power they have over her and instill fear upon her.

Now Momo is filled with terror and horror. She wants to hide from the presence of the men in grey, but that is simply impossible. A dream shows her the predicament Guido is in—obliged to spin stories without soul for the men in grey—and the one the children are in—obliged to lose their souls in "playing." From the place of utmost fear and powerlessness, Momo summons courage and realizes that this is not her predicament alone, but that of the whole world, and that she has the means to do something about it. "Her feelings of fear and helplessness had reached such a pitch that they were suddenly transformed into their opposites. Having overcome them, she felt courageous and self-confident enough to tackle any power on earth; more precisely, she had ceased to worry about herself" (Chapter 17: The Square). Momo has reached a next step. She now has fully recognized the being of the men in grey. They do more than robbing humanity of its time, as she has previously ascertained. They lead the human being into a loneliness and separation that magnifies egotism and instills fear. They can be vanquished from the ground of courage and dedication to the spirit. She has clearly understood the spiritual nature of her inner and outer confrontation.

This is when she is confronted by the whole power of the men in grey in a huge, deserted square. All of them converge in their cars to overwhelm her. The men in grey show their power and offer Momo the bargain of being able to continue to play with some of her friends in a world that will basically be in their hands. They want her to help them gain access to Professor Hora in exchange. Throughout this exchange Momo converses with vulnerability and sincerity with the men in grey, never yielding to their bargains. Ultimately the voice of a grey man admits, "We want to rule the world."

The turning point of Momo's newfound courage creates the necessary precondition for returning to Hora, as Cassiopeia reveals to Momo. Momo wants to carry the tortoise in order to go faster, but Cassiopeia reveals it's not possible because "The way's inside me." Once they get close to the Never Lane, Momo wants to go faster, but the tortoise insists on "more haste, less speed," and she advances slower than ever. At last Momo once again has to proceed backwards from Never Lane to the Nowhere House, with the grey men in hot pursuit. They are laying siege to Hora's domain.

Hora reveals the difference between how time flows on Earth and in his domain: "Normally, time flows into you. The more time you have inside you, the older you get, but in Never Lane time flows out of you." Momo asks naively if it were possible to let this second kind of time dominate the world. Hora replies: "The two currents are in balance, you see. If you cancelled one, the other would vanish too. Then there'd be no time left" (Chapter 19: Under Siege).

The men in grey cannot subtract time from human beings, but they can do something worse: they can poison it. They can get hold of the hour-lilies, but they cannot shorten people's time. In this way the hour-lilies can neither die nor live. The men in grey cannot use living time, which is why they use the petals of the hour-lilies by smoking them. When they do this, time is really deadened; they feed on dead human time. Now they are trying to completely cover the atmosphere with smoke so that Hora can no longer send his beneficial influences to the aid of human beings. The men in grey can send a fatal illness to humans, which Hora calls "deadly tedium," that will turn humans into creatures similar to their jailers.

Hora wants to act but needs a willing human being. And Momo has been tempered by overcoming loneliness and fear. Now she has to be willing to take a great risk all on her own. Hora can help by suspending time for the length of an hour and by giving Momo one hour-lily. Cassiopeia decides to accompany the child, which helps her overcome an initial paralysis. Once she knows what the problem is, the child has to act on the opportunity.

In the new dimension without time, Momo moves with Cassiopeia under her arm and the newly given hour-lily in her hand. Contrary to everything that took place before, she has to hurry, run, and dart, and the tortoise reminds her that "you're wasting time" and "keep going." Ende reminds us that "more haste, less speed" no longer applies.

In her last confrontation with the men in grey beyond the threshold, Momo must draw completely from her inner resources. At the moment of the crucial confrontation, Professor Hora leaves Momo alone in a realm outside of time, without the guidance that comes from the spirit. For an hour, time will stand still in the physical world and the survival of the latter will depend on the power of initiative of the girl, on the strength of her ego, which lives outside of space and time, and which draws strength from eternity. It is here that Momo must show that she knows how to seize the moment, trusting in her simple human faculties, without the help of the spiritual world, other than her ego.³

This is the moment of intuition, of being completely aligned with personal and collective destiny, a point of no return and a point of new beginnings, in fact in the story the beginning of a new era.

Relevant Readings

- Michael Ende, *Momo*.

³ What Momo does in the pages of a fiction book is what Rudolf Steiner calls a free deed. An example from Rudolf Steiner's life itself is his acceptance of the task entrusted by world karma to Karl Julius Schröer. In the conversation Steiner had with Walter Johannes Stein in The Hague in 1922, we see the sequence of steps of Imagination, Inspiration, and Intuition in the carrying out of this free deed. (From Walter Johannes Stein, Rudolf Steiner, Dokumentation eines wegweisenden Zusammenwirkens : W.J. Steins Dissertation in ihrem Entstehungsprozess und in ihrer Aktualität; mit Briefen und Aufzeichnungen Rudolf Steiners Korrekturen und Ergänzungen sowie dem "Haager Gespräch" von 1922, Thomas Meyer editor, Verlag am Goetheanum, 1985. An English translation is available at https://millenniumculmination.net/Aristotelians_and_Platonists.pdf, pp. 166–68).

- Rudolf Steiner, *The Fifth Gospel*, lecture of 6 October 1913. In this lecture Steiner portrays the way Mary is able to listen to her son, Jesus, after he has gone through the shattering experience of the complete cultural decadence of his time. Mary listens with such presence and attention that Jesus is able to take on the next step, which will lead him to John the Baptist at the Jordan River. At the baptism the lower sheaths of Jesus, vacated by the ego, are filled in by the presence of the Christ being.
- Paul Wallace, *The White Roots of Peace*. The quintessential myth of social transformation. It comes from the Haudenosaunee, formerly known as Iroquois of the American Northeast. It shows us how the cultural adversary enjoys superior, albeit decadent, powers. These can only be overcome if we promote another culture, renewed by the Christ impulse. Hiawatha is a quintessential cultural hero and cultural activist, inspired by the initiate Deganawidah, the Peacemaker.
- Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. The archetype of the U corresponds to what Rudolf Steiner called the seven life processes. Through the understanding of this archetype, Otto Scharmer has expanded the range of social/cultural interventions that facilitate participatory change and satisfy a large number of stakeholders.
- Frederic Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage in Human Consciousness*. Laloux shows us how organizations can become bearers of meaning, soulfulness, and purpose that affirm the individual, the community, and the planet.
- Luigi Morelli, *Accelerating Social Change, Impacting Our World While Transforming Ourselves*. The book deals with three archetypes of social change; new social imaginations (social threefolding), new social processes (the archetype of the U or seven life processes), and new social forms (the archetype of emergence).