



THE POWER OF COMMITMENT

Lynne Twist

Commitment means dedication to a cause or purpose larger than yourself. As we well know, people can be committed primarily to themselves and their own causes—a business, the family, a sport or hobby. In fact, that is where most people place their devotion and loyalty. You can live a life dedicated to mothering or gardening or making money, but I am asking that you consider a commitment to the common good: to something that takes you out of yourself and into the realm of service.

Living a committed life is not about doing good so that you can feel good about yourself or look good to others. It is about answering a call that creates a new context for your life. Living this way is guided by taking a stand and giving your word that you will live into that stand and have it shape your life. It requires keeping that commitment in the face of challenges by creating a context of possibility and transformation. You learn to pay attention, to train yourself to navigate the upsets and challenges and to learn from and be nourished by them.

When you are able to turn breakdowns into breakthroughs, then whatever comes at you in life (a job loss, a death, cancer, the breakup of a marriage) can become a gift; it's all there to teach you, to empower you somehow. You're free from falling into the dark hole of depression or wallowing in jealousy or envy. It's not that life's difficulties don't show up, but they show up in a way that you are served by them rather than being taken down by them. That's the frame of reference that I come from. I can't prove if this is universally true or false; I just know that it works. This mindset is what has allowed me to discover the distinct joys of living a committed life.

OUR TIMES CALL FOR COMMITMENT

We are in a new era where the very survival of humanity and myriad other life forms is called into question. Having altered the composition of the planet's atmosphere with ever-growing concentrations of greenhouse gases, having warmed the oceans and poisoned them with pollutants and plastics, having caused the extinction of unknown numbers of plants and animals—we have to admit that we as a species are pretty darn powerful. If we can create these massive changes, we can also stop them. But to do so will take many millions of us living purposeful lives: lives of commitment to the future rather than to our own comfort and desires.

Our dreams of a future where we could have meaningful work and also relax, play, and maybe even roam this beautiful planet now seem elusive. The existential nature of our global crises (worldwide pandemics, global warming, species extinction, runaway inequality) means that much more is required of us. We can transform our fear and anxiety into commitment and action. That transformation is what interrupts and heals the fear, and it moves the dial on what is causing it.

In facing the dark shadows showing up in our polarized politics (racism, sexism, militarism), we have to confront our own darkness and heal our own hearts. So, in committing to a vision, a purpose larger than our own lives, we are freed from the smallness and pettiness of our own minds and catapulted out of anxiety and fear into inspired action. Rather than putting all of our energy into trying to protect what we have, we can focus our imagination and our efforts on re-creating and regenerating all of our human systems for the next phase of our evolution. There's never been a time when we needed inspired action more than now.

We humans are poised to make an evolutionary leap. That's why I have included in this book stories related to the arenas of commitment that I believe are crucial to our future. If you are looking for where to focus your talent and energy, consider taking on ending hunger and poverty, changing the destructive dream of the modern world, generating effective action on reversing global warming, empowering women and girls, or contributing to creating a more inclusive, fair, and ecological economy. There's so much to be done, urgently, but there is still time, and we can do it. It is easy to slip into denial, depression, or hopelessness about the future. Yes, we face an uncertain future: yet what a time to be alive! What we do collectively in the coming years will determine the future of the planet for perhaps thousands of years to come. That may sound daunting, overwhelming, or even burdensome. But my experience is that this view ennobles our lives and gives us the opportunity to live the most meaningful lives any generation has ever had.

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COMMITMENT AS A CONTEXT FOR LIFE

Giving one's word from a place of authenticity and courage can be life altering and life defining. A bold, audacious commitment can shape every action you take. It's not a decision and not merely an agreement; it becomes the context of your life. Commitment is especially powerful when connected to the needs of the world that touch your heart. It enables you to take your grievances and your heartache about the world and do something about it. The very words "I commit" can stir the soul of both the one who speaks them and those who hear them. I've found that making commitment public enough that the people you respect, love, and trust hold you to account is empowering. Then people relate to us not as our desires, our personality, or our agenda, but rather as our word. They interact with the integrity of the commitment we've made.

A commitment larger than your own wants and needs lifts you out of the landscape of your circumstances and personal desires. It lifts you out of day-to-day moods, irritations, and upsets about things not going your way. It pulls you out of that smallness and elevates you to a place where you find the strength and courage to generate your life out of possibility and generosity.

All great movements, all major alterations in the course of history, began with a courageous commitment by a human being who said what they meant and meant what they said—someone who held themselves accountable to a standard beyond what they knew possible of themselves.

When President John F. Kennedy committed to getting a man on the moon within nine years, a whole new field of aeronautics and space science was born—along with national inspiration and aspiration. When a small group of men and women in England committed to ending slavery, they began a worldwide revolution. When Mahatma Gandhi said the British would walk out of India and India would be independent, an unstoppable, nonviolent movement was born.

That kind of commitment is born of the heart, from the soul, from the deepest place of who we are. It comes from what some of us call God, Spirit, or Source, and it is equally felt by anyone who is moved to hear a calling from life itself. It's an act of courage, which comes from the heart. What I'm talking about isn't logical. It doesn't come from the mind. It's not irrational or rational. It's not even in that domain. I call it trans-rational—in the domain of transformation. It changes the game, moves the world, and creates a space for miracles.

People often think that great leaders are born, not made—that they are somehow destined for greatness. I believe, however, it's the opposite—that committing oneself to an inspiring cause is what forges you into a great human being. It's the commitment that shapes you into who you need to be to fulfill it. And that's the point of this book. It's not that you have to be smart enough or talented enough or knowledgeable enough to make commitments. You make the commitment, and then the talent, the knowledge, the passion, the resources start to become visible and move toward you. The light of a splendid torch attracts them to you. When something greater calls you, human frailties—which we all have—begin to fall away or move into the background. Instead of focusing only on your own wants and needs, you put your attention on the larger community—what George Bernard Shaw called the “true joy in life.”

People who've made a big commitment seem larger than life, but they didn't start out like that. Gandhi was a small man who was thrown off the train in South Africa and became a huge hero for generations to come. Jane Goodall went to Africa as a young researcher before she had any scientific credentials, yet her relationship with chimpanzees gave scientists and the rest of us a completely new perspective on primate behavior. Greta Thunberg was a young girl with Asperger's syndrome who got very angry about inaction on climate change and just started sitting outside the Swedish Parliament instead of going to classes. She took her anger and transformed it into a beacon of light so powerful that she mobilized millions and millions of young people to join in climate action. Even people living in downtrodden circumstances where it looks like there's no hope have found deep commitment. Cesar Chavez is such a beautiful example. He spent every day of many years toiling in fields and picking grapes with no rest, no health care, no decent wages or place to live. But something happened that sparked his commitment. And then he started to live by that commitment, and the farmworkers' movement was born.

The possibility of that kind of commitment, I declare, lives in everyone—everyone who's alive, or they wouldn't be here. Many people live their lives without ever tapping into it or even getting close to it, but we are all capable of living committed lives.

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I have been blessed to have a privileged life that afforded me the opportunity to follow my passion, and for that I am beyond grateful. However, I have seen that a committed life is not a function of circumstances—that jobs and families need not define service. Raising children is obviously a massive investment of time and commitment and might seem a deterrent to substantial broader contribution. During the long battle for women’s right to vote, some leaders, like Susan B. Anthony, had no children. Other, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had eight children to raise, had many, yet they all worked together side by side. For some, it was totally inconvenient, while others had all the time in the world, yet they both stepped up. I am particularly inspired by mothers who have lived a committed life. For example, among the women Nobel Peace Prize winners who make up the Nobel Women’s Initiative, Leymah Gbowee, a freedom fighter from Liberia, has six children. Tawakkol Karman, an exiled journalist from Yemen, has three children, and she’s still fighting for human rights in her country.

Often, those heroes and heroines who have lived committed lives are unknown and unacknowledged. I think of the fathers and mothers whose commitment to their children made astonishing contributions to society, even under the harshest of circumstances. Berdis Jane Baldwin raised her son James and eight other children as a single mother working as a domestic servant. Louise Langdon Little, the mother of Malcolm X, had eight children who went to foster homes after she was involuntarily institutionalized for “believing she was being discriminated against.” Martin Luther King Jr.’s mother, Alberta Williams King, was murdered six years after her son was assassinated. She was shot in the back while playing piano in Ebenezer Baptist Church. These women were directly responsible for the empowerment of their children as well as the entire Black community.

WALKING CREATES THE PATH

People often want to see the way forward before they commit, but it just doesn't work that way. When I committed to ending world hunger, I had absolutely no idea how to do it. When I committed to preserving the world's tropical rainforests, I had no clue how that would happen. For those of us who are committed to ending racism in the United States, there is no road map. You can't figure it all out in advance and then do it. As W. S. Murray said, "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too." Things start to organize themselves around what needs to happen. It's not that obstacles, doubts, and worries go away, but you find your way through them. It's almost like a path opens up in the forest and you can then see the way forward—but not until you commit. People often want to keep their options open; they fear being trapped. But in my experience, it is not making a commitment that traps you. Keeping your options open gets really tiresome and burdensome after a while. **When you make your commitment and declare, "This is it!" then you have real freedom.** 📖

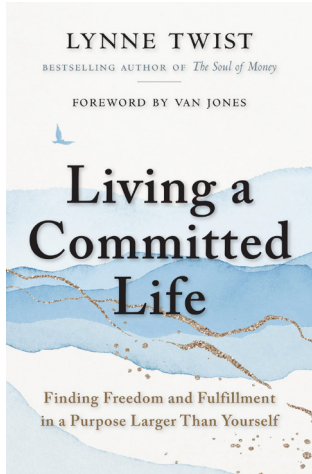
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynne Twist has been a recognized global visionary committed to alleviating poverty, ending world hunger, and supporting social justice and sustainability for more than forty years. She is also the cofounder of the Pachamama Alliance and founder of the Soul of Money Institute. Twist has worked with over 100,000 people in fifty countries in workshops, keynote presentations, and one-on-one coaching sessions on how to fundraise with integrity, practice conscious philanthropy, and create a healthy relationship with money. She is the bestselling author of *The Soul of Money*, which has sold over 200,000 copies worldwide and has been translated into nine languages.

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