JACK HEALEY

FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACTION CENTER •

FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL U.S.A. •

FORMER FRANCISCAN PRIEST

WASHINGTON, D.C.

(Kristin)

When I was in my early and mid-twenties, my awareness of human rights—and violations thereof—was expanded by a man I had never met: Jack Healey, the executive director of Amnesty International U.S.A. One of the ways Amnesty had achieved its goals of raising awareness of human rights and protecting the rights of political prisoners was with huge rock concerts—devised by Jack to raise money and consciousness—and I had been one of the estimated 1 billion people mesmerized by the five-hour *Conspiracy of Hope* and *Human Rights Now!* shows. Through the universal language of music, Amnesty, with Healey's guidance, wove an international net that caught the attention and imagination of my entire generation—and countless others around the world.

Shainee was also aware of, and involved with, Amnesty, having interned with the organization during her college years. So when drawing up our *Anthem* wish list, we were determined to track down Jack Healey at his home in D.C.

It had taken us quite a few attempts to reach Jack, but when we did, he instantly accepted our invitation. He explained over the phone that after twelve years at the helm of Amnesty, he had struck out on his own and formed the Human Rights Action Center, a grassroots effort to get the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—instigated by Eleanor Roosevelt almost fifty years ago—translated into all languages and into the hands of everyone, everywhere. To me, this sounded like a daunting task, but listening to Jack, I knew he believed it was more than possible. While we were on the phone, he went on to explain the kind of empowerment he'd witnessed around the world when people learned—firsthand and in their own language—their rights, such as the right to shelter or the right not to be tortured.

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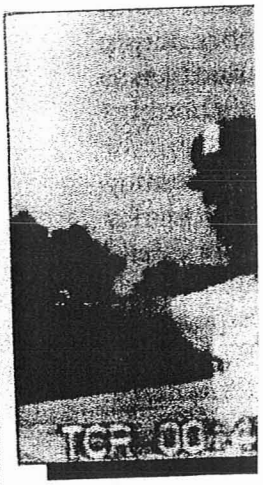

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We pulled up to Healey's brownstone on the southeast side of town. We knocked and were greeted by a swiftly opened door and a man whose flurry of untamed white hair, pronounced jowls, and thick glasses reminded me of an overworked Einstein, although Jack's Human Rights Now! T-shirt planted him firmly in this decade.

We made our introductions. "You've been *driving*!" Jack declared commenting on the itinerary we had faxed him.

"Yeah," Shainee admitted, "we haven't really been going in a logical order because of people's schedules."

"Every time we think we're done with an area, we have to go back," I added—D.C. being the most recent example.

We decided to eat before the interview and walked over to the corner pub for a long talk and some french onion soup. Jack told us about his ambitious plans and why he and Amnesty had parted ways after twelve years. He explained, "There were certain things that couldn't be done within an international infrastructure, with a staff of a hundred." He said that he had accomplished a lot of what he had hoped to at Amnesty, and now wanted to approach human rights from a more grassroots perspective, with a people's campaign. Shainee and I were intrigued.

After lunch, he led us down the Capitol streets as we tried to decide where to do the interview. "We've got the Supreme Court here," he said, pointing to his left. "Now, the Library's a little older. And there's the Capitol . . ."

Unfortunately, it's Saturday

Shainee and I decided the Supreme Court would be an appropriate backdrop, and we started up the white polished steps, Jack lugging some of our equipment. "Oh, Kris," Shainee said, stopping. "Look what it says." She pointed to the top of the building, which was adorned with a cement ribbon that read: EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW.

"That's a pretty good backdrop for you, Jack," I said as we moved closer to a Romanesque fountain on the far side of the building. "Yeah, we're still hunting for that," he said, more to himself than us.

A guard approached us from the bottom of the steps and asked if we had permission to shoot up there. "Permission?" I questioned. "We're just doing a little documentary project."

"Yeah, see, you have to get permission from the Public Information Office, which is open Monday through Friday, before you can do any kind of filming up here," he explained.

"Monday's too late," Shainee pleaded. "What about on the steps?"

"No, that's not allowed, either," he said. The guard spoke into his walkie-talkie, then started to walk away.

"This is sad. Don't we own this, as citizens?" I asked the guard, who was quickly moving out of earshot. "Oh, God!" I said in exasperation, looking to Jack.

"It's an analogy for what's going on," Jack said, turning to walk back down the stairs, away from the Jeffersonian building. " 'Public Information Office,' " Jack repeated, his head bowed. "You can only be helped Monday through Friday from nine to five."

Ultimately, we decided to set up on the sidewalk at the foot of the stairs leading up to the building. We started the interview by asking Jack to tell us a little about his childhood and life in the priesthood.

"I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," he began. "My parents were economic refugees from Ireland, and I was the youngest of eleven children. My family worked in the coal mines. My father was killed when I was two, so we went from poverty to riches to poverty; I was raised in poverty. Then I went into the seminary, became a Franciscan priest, and then left the priesthood when I was about thirty."

Jack had a shy, unassuming quality to him. I wondered if it came from living in isolation as a monk in the socially formative years of his twenties. Shainee went on to ask him why he had left the priesthood.

"I enjoyed the seminary; it was a good way to grow up. It instilled a lot of values in me. But I came out," he explained, "because I wanted to get more deeply involved in what was going on—and going wrong—in the world. I realized I was more social-minded and political-minded than I was religious-minded, though I was religious."

Jack explained that his first job outside of the priesthood was raising money for world hunger in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Jack isn't the kind of person to assume credit for successes, but in my research on him, I found out that he essentially pioneered the now-popular fundraising technique of walkathons. Jack seemed to have strong instincts about what masses of people would respond to. "We raised about $14 million for world hunger, between 1969 and 1974, from young people walking," he said, pushing back his thick glasses. "That's when I discovered that kids were being wrongly accused of apathy." I thought of Studs Terkel's assertion that "the kids of the sixties *did* reach outside of themselves, only to be put down."

Jack went on to talk about working with human rights activist Dick Gregory on America's first world hunger run, yet another impressive success for the cause. Jack then moved to South Africa, where he worked as a Peace Corps director for five years. "At the end of my stay in Africa, I answered an ad," he explained. "It was in the back of some brochure, and from that I ended up the director of Amnesty for twelve years."

That was to be the little fork in the road that would change Jack's life. Shainee asked him what he was focusing his energy on today, twelve years after answering that ad.

"I'm working on a *people's* campaign for human rights," he began. "I want to use the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1998, as an opportunity to move the world toward nonviolence, so the next century is better than this one."

Shainee asked Jack to tell us about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written in large part by Eleanor Roosevelt," Jack explained. "Eleanor saw poverty and pain, and she translated it into policy. It's a document that protects everybody on earth better than any other document in the world. And one of the primary reasons the Declaration was written was to be an antitoxin to the toxin of Nazi Germany. The Declaration was created in order to ensure that human rights violations like those did not occur again anywhere in the world.

"Since then, obviously, a lot of violence has occurred. People around the world should be using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a foundation, as something to move them forward, something to expand the thinking. If you give someone a document that has been agreed upon, like this one, it would be like Martin Luther King, Jr., when he used the U.S. Constitution in front of this building—'Equal Justice Under Law.' " Because we had to set up so far away from the building, the very inscription hovered just above Jack's head in my viewfinder.

Jack Healey

"I view the United States as *one* of many countries in the world," Jack continued, "not the center of the universe. So what I'd like to do is create a universal celebration for the Declaration that was signed by nearly every nation in the world, although many of those countries violate that agreement today. Which is why public awareness of the document and the violations is crucial. The people's campaign would be a way of expressing to all countries that this is our international ethical code and contract, which we are all responsible for obeying. The next wave in the movement has to be local human rights organizations in each nation, big and small, because people everywhere need immediacy when filing grievances, and they need to be able to do it in their own languages. And I'd like to use that which

is best in America—our creativity, technology, and imagination—and have other places in the world offer their talents so we can come together in a coalition that's equal and fair and democratic to everybody."

There's a saying that some people have the vision and others quietly make things happen. Jack was definitely a big-picture visionary. To some, his ideas might seem idealistic or unrealistic, but just like Bill Siemering and Wes Jackson, Jack believed it was necessary to redefine the parameters of the discussion in order to push the envelope. Jack argued that as the global community continues to form and permeate our daily lives, it is impossible—even though we live in a liberated country—to ignore infringements upon a worldwide social contract that must evolve and be rooted in basic integrity and human decency.

Jack viewed the global community as siblings in a tight-knit family; he believed that people should look out for one another, help raise each other. Jack seems to take the statement—popularized in the title of Hillary Clinton's book *It Takes a Village*—one step further: If "it takes a whole village to raise a child," then "it takes a whole country to raise a village" and, further, "it takes a whole world to raise a country."

We asked Jack what had inspired him to dedicate his life to ensuring and protecting other people's rights.

"My mother was raised when they brought in 'goon squads' to beat up the Irish miners," he explained, "and she never forgot that. All of her brothers were poor miners. So justice to her meant battling for your rights. When I was growing up, she used to say, 'I didn't bring you here just to survive. I brought you here to get something done. . . .' She was like a quiet warrior who wanted her son—me—to jam the system and make it better for people, especially the poor.

"And there came a point when I was struggling with my mother about my own maturity," Jack continued. "I kept buggin' her for answers, and she would just say, 'Grow up to be a man, Jack. Be a man.' It was just botherin' the hell out of me. So I finally said to her, 'What is it to be a man? What's the standard? How do I get this done so I can move on?' And she said, 'When you can walk the highways and byways of life and learn to listen to the weeping and the wailing of the poor, then you'll be a man.' "

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a policeman coming toward us. I bristled a bit, anticipating a hassle. I was about to inform the officer that a guard had already said we could film on the sidewalk when I heard Jack ask, "Doing all right, officer?"

"All right. How about you?" the policeman responded, an uncommon amount of sincerity in his voice.

"Oh, I'm all right," Jack returned.

"You know," said the officer, "if you move over some, you won't be in the sun so much." The policeman then directed his attention to me. "He's in the sun. It's awfully hot."

Caught off guard by the officer's helpful intentions, I didn't respond. But Jack

took his advice and scooted a little to the left, out of the direct sunlight. "Yeah, that is better," he said. "Thanks."

"No problem," said the officer, continuing on his way down the street.

It was an interesting moment, especially set against the backdrop of the conversation we'd had at lunch about police brutality here and in other countries. As Michael Stipe had said, some people in America see *this* country as a brutal police state. Other people think it's the freest place on earth. It all depends on your perspective.

We asked Jack to describe what he thinks "human rights" mean to Americans. To answer, he clarified that his definition includes more than the right *not* to be tortured, which is how many people approach the subject.

Jack went on. "For the most part, human rights, to the West, has meant individual rights, where it should really mean collective rights, too—the right to a job, a roof over your head, the right *not* to starve to death. In America, you could have your rights and still starve to death. It's contradictory! What must happen is a broadening of the definition so that human rights includes the whole gamut of the Declaration, which encompasses the health and well-being of all persons. We don't want three percent of the world super rich, and ninety-seven percent starving, which is where we're headed. The goal of the Declaration is to close that gap and make it a little better for everybody."

Given that in the United States, most people are aware of their basic human rights, Shainee asked Jack to talk about the urgency of disseminating the information to other countries.

"Well," he began, "I went to Swaziland to get six kids out of jail who were being wrongfully held, and the government let them out before we got there, so they wouldn't get bad press. And the six kids were asking us, 'How did you know about me? Why are you here? Why would an organization somewhere on the other end of the world care about us?' And I think that's the power of believing in human rights—that some poor kid from Pittsburgh can go to Swaziland and help get political prisoners out of jail because . . . it's just a right. And I *know* that. And if you tell other people about it, they get the idea. It's like the idea of freedom. Once you got it, you never lose it.

"We can't trust governments with human rights," he declared. "There have been too many abuses, too many people killed, too many things ignored. So we gotta make it a people's movement."

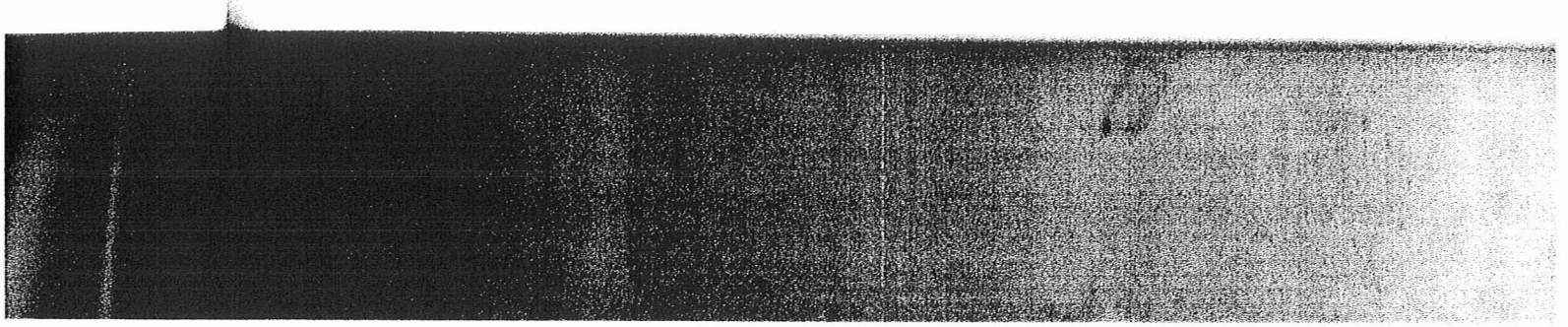
Suddenly Jack looked as if he'd swallowed all of the suffering he'd been describing. His naturally flushed complexion went pale, and he slowly rubbed his belly in a repetitive circular motion, looking stunned.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"Do you have an antacid?" he asked.

Neither of us did. "But we can get one," I assured him. "Is your stomach burning?"

"No, it's just tightening up. Hiatal hernia," he muttered, still rubbing his stomach and breathing carefully. "All's I need is a . . . glass of water . . ."



As usual, we didn't have any water with us, but we spotted a hot dog cart about 200 yards away. I ran as fast as I could.

Relief

When I got back, he guzzled the soda water and was visibly relieved. After we sat for a few minutes, tourists moving around us, snapping photographs of this monument to justice to take home, Jack insisted that we continue the interview. Shainee and I didn't feel that we should. But when I looked back to Jack, I recognized that determined look in his eye and knew that "quitting" was just not an option. "Please just say the word if you need to stop for *any* reason," we insisted, knowing he probably never would.

Shainee asked Jack about his influences. "Dr. Martin Luther King!" he said without pause. "Because I was studying here in the sixties, at Catholic University up in northeast Washington, D.C., and we set up a vigil right here." Jack looked around him, remembering. "Right at this spot actually—a vigil for the passage of civil rights legislation in 1963. And I went to small discussions, where Dr. King gave speeches to organize the March on Washington, and we helped him do that—a number of us seminarians from local Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish schools. And hearing him in small and big groups and then in the final speech during the March was . . . I don't think a young person could have a better experience than that. Dr. King radiated goodness, and you felt it.

"And it was here in this city. I'm very proud of this city for having done that for me. Because as an American, you expect something from this city!" he exclaimed. "This is governmental leadership. These people are supposed to *excel* at decency. But oftentimes they fail us, and I don't like it one bit; and I want to go after them when they do."

We had an idea of what kind of civil and grassroots leaders had influenced Jack, but we were curious about what he thought of the American hero. "What is 'hero' to you?" Shainee asked.

"I think as life goes on—I'm now fifty-seven—" Jack revealed, "you get a sense that you need to be inspired. There's so many hard things in life. It's so hard to change a foreign policy that's gone wrong; it's so hard to change a community with lots of violence in it. How do you talk to young people who are on crack? And sometimes you find yourself overwhelmed with frustration. And so you hope that someone comes along and inspires you, teaches you a new way to look at

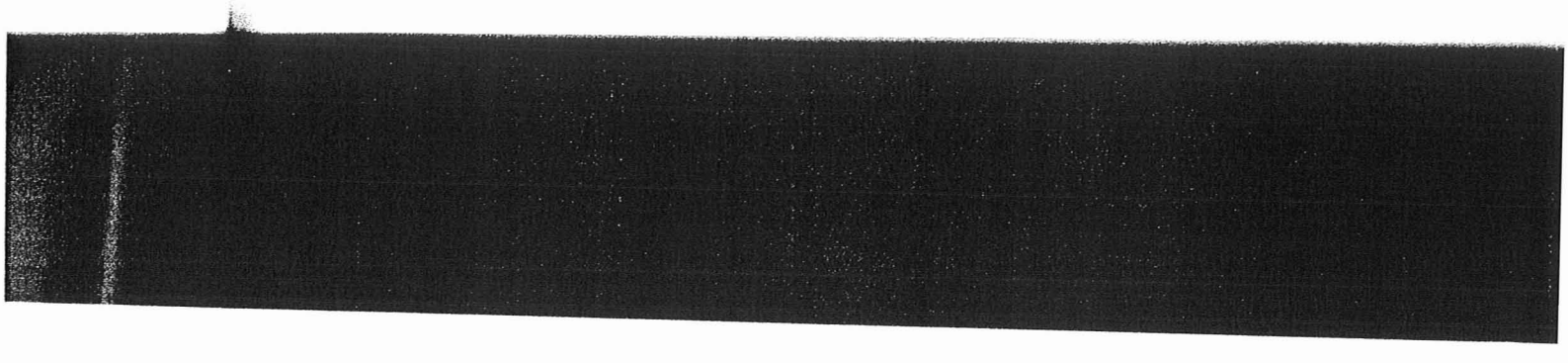
these problems. To me, those people who step in and do that are heroes. And that's what's so incredible about this country—we have a lot of those people."

Shainee asked Jack if he believed the American dream was alive and well. To answer, Jack redefined the American dream as one element of the ongoing American experiment.

"Oh, yeah! Oh golly!" he exclaimed, in answer to the question. "Absolutely. I think the American experiment of democracy is one of the finest human things that has ever happened in the world. I think we are a great experiment, and sometimes we do well, and sometimes we don't do well. But we're one of the great runs at what freedom can mean. At times, we can get hubristic about what we essentially took from the Indians: great land, great oil, great water. And we forget the cost of our conquest and setting up a system that was not fair to everybody, as it was purportedly intended. But it is a great run at it. And what we gotta remember is that we're not there yet. It's a goal out in front of us, and we need to keep running and chasing it. Just like this building—justice is a process, a searing process. Someone once said, 'God will judge us by how we treat the least of us.' Right now, I think we're learning a lot about the least of us."

We asked Jack how he felt about America's future. "I'm worried about the United States," he said frankly. "Money does not make for a golden period; it's art, poetry, enlightened government, and decency. I think right now, we mostly have money. And when a country is restored to decency, it is always restored by the people, not a shift in political leadership. But I happen to be an optimist about this particular society, because I believe government and people *can* work together to make things better for everyone. People think the struggle is between the Democrats and the Republicans. It isn't. It's between the decent and indecent, the people who play it safe and the risk-takers, and between the gun barrel and dialogue.

"As an American," Jack continued, "I want to go back to the Founding Fathers and ask, 'What did you *really* say? What was on Jefferson's mind in his *best* moments?' . . . I believe the Founding Fathers knew that democracy would be messy. I think it was Jefferson who said, 'Democracy is really made for the angels.' It is indeed a pursuit, because if you're in this process of democracy it will drive you crazy, but it's the only thing that's truly great. I want that spirit back. I want the Eleanor Roosevelt spirit back. I want to bring back the spirits of the people who have made this country great and listen to



them in the night like a spiritual growth, like a spiritual healing—hearing the best so we can pursue it. And I hope," Jack said, waving his hand around his ear as if drawing in these spirits toward him, "that the whole nation is listening to those voices one by one, by one, by one."

The sun had begun to set, draping Jack and the building behind him in shadows. I saw exhaustion on Shainee's and Jack's faces, and I felt it in my own. Jack helped us pack up our equipment, and we headed toward his house, leaving that view of the Supreme Court Building behind us as we turned the first corner.

We ended up continuing our conversation with Jack over dinner that night. A torrential rainstorm descended upon D.C. without warning. Soaked all the way through, our coats packed away deep in the car, we ducked into Jack's favorite Thai joint. Over lemongrass soup, we probed Jack, just out of our own personal curiosity, about his experiences in other countries. After dinner, he gave us Bruce Springsteen's contact number and wished us luck on our next interview with Chuck D.

Shainee drove and I rested my tired legs on the dashboard, lulled by the hypnotic rhythm of the windshield wipers. I thought about something Jack had said at lunch: that two out of every three people in the world still live under a government that tortures and kills its citizens.

A lot of people do extraordinary things to support decency, justice, and change—some give time, some give ideas, some write checks, and some set standards. To Jack, a poor kid from the coal mines, it seemed to be a simple fact that it is our job as human beings—no different than the responsibility of being a good parent or lawful citizen—to make this world more humane. Jack had said something to us while walking away from the Supreme Court, words that now rang in my head: "A poet wants to write the perfect poem. A singer wants the perfect song. I want the perfect world, and it ain't no different or more silly than the poet who thinks he can write the perfect poem. It *should* be the goal of the poet to do that or the musician to write the perfect song. It *should* be the goal of the human being to make it a perfect world."

Jack had reminded us of the necessity to continue to define and rearticulate the ideas and ideals set forth by our nation's founders more than two hundred years ago. I agreed with Jack that the minute we got comfortable and thought we'd "arrived" was the moment our "great run at what freedom can mean" would cease to exist.