We Can Replace Cynicism and Despair with Empowerment and Hope

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Problems in the world and in our nation

Let's face it. There are many serious problems at the global, national and local levels. We are suffering from simultaneous crises, including climate chaos, political corruption, nuclear weapons, terrorism, economic crash, creeping fascism, concentration of media ownership, violations of the Constitution, the ineffectiveness of the political process, etc., etc.

It is easy to feel powerless and despair caused by the powerful political and economic forces that overwhelm us with practically "shock-and-awe" kinds of ways. Furthermore, capitalistic-owned media fail to cover these abuses, and even when they do cover issues we care about, they do it with bias. No wonder so many Americans feel despair nowadays!

A dying empire needs to censor the truth in order to perpetuate the illusion that the empire is still alive and well. Therefore we should not be surprised that the Obama Administration has harassed journalists and whistleblowers worse than Nixon or other presidents in recent memory. He has prosecuted more journalists and whistleblowers under the 97-year-old Espionage Act than all previous presidents combined.

Election years can be especially frustrating for several reasons: (1) The US's electoral system is corrupted by rich individuals and corporations that buy politicians and dominate propaganda. (2) Two political parties have corrupted our system to share a "duopoly" of power and exclude alternative voices coming from the grassroots. (3) Mainstream news media are owned by giant corporations that also exclude alternative voices and bias their reporting to serve the status quo. (4) Campaign reporting focuses on "horserace" aspects and trivial irrelevancies, avoiding thoughtful discussion of serious issues. (5) Ordinary people get caught up in partisanship and silly election "news" and get distracted from working on substantive issues, so this decline in grassroots organizing hampers efforts to fix our nation's problems. (6) Preoccupation with elections downplays the important realities of real democracy percolating from the bottom up – from people organizing and acting at the grassroots – so the preoccupation with elections actually disempowers real democracy.

The remedy – especially in election seasons – is to ground ourselves in our core values and work vigorously and proactively on real issues. The rest of this article helps us do that.

How people feel about these problems

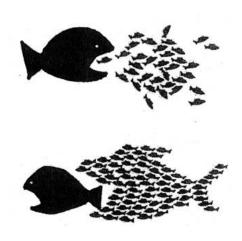
Each crisis alone is daunting, and together they are even worse. These crises seem overwhelming, overpowering us with forces beyond our control. Many Americans feel overwhelmed, powerless and depressed, so instead of responding with meaningful actions, they react with the fears and escapist illusions that many politicians and businesses provide. When we retreat into powerlessness and despair, this suits the powerful political and economic interests just fine, because it allows them to proceed without pushback from the public.

People in the progressive movement are not exempt from those debilitating feelings. Fear and despair can inhibit people from acting when our activism is needed most. Now is such a time because so many daunting threats come at us from all directions. The progressive movement and its various parts (peace, social justice, economic justice, democracy, etc.) all face stiff opposition and entrenched "powers and principalities" that are keeping us down. Many in the progressive movement feel despair. But many others feel determination to stand up for what's right. I have long believed that the progressive movement needs psychological and spiritual support more than just more facts.

I agree with whoever wrote, "Feelings of powerless, futility and despair are 'the elephant in the room' that prevent the broad population – and especially progressives – from making effective action to produce massive change." The overabundance of "ain'tit-awful" articles and fact-based resources can overwhelm us with what we already know and fear. Republicans and Shock Doctrine cynics manipulate us with fear. We need to get beyond that toward empowerment and constructive action.

In the 1980s nuclear weapons were rapidly escalating. People were traumatized by very real fears of nuclear war. Joanna Macy accomplished much with her "Despair and Empowerment" workshops and her book *Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age*. She helped people grapple effectively with problems and emerge with energy and hope for making progress. Now Joanna Macy offers new workshops based on her new approach, "The Work that Reconnects" (www.workthatreconnects.org). These can help us during this time of planetary emergency and the widespread feelings of overwhelm and despair. Perhaps we could benefit from an all-day session to experience some of her participatory exercises in a workshop like her recent one titled, "Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy"

Grassroots organizing is an excellent remedy



Almost all of the positive political and social changes that have occurred in the U.S. were achieved through grassroots organizing. It's not enough

through grassroots organizing. It's not enough for activists to merely accumulate more information and talk

among ourselves. In order to make political progress, we must interact strategically with the general public to move public opinion. "Grassroots organizing" means working locally through other people to make good things happen!

Instead of overwhelming people with more facts, which can make them feel even more powerless, let's expose the political and economic forces that cause feelings of powerlessness. But when we do this, let's be sensitive to their feelings, not overload them further, or else we'll push people away instead of healing and empowering them.

We can choose not to live by fear. We can act creatively and boldly. In the mid-1990s, Serb militias were firing into downtown Sarajevo, Bosnia, from the hills around the city, and the Bosnians were terrified. After one day's Serb shelling killed many people waiting for bread outside a bakery there, Vedran Smailovich, a skilled cellist, performed classical music outside on the street at that very same location, courageously empowering people to hear beautiful music and effectively countering fear. (I later heard him play the same piece at the Seattle Center.)



WE <u>DO</u> HAVE POWER – more power than we realize – and more power than the Establishment wants us to realize. Broad-based "people power" overthrew dictators in several nations, including Marcos in the Phil-

ippines **(SEE photo)**. The Berlin Wall came down and later the Soviet Union crumbled **NOT** by the US's huge military or nuclear weapons, but by people power. There are more of us than there are in the elite levels of politics, the economy and the military.

What if

- What if Thomas Jefferson is right, and the power really does reside with the people – and the power we temporarily granted to governments we can also take away?
- And what if Gandhi is right, and ordinary people can bring down a powerful empire by withdrawing our consent?
- And what if Martin Luther King is right, and "the arc of the moral universe" does indeed "bend toward justice"?
- And what if scholar Gene Sharp is right, and there are at least 198 methods of nonviolent resistance that have been used successfully throughout history against all sorts of tyrants and dictators, including Nazis and communists?

If these are true – and I believe they are – then

Now is the right time to learn how to organize nonviolent social change movements with long-term strategies, nonviolent resistance, and progressive alternatives to the status quo. For more information – and for resources and workshops on effective grassroots organizing – contact the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation at (360) 491-9093 info@olympiafor.org and visit the "Nonviolence" part of www.olympiafor.org.

We keep reacting against the bad things happening in political, social and economic realms, so we have gotten trapped in always playing defense. This wears us down and causes us to feel powerless. It would be more energizing – and strategically more effective for our grassroots movements – to act proactively! We would energize ourselves and attract new people if we were to set bold but achievable goals and plan strategies, campaigns and activities to help us achieve these goals. Instead of being perennially trapped in defensiveness, we would be boldly proactive, and we would generate new energy and vigor.

This is true, no matter which party runs Congress or lives in the White House. Deep down, the American people probably know in our guts that the problems are more fundamental than a mere change of political party can solve. Don't look to any level of government for leadership. I enjoy wearing a button that says, "When the people lead, eventually the leaders will follow." A powerful saying affirms, "We are the people we've been waiting for." The solution to our current mess is to create strong issue-based grassroots movements that organize proactively for the political and social changes that we really want!

Therefore – no matter which issue we're working on – in order for a political or social change movement to win, **the movement must:**

- (1) Make the issue so hot and compelling that our society, media, institutions, and "leaders" will have to deal with it.
- (2) Reach out to the general public, educate the public, and convince an increasingly larger majority of the public.
- (3) Mobilize this new majority into an effective force that brings about the necessary social or political change.

In order to win public opinion, the movement must reach out to the public from the **inside** – as Americans who are grounded in society's deeply held values, beliefs, traditions, and symbols. We must show that **our progressive movements uphold these true American values**, while the powerful forces promoting greed and militarism are violating them.



To attract new people to our progressive movements, we can **reach out in friendly, open ways to all sorts of people**. They will be attracted to a movement that welcomes them into working for a better world and other clearly positive goals. We can offer understanding and solidarity as we help the public see how peace and other progressive policies are really in their best interests.

We can devise fresh approaches to catch public attention and help people see the progressive movement in fresh ways. We can rewrite the old scripts of political action, replacing old worn-out stereotypes of activism (methods, messages, images, etc.), and engage people in creative new ways.

We'll make good progress by framing our message in ways that actually affirm society's best values and culture. A few years ago the City of Olympia tried to cram an unwanted convention center down our throats. The City's end-run around democracy violated our sense of local democracy and citizen control, so our local community rose up, rejected the City's leaders, and demanded the right to vote on the proposed conference center. The grassroots organization that challenged the City called itself "Public Funds for Public Purposes." What a winning concept! The grassroots movement challenged the establishment by invoking powerful democratic values of grassroots empowerment, public accountability, fiscal responsibility, and open government.

Creative strategies, tactics and actions catch people's attention and participation – and they are fun for us! Creative nonviolent strategies and actions can help us break out of lethargic frustration and move our issues ahead.

Strategies and methods for organizing grassroots movements

Small groups of people who know and trust each other can work together closely as "affinity groups" over a period of time. Each small group can figure out what to do, based on their interests, abilities, personalities and schedules, and flex from one issue or activity to another over a period of time, as it chooses.

When we seek to change public opinion, let's recognize that "the public" includes different constituencies and also different people who are at different points along the spectrum from strong opponent to strong supporter. Let's devise different strategies tailored to communicate with – and move – the people in each constituency and the people who are at each point along the spectrum. For example, let's devise specific ways to move people who oppose our position toward the middle "undecided" point on the spectrum, devise other specific ways to move undecided people

toward modest support, and devise other specific ways to move modest supporters to become strong active supporters.

Likewise, we might devise specific strategies to help people who are not even paying attention to the issue to start paying attention and informing themselves about it. And we would devise different strategies for mobilize the people who already know about the issue but have not chosen to start working on it.

If we are not changing what a debate is about, we will lose the debate. We must re-frame the issues and point to the real problems. Let's break corporate power's chokehold over our democracy – including the nationalist, capitalist and militaristic assumptions and top-down systems that inhibit changing to a peaceful, humane, democratic, and sustainable society.

Our grassroots organizing works best when it is nonviolent, positive and welcoming

Many ordinary people hate political squabbles (not only partisan squabbles, but also any kind of political conflict that gets polarized or negative). Many people do not like polarization, so they tend to settle for the *status quo* and reject anyone challenging it in a confrontational way. Very often it is we progressives who are challenging the *status quo*. So we must devise ways to propose profound changes without turning off the public.

Too often we complain about what we are AGAINST without proposing POSITIVE ALTERNATIVES that people will find it easier to connect with. Many people do not want to hear more bad

news, so our organizing and publicity should engage people in positive and welcoming ways – and support our proactive goals.

During 1982 – when President Reagan was recklessly escalating the nuclear arms race and the world was fearing imminent nuclear war – the Thurston County Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign organized a county-wide ballot issue that won a landslide victory in the November election. Instead of slamming people with frightening "doom-and-gloom" imagery, our slogan was friendly and positive: "Ain't it great to be alive!" We provided the necessary information in an appealing way, engaged ordinary

voters with a positive alternative, brought them into the movement, and achieved a landslide electoral victory.

Another effective strategy is this: Instead of blaming what we are against, state the new reality that we want to achieve, and do this with a present tense verb: (*e.g.*, "Olympia Is Free!" or "Olympia Declares Peace!")

Instead of repeating the same stereotypes (and methods, slogans, messages, images, etc.), let's devise fresh new ways that will reach out to people where they currently are, engage them, and invite them to participate from where they already are.

- How can we do this for people who do not yet see themselves as part of the peace movement?
- Why should ordinary families care about the climate crisis?
- How could we help ordinary employees support the movement for a \$15/hour minimum wage?

Glen Gersmehl, a savvy nonviolent strategist and peace organizer, offers suggestions for "How to Be a Bridge in a World Full of Walls." He suggests: **Breathe**: Take a breath. Find your center. **Listen First**: Genuinely and actively listen. **Inquire**: Ask questions. Seek the other person's truth, find their humanity. **Truth**: Speak your own truth with kindness. **Keep It Light**: Be easygoing. Pause. When appropriate, use humor.

Inspiring us to work for progress

People have an inherent need for their lives to have purpose and meaning – to make a unique contribution to the world's wellbeing. Each person can pay attention to his or her own values that provide a "calling" to make their world a better place.

People of conscience recognize that – as a society and as individuals – there is a vast gap between where we are and where we could be. We recognize our individual personal resources (intellectual, spiritual, moral, social, financial, skill-based, etc.) and look for ways to apply them to help heal the world. When we participate actively and practically in healing the world, we feel better about ourselves and generate energy to do even more good work.

Are we doomed, or is there hope? Really, it's all up for grabs. We decide about doom vs. hope by what we do or don't do. Everything we do makes a difference, but we might not notice the results right away. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Different people help in different ways. Some individuals would write to Congress but would never sit on the railroad tracks to block a train carrying nuclear weapons, while other individuals would sit on the tracks but never write to Congress. Yes to both!

In the 1980s when the Western Washington Fellowship of Reconciliation used to conduct annual workshops about resisting war taxes, Irwin Hogenauer, who had refused to pay war taxes since the 1940s, explained the usefulness of this nonviolent method because, "You never know which one of us will be the straw that breaks the IRS's back." (Also see the story about the snowflake on the branch at the bottom of the the right-hand column.)

Listen to the old Black Church's spiritual music that inspired the Civil Rights Movement. Their music contained strong inspiration of resistance and hope, and it affirmed divine support for the Movement. This spirit of bold confidence and hope was absolutely crucial for the Movement's success. If people had a "gloom-and-doom" attitude, they never would have achieved anything. Our success depends on our having self-confidence and real hope for accomplishing goals.

"Hope" is not really a matter of probability – a feeling of whether we have more than 50% likelihood that we will succeed. Rather, it's a matter of **possibility** – the fact that the future is uncertain and that even if we are underdogs with less than 50% likelihood of succeeding we can still act with determination, take strategically smart actions, and actually turn things around!

Farmworkers marched and chanted "Si Se Puede" (Yes, it can be done) with a strong vision of success. The song "We Shall Overcome" has been inspiring people for decades.

Many people have been inspired by the old story about the Weight of a Snowflake:

"Tell me the weight of a snowflake," a sparrow asked a wild

"Nothing more than nothing," was the answer.

"In that case I must tell a marvelous story," the sparrow said.

"I sat on a branch of a fir tree, close to its trunk, when it began to snow, not heavily, not a giant blizzard, no, just like in a dream, without any violence. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. When the next snowflake dropped onto the branch – nothing more than nothing, as you say – the branch broke off."

Having said that, the sparrow flew away. The dove thought about the story for a while and finally said to herself, "Perhaps there is only one voice lacking for peace to come in our world."

→ See relevant quotations on the final page.

Quotations to inspire our efforts

The need:

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept." ~ Angela Davis

"We grow up in a political culture that shows us only a VERY LIMITED range of choices. Most people choose from this VERY LIMITED range, so our political culture remains stuck. We can make progress only if we CREATE A MUCH WIDER RANGE of choices – and then using our best values and our best thinking to choose the wisest, most compassionate ones – and also ENCOURAGE AND EMPOWER OTHER PEOPLE to explore wider possibilities too." ~ Glen Anderson

"You could describe activism as having two primary strains: the attempt to change something problematic outside itself, and the attempt to build something better – though the two strains are irrevocably and necessarily intertangled."

~ Rebecca Solnit in her book Hope in the Dark, Page 87

YES, it is possible:

"There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come." ~ Victor Hugo

"We have the power in this room, if we mobilize it, to change the future course of America." ~ Martin Luther King speaking to about 35 people in a church basement

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear but the triumph over it. It always seems impossible until it is done." ~ Nelson Mandela

Hope:

"If you don't feel hopeful, you're not doing enough." ~ Josh Fox, creator, director and narrator of the film "Gasland"

Our struggle is long-term: "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

STRATEGY:

"If there is going to be real change, it will have to work its way from the bottom up, from the people themselves."

~ Howard Zinn

"In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu said most battles are decided before they begin by the choice of battlefield. The higher up the political strata you go, the more powerful corporations get and the weaker we get. The closer to the ground you push, the stronger citizens' movements are and the weaker corporations are." ~ Jim Shultz, Democracy Center, Bolivia

In light of the quotation above, Glen Anderson says if we are frustrated by lack of progress at the global or national level, let's work on a local aspect of a problem, where we are more likely to achieve some tangible result more quickly.

"We must organize more skillfully from the grassroots. Part of our strategy must be to change what the debate is about. If we are not changing the debate, we will lose the debate." ~ Glen Anderson

"Social movements must be based on widely held universal values. To place their social movement in the center of society... movement activists must consciously stand for and articulate the culture's fundamental values, such as justice, democracy, civil and human rights, security, and freedom."

~ Bill Moyer in his book *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*

"First they ignore you, then *they laugh at you*, then they fight you, then you win." ~ Mohandas K. ("Mahatma") Gandhi

Take action:

"Activism is my rent for living on this planet."

~ Author and poet Alice Walker

"Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." ~ Mohandas K. Gandhi

"Take one step out of your comfort zone." -~ lackie Hudson

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

~ Mohandas K. Gandhi

"Children are educated by what the grown-up is and not by his talk." \sim Carl Jung

In light of the quotation above, let's be aware that the personal character and actions of members of the peace and justice movement tell the general public more than the ideas we express verbally. Or – as Albert Schweitzer said, "Do something wonderful. People may imitate it."

Resources

- See the "Nonviolence" part of www.olympiafor.org for more resources on organizing and nonviolent action.
- For more information and for resources and workshops on effective grassroots organizing contact the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation at (360) 491-9093 info@olympiafor.org
- Feel free to contact me for a variety of books and other resources, free consultations for the issues and non-profit organizations you care about, and additional help. Glen Anderson (360) 491-9093 glenanderson@integra.net