

Transformation

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A Moral Imperative

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In the South we have an expression, "I've been studying on (something)," that means we have been dwelling on a subject. It doesn't mean we have gone to books to research it, but that we have taken it deep inside us where we have been "studying on it." For most of the fall of 1993 and the winter of 1994, I studied on the nature of good and evil. There was much on the news and in current events to lead me to this inward journey, but I think it was in particular my work against the rapid growth of the Right that moved me along.

During this time I began to think about what would happen if we played this out to its historical end, the Right's scapegoating and dehumanizing of people of color, Jews, women, lesbians and gay men, and poor people? These thoughts led me to remember the Trail of Tears, slavery, and the Japanese internment camps. I went to see "Schindler's List," a compelling vision of the Holocaust, and then read the book-length *New Yorker* account of the massacre at

El Mozote in El Salvador which occurred on our government's watch there. All of these atrocities were brought to us by the Right and supported in one way or another, sometimes actively, sometimes passively, by people who occupy the middle of the political spectrum.

It seems to me that what we know as societal (as opposed to individual) evil does not spring forth fullblown. Instead, it begins with a few people who share a desire to acquire power and wealth at the expense of the wellbeing and lives of other people. The growth of injustice does not occur in a vacuum; it grows as it is nourished and supported by increasing numbers of people, some of whom support it actively and others who support it with their silence. It is those who make up the middle ground of any society – neither the perpetrators nor the victims – who have to collude in some way for mass destruction to occur. Otherwise, it cannot gain momentum.

It is this group, those who are

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on the middle ground, those who might be moved to collusion with forces of destruction, who have come to occupy my thoughts. My political life is filled with questions. What, for example, is it in this current configuration of the Right that gives them so many successes, such broad appeal to those people in the middle? Is it because they offer authoritarian order, a set of rules to be enforced, and people turn to them in a search for meaning? I believe there is an appeal to people's bigotry and fear but also to their sense of isolation and alienation and desire for wholeness. In the United States, great numbers of people feel confused about cultural change, about violence and economics, and they are often dispirited, overwhelmed. Sunk into a commodity and consumer based culture, alienated within the workplace where corporations have tossed them around in the downsizing necessary to fill corporate greed, they feel increasingly objectified and alienated from themselves and one another.

Studying on good and evil did not lead me to think that some people are innately evil; instead, it brought me to consider how certain conditions create ripe possibilities for the growth of injustice. The just-

described conditions of alienation and disconnection are fertile ground for the development of a vision of personal and group power to be gained at the expense of other people who are not seen to be as human as oneself. When we do not feel the lives of other people – their joys, sorrows, struggles – are connected to our own, then we not only lose sympathy for them, we also can easily begin seeing them as a problem and a barrier to our own well-being. It is here where the potential for evil – the spiritual, emotional, mental or physical enslavement or destruction of others for one's own gain – begins.

At this time when there is virtually a national longing for meaning and connection, the Right offers an argument for the unification of people along religious, racial, gender and economic lines. Rewriting our social and political times, they say that white people are economically oppressed by people of color who are accused of not only taking their jobs and using up their tax money on welfare but creating violence in their communities; men are oppressed by women who accuse them of violence and sexual misconduct so that supposedly men's authority and sense of self are ruined; Christians are oppressed by the "secular humanists" they say will not allow them in the public square; heterosexuals who are

trying to maintain families are oppressed by lesbians and gay men they say are destroying not only the family but rules of public decency. They create villains. The Right has a clarion call on the public airwaves for people to unite and to disconnect as a group from those who are named as unacceptable, those who purportedly cause them harm. They offer connection along the barricades on the battleground for power. Dehumanization and scapegoating are major weapons of the Right in bringing people together in solidarity to establish a common enemy.

Meanwhile, we progressives are not doing such a great job offering another vision in which there is explicit meaning for life, a moral basis, and people are deeply connected. While once strong in this leadership, we have perhaps abdicated this role because we have grown confused and fearful about moral vision. We have sometimes confused morality with rigid sin-based religious beliefs and practices and consequently have shied away from discussions of moral principles because we did not want to be associated with religious bigots. Perhaps we did not distinguish very well between private religion and individual and public morality.

Our Moral Vision

For whatever reasons, we

have not always talked a great deal about the strong moral reasons underlying why we do this work of social justice: because we believe every person counts, has human dignity, and deserves respect, equality and justice. This morality is the basis for our vision, and when we do our best vision-based organizing (as opposed to response-based or expediency-based), all our work flows from this basic belief.

Ours is a noble history. Because we believe in the inclusion of everyone in the cause of justice and equality, we have struggled for civil rights for people of color, for women, for people with disabilities, and now for lesbians and gay men. We have worked to save the environment, to provide women autonomy and choice concerning our bodies, to end unjust wars, to end homelessness, hunger, and poverty, to create safe workplaces, decent wages and fair labor practices, to honor treaty rights, to eliminate AIDS and improve health care, to eliminate biased crime and violence against women and children. We share broad principles of inclusion, fairness, and justice. We must not forget what provides the fire for our work, what connects us in the struggle for freedom and equality.

I believe it is our moral imperative to make connections, to show how everyone is connected and belongs in

community, or as it is currently expressed, "We all came on different ships but we're in the same boat now." It is at our peril if we do work that increases alienation and robs meaning from life. Today's expressions of violence, hatred, and bigotry are directly related to the level of alienation and disconnection people feel. For our very survival, we must develop a sense of common humanity.

It may be that our most

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important political work is figuring out how to make the full human connection, how to engage our hearts as well as our minds, how to do organizing that transforms people as well as institutions. With these as goals, we need to re-think our strategies and tactics.

We have to think about our vision of change: are we involved in a struggle for power that requires amassing forces and resources on each side and having a confrontational show-

down in which only one side wins – a shootout? If we are in a shoot-out, then the progressive side has already lost, for certainly there are more resources on the Right at this moment. Or, in cases where we can organize the most resources, such as the 1992 No on 9 campaign in Oregon, what is the nature and permanency of the win? The anti-gay and lesbian constitutional amendment was defeated, but in general, people did not have a sense of ecstatic victory. I think there were two primary reasons: 1) the Right immediately announced its intentions to take the fight to local rural communities and to build a string of victories in areas where it had developed support – indicating that this is indeed a long struggle for the hearts and souls of Oregonians; and 2) the campaign did not facilitate the building of relationships, of communities, of progressive institutions. At the end, I believe people felt some kind of war atmosphere had been created but that the language and tactics of war had failed them. In the months that followed the election victory, people seemed fatigued, wary, often dispirited and in retreat. Rather than being transformed into new politics and re-relationships by their experience, they seemed battered by it.

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Transformational Organizing

There is something to be learned in places where victory feels like defeat. Somehow, people did not emerge from the Oregon experience with a sense of vitality, of wholeness, of connection. What is called into question for justice-seeking people is our methods of organizing. Often we have thought that effective organizing is simply being able to move people as a group, sometimes through manipulation, to act in a particular way to achieve a goal. Too often, the end has justified the means, and we have failed to follow Ghandi's belief that every step toward liberation must have liberation embedded within it. In concentrating on moving people to action, we have often failed to hear the voice of their spirit, their need for connection and wholeness – not for someday after the goal has been achieved but in the process of achieving it.

My concern is not that we should give up direct action, civil disobedience, issue campaigns, political education, confrontation, membership and voter drives, etc.: we need to do these things and much more. Instead, it is that we re-think the meaning of social change and learn how to do the long-term

work of transforming people as we work for social justice. Our social change has to be more than amassing resources and shifting power from the hands of one group to another; we have to work from a base of a true shift in consciousness, one that forges vision, goals, and strategies from belief, not just from expediency.

The definition of transformational politics is fairly simple: it is political work that changes the hearts and minds of people, supports personal and group growth in ways that create healthy, whole people, organizations, and communities, and is based on a vision of a society where people – across lines of race, gender, class and sexuality – are supported by institutions and communities to live their best lives.

Among many possibilities, I want to suggest one way to do transformational work: through building community based on our moral vision.

Building Community, Making Connections

Where do we build community? Should it be geographic, consisting of everyone who lives in the same neighborhood? Based on identity, such as one's racial identity, sexual identity? Or organizational or work identity? Where are the places that community happens?

It seems to me that com-

munity can be created in a vast number of places and ways. What is more important is the *how* of building community. To get to the how, we first have to define what community is. My friend Eric Rofes defines community as authentic connections between authentic people. I would expand that definition to say that community is people in any configuration (geographic, identity, etc.) bonded together through common interest and concern, through responsibility and accountability to one another, and at its best, through commitment, friendship and love.

To live in authentic community requires a deeper level of caring and interaction than many of us currently exhibit in our drive for individualism and single-focused self-fulfillment. That is, it calls for living with communal values. For example, the often quoted African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," speaks to the communal values of the importance of every child in the life of the community, present and future. Such values point to very different solutions than those currently suggested for the problems of youth alienation, crime, and violence. Rather than increasing police forces and building more jails, we would look for more ways for the community as a whole to be responsible for and accountable

to children. We would seek ways to support and nurture their lives. All of us would be teachers, parents and friends for every child.

Creating community requires seeing the whole, not just the parts, and understanding how they interrelate. However, the sticky part is learning how to honor the needs of the individual as well as those of the group, without denying the importance of neither. It requires ritual and celebration and collective ways to grieve and show anger; it requires a commitment to work through conflict.

Most of all, it requires authenticity in relationships between and among whole people. This means that each of us has to be able to bring all of who we are to the relationship, neighbor to neighbor, friend to friend, worker to worker. Bringing all of who we are to community requires working across great differences in culture, in lifestyle, in belief. It demands that we look beyond our own lives to understand the lives of others. It demands that we interact with the lives of others. It requires understanding the connections among people's lives and then seeking comprehensive solutions to multi-issued, multifaceted problems. If we allow only certain parts of people to surface and if we silence, reject or exclude basic pieces of their

essential selves, then we begin designing systems of oppression. Community becomes based on power and non-consensual authority: those who have the most power and privilege dictate the community norms and their enforcement.

One of the goals of every political activity we engage in should be moving beyond superficial interactions to building relationships and community. Much of this work

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is simple, not difficult or complex; it merely requires redefining our values and how we spend our political time. An example: far too often I go to meetings, frequently held in sterile hotel conference rooms, where introductions are limited to people giving their names or, at best, what work they do. Building relationships – whether those of neighbor, friend, lover,

work partner – requires that we ask who *are you?* In rural communities in the South and on American Indian reservations, people spend a lot of time talking about who their people are, how they are connected to people and place. Women activists in the housing projects in New Orleans get to know each other by telling their life lines, major events that shaped them along the way. Battered women throughout this country make community in shelters through telling their stories. Lesbians often get to know each other through telling their coming out stories – when and how they first experienced their lesbianism.

Building connection and relationship requires that we give it time, not just in meetings but in informal opportunities surrounding meetings, structured and unstructured. For instance, when I did popular education on oppression issues within the battered women's movement, there was always a dramatic difference in the relationships that were built when we stayed in retreat centers or self-contained places away from distracting outside activities rather than in hotels in cities. So much of what happened in people's growth and understanding came from living, sleeping, and eating together in an atmosphere that encouraged interaction.

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As a way to think about building community, we can ask ourselves these questions:

1) In what settings with other people have I felt most whole? What is it that makes me feel known and accepted as who I am?

2) What conditions make me most able to work well in partnership with other people? What makes me feel connected rather than alienated?

3) What are communal values? What are the practices that support them?

4) Where are the places where community is occurring? (For example, in care teams for people living with AIDS, in youth gangs, in certain churches or neighborhoods, in AA

groups?) What are the characteristics of these communities?

5) What are the qualities of an inclusive community as opposed to an exclusive community?

6) What makes a community democratic?

Our communities are where our moral values get expressed. It is here that we are called upon to share our connection to others, our interdependence, our deepest belief in what it means to be part of the human

condition where people's lives touch one another, for good or for bad. It is here where rhetoric of belief is forced into the reality of living. It is from this collection of people, holding within it smaller units called families, that we build and live democracy. Or, without care and nurturance, where we detach from one another and destroy our hope for survival.

(From a speech given at the Democracy Under Siege conference in Tacoma, Washington, April, 1994)

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