

Blessed Are the Organized

GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

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Walking in Our Sleep

ONE OF US KNOWS what the future holds, of course, and I have no predictions to offer on the fate of grassroots democracy. The great reforms of the past were accomplished against what then seemed to be great odds. If there are still great reforms to come and if ordinary citizens are going to compensate for the emergence of new classes of masters, these things will be accomplished in the teeth of what will often appear to be insurmountable opposition.

Of some things, however, we can be certain. To maintain a position of dominance, even the most powerful people in the world rely on the inaction of others and the resignation that lies beneath it. The powerful became powerful by organizing others to work for them and creating incentives for profitably cooperative activity. It appears to be against the interests of the rich and the lucky for everyone else to be similarly well organized. The rich and the lucky benefit from making large-scale democratic reform *appear* hopeless. Paradoxically, they also benefit from making large-scale change seem *easily* achievable, for example, by casting a vote every four years for a candidate who promises something called "change."

Our roles, relationships, institutions, laws, and policies are not so fixed that we could not change them if we decided to do so. Each person or faction might seem powerless to effect large-scale change when viewed separately, but such change has happened before, and when it has, the dependence of ruling elites on the deference of ordinary people has become plain.

Thoreau was trying to reveal the nature of this dependence to the readers of *Walden* in the following passage in which the railroad, the third major form of economic organization (after the plan-

tation and the mill) to impose domination on ordinary Americans, becomes a metaphor for American society itself:

Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts "All aboard!" when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over, — and it will be called, and will be, "A melancholy accident."

Thoreau returns to the metaphor some pages later, where a pun on the term "sleeper" becomes the occasion for a meditation on the need to be awakened from the slumber of false consciousness:

We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man . . . The rails are laid down on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.¹⁴⁰

The sleepers are those on whose backs the economy runs. It is their being asleep and remaining prone that permits the economy to take this form. If the sleepers rise one by one, they will immediately be struck down, either by the trains or by the gangs of men whose job it is to keep sleepers prone. To rise in this way is to be a

sleepwalker, to be less than fully aware of the extent to which the whole system depends on sleepers remaining in the prone position.

Thoreau is suggesting that there is ground for social hope in the nature of the dependence. The system would have to change if the sleepers woke up and rose up together. The uprising can effect change only if it is organized, coordinated, and self-aware. And the uprising can be beneficial to the ones rising up only if the ideal of inclusive nondomination is actualized in it. What would this mean, concretely? Ultimately, it would mean changing some features of the legal infrastructure that permitted the mills and the railroad, and the large corporate hierarchies that followed them, to dominate the people they employ and purport to serve. The sleepers will ultimately need to decide, and will decide if they ever stop walking in their sleep, whether the limited liability, relatively unregulated megacorporation is compatible with democracy.¹⁴¹ This is the same thing as deciding whether the upright posture of citizenship is compatible with accepting the prone position of a sleeper in the economy.

In 2004 I traveled to Knoxville, Tennessee, to give a lecture on the worrisome condition of American politics. My claim was that the current crisis of democracy is grave enough that concerted action on the part of many citizens would be required to overcome it. I was trying to awaken Thoreau's sleepers. Toward the end of the question-and-answer period, I called on a young man who identified himself as a freshman at the University of Tennessee. He found my diagnosis of democracy's ills persuasive, he said. But my prescription for those ills seemed both doomed to fail and unhelpfully vague. If I was right about the severity of the situation, how could ordinary citizens possibly revive the patient? And what, exactly, did I expect them to do?

The seriousness with which the student posed his questions impressed me. He was neither expressing cynicism nor trying to score points. He wanted a concrete, honest, informative answer. I rec-

ommended that he try to organize people who felt as alienated from the system as he did. It is hard to have an impact entirely on your own, but easier when you join forces with others.

This was Thoreau's point about what happens to people who are walking in their sleep instead of organizing one another to stand up. Ordinary citizens have brought about large-scale change before, and they can do so again. Each time they have done so, they have created organizations, infused them with ideals, and generated power. Thoreau was thinking of abolitionism in its post-1830 phase, and hoping that a form of economic domination less obvious than chattel slavery could be added to the list of things slated for change. Megacorporations are now all the more worrisome, and global in their reach. It is harder than ever to evade the sphere in which they dominate. There is, nonetheless, a tradition of democratic reform with which I can identify that is somewhat distinguishable from the relationships of domination I would like to transform. It is the tradition that Thoreau and other members of his generation were still in the process of founding when he published *Walden* in 1854.

My advice to the student from Tennessee was meant to be encouraging, but it was too abstract to do any good. I had not explained how people currently addicted to fast "food" and "reality" television might actually take back the country from the plutocrats, militarists, and culture warriors now dominating our politics. The truth is that I had only a vague idea, drawn from memories of the civil rights and antiwar movements I had participated in as a teenager and from sporadic involvement as an adult in the politics of my own community. I was not myself rooted in an extended social network capable of generating dependable leadership or fostering significant change. So my advice to the student from Tennessee was hollow.

Before long I was back on the road, traveling to many locations in the United States and to two provinces in Canada, lecturing on

the dangers facing democracy and listening to people expressing their hopes and concerns. Between trips, back at my desk, I tried to pull my thoughts together in the form of a book. But my message, like that of my Knoxville lecture, was too abstract to serve my purposes. Everywhere I went, people told me that they were deeply worried about the future of democracy. They felt alienated from both the electoral process and the culture wars, and were groping about for plain language in which to express their discontent. They were relieved to hear all of this being talked about in public and were buoyed, as I was, by the realization that many people feel the same way. Barack Obama must have been having the same sort of experience with his audiences at roughly the same time.

At nearly every stop I made, someone asked me more or less the same questions that had been posed to me by the student from Tennessee. They were all asking why they should have hope and what a better way of conducting our political affairs might look like in concrete terms. To answer these questions, I knew that I would need to look closely at examples of democratic practice. The abolitionist movement in which Thoreau participated is a good example, but an old one. I discovered that young people who came to hear me had trouble identifying even with the civil rights movement. To address their doubts, I would need to offer them examples of *temporary* democratic practice that might conceivably be a basis for addressing the issue of stratification that Thoreau had tried to highlight, more than a century and a half ago, in the passage on sleepers.

The present book is essentially my considered response to the student from Tennessee and to thousands of people like him, young and old, who want to know how the spirit of democracy might be actualized *concretely* under our circumstances, but who either suspect that the endeavor is now hopeless or expect the ills of democracy to be cured by putting a charismatic reformer in the White House.

Hope is not the same thing as thinking that what one ardently desires is *likely* to happen. It is the virtue one needs when grim facts might tempt one to give up on promoting or protecting important goods. In this case the goods are liberty and justice, and the temptation is to assume that they are now essentially out of reach. The temptation, in short, is despair. Democratic hope is a virtue that needs grounds, but not grounds capable of demonstrating that the goods in question will in fact be achieved, or are likely to be achieved, if we behave in a certain way. They are grounds for thinking that we have a chance of making a significant difference for the better.

When despair is the disease one hopes to remedy, anecdotes can be antidotes. That is why this book is full of stories and has such a high ratio of quotation to commentary. The ideals of grassroots democracy are embodied in a particular pattern of coordinated action, which the stories display. To understand grassroots democracy one needs to experience something like the face-to-face interactions in which its spirit takes shape and acquires organizational and evaluative substance. The stories I have been recounting and reflecting on are, I believe, enough like those interactions to make a reader experience the emotional component of the hope that the tellers of the stories embody in person. But the student from Tennessee wasn't merely looking for an infusion of hopeful passion. He also wanted a determinate idea of what to do, of what it is to collaborate with others democratically.

The various examples discussed in this book include highly successful campaigns, such as the fight over the colonias. The concrete evidence they provide that success is possible is another ground for hope. But while success stories are necessary for purposes of self-instruction, they are not sufficient. The stories about power failure, as in the cases of Arizona and southern California, when complacency set in among the organizers, help put democratic excellence in relief. The concept of excellent democratic

practice comes into clearer focus when we determine, case by case, how to distinguish successes from near misses and complete failures.

We discover how to behave democratically by participating, by observing others participate, and by taking in the stories of people who have participated. The stories would be less instructive if they focused on famous people. Larger-than-life heroes tend to dwarf the rest of us. The stories of Lincoln and King are debilitating when they lead us to think that our task is to wait for the emergence of the next heroic figure and then donate a little money or spare time to the cause. At least some of the stories we contemplate need to be about people more like ourselves, behaving reasonably well.¹⁴²

Needless to say, we are not all in the same situation. For readers who find themselves in communities already in the process of getting organized, this book offers various concrete models of involvement and perhaps some incentive for being receptive to the organizing effort. In the examples you now have before you, you should be able to find sufficient evidence of the value of organizational activity to justify taking the plunge. It is important to recognize that the local institutions discussed in this book fall at many points along a wide economic spectrum, from Maywood to Marin. An extremely poor parish can benefit greatly from getting involved, but so can a relatively wealthy congregation that senses the need to overcome the limitations of lifestyle liberalism. For institutions on the wealthier end of the spectrum, the broad-based citizens' organization is an alternative to paternalistic "good works." Solidarity with the poor is an institutional matter, not a matter of charitable giving or sentiments. The first step is the kind of internal organizational activity I have described in detail. Congregation Kol Shofar benefited as much from that as St. Rose of Lima did.

Readers who find themselves in communities not yet in the process of getting organized might feel somewhat disadvantaged, compared to most of the people described in these chapters. In fact,

however, a reader disadvantaged in this way is in roughly the same situation Sister Christine Stephens was in when she served on the planning group that brought Ernie Cortés to San Antonio in the 1970s. Christine saw her situation as an opportunity. Looking back, she takes pride in having been "present at the creation" of COPS. Anyone reading about her work has advantages she lacked, including her example to emulate and the now rapidly developing networks of successful citizens' organizations that can be found here and there around the United States and in various other countries.

There is a way to begin. Do a preliminary power analysis. Talk to one institutional official in your community. Then talk to another. Search out potential leaders. Begin cultivating their skills and virtues, as well as your own. Keep talking until you can form a planning group. And reach out to professional organizers for help. This is what some of us are now doing in my own county in central New Jersey. How much we can accomplish remains to be seen.

It should now be clear why I have put this book together as I have, but my hard-won lesson about the value of examples also has curricular implications. An organizer in New Orleans complains about how democracy was treated in the university he attended. Pastors in Los Angeles County remark on the superiority of their IAF training to anything they learned in seminary. A principal in South Central says much the same thing about his college experience. It seems to me that the misgivings are justified. Most of our institutions of higher education do a poor job of conveying a concrete sense of what praiseworthy involvement in the public life of a community looks like, whether on the part of an individual citizen, a civic association, or a religious institution.

The examples taken up in this book do not show that democracy is in good health overall. Disaster capitalism in New Orleans, the condition of resident aliens in Maywood, and the ethnic strife of South Central L.A. are evidence that momentous forces are at work, reshaping the landscape within which concerned citizens are

struggling to get a foothold. It is indeed possible that the most powerful people in the world already have the means to exercise their power arbitrarily over us for the foreseeable future. It is also possible, however, that ordinary people have a fighting chance of winning some significant victories for liberty and justice.

In this book I have simply tried to get some of our most promising practices and the forces currently arrayed against them into the same picture, one in which both grounds for hope and a realistic sense of the situation's gravity can be found. The picture should at least help us guard against resting our hopes in famous, powerful leaders. This is the world we have.

Are the practices I have described here literally the best that contemporary democracy has to offer? I don't know enough to claim that, but in any event it will take many kinds of groupings and forms of conduct to serve our needs as citizens. My purpose is not to argue that broad-based organizing should *replace* such activities as Internet fundraising, single-issue movements, or organizing for specific purposes along lines of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, vocation, or religious affiliation. To the contrary, I assume that, until proven otherwise in a given case, each of these things exists because it serves a real need.

I do want to claim, however, that the imbalance of power between ruling elites and ordinary citizens is the principal cause of democracy's current ills and that it can be set straight only if broad-based organizing is scaled up significantly, only if it extends its reach much more widely throughout American society than it has to date. We have seen that this will take patience, as well as effort, assuming that it can be done. Moreover, the danger of oligarchy within the emerging networks of citizens' groups is as real as the danger of settling for the excessively loose connections most citizens have now.

Scaling up the activities of broad-based organizing does ask a great deal of the citizenry, and there is no guarantee that it will suc-

ceed. All that can be said on the basis of available evidence is that there are promising signs of democratic life all around us, if we take care to look for them. The Southwest IAF network is only one of them. Its power continues to grow, and its effects have on several occasions reached the statewide and regional levels. Thus far, I see no signs that Cortés and his associates have succumbed to the internal temptations of oligarchy. The work of Metro IAF—which encompasses organizations in Chicago, New York, Boston, and London, among other places—strikes me as similarly encouraging. Whether such developments can be extended further without either losing power or being corrupted by oligarchy remains to be seen. The examples of broad-based organizing considered here are both of paramount importance and inherently limited in predictive value.

The imbalance of power between ordinary citizens and the new ruling class has, in my view, reached crisis proportions. The crisis will not be resolved happily *unless* many more institutions and communities commit themselves to getting democratically organized and *unless* effective publics of accountability are constructed at many levels of social complexity. Of this I have no doubt. Whether these conditions will be fulfilled is very doubtful indeed, in roughly the way that all collaborative undertakings of great social import are doubtful. It is impossible to know whether enough people will join forces to make a big difference. A question for each individual to answer is what he or she might do that would make some difference. For citizens in professions with a direct bearing on the health of democratic culture, this question acquires a distinctive meaning.

Consider the case of intellectuals. Citizens' organizations are short on expertise and information. In their capacity as "public universities," they need volunteer faculties and access to facts. An intellectual can contribute to grassroots democracy by sharing factual knowledge with people disposed to make democratic use of it,

but also by clarifying and illustrating what domination and democracy are. Political concepts that have been turned to antidemocratic ends require rectification. New concepts await invention for the naming of new configurations of power and authority. The struggle for liberty and justice would benefit if the ideals implicit in it were made explicit and subjected to critical scrutiny. There is a need, too, for examples that crystallize domination and democracy, as they now exist, in concrete images. The democratic imagination wants replenishment on a daily basis.

The press can foster the growth of grassroots democracy not only by reporting facts relevant to domination and to its overcoming, but also by portraying ordinary citizens as empowered agents. One reason for having a free press is to help citizens gather, inform themselves, and give voice to their concerns. Inquiring minds ought to know that grassroots organizations exist and occasionally succeed. A press that earns its freedom serves democratic ends by democratic means.

Clergy are often said to have no role in politics. We have seen, however, that grassroots democracy would be a paltry thing, especially among the poor, if clergy did not lend a hand to organizers. Neither prophetic critique nor charitable assistance, by itself, alters the basic relationship of the dominant to the dominated. Organizing of the right kind, however, can make ordinary people less vulnerable to domination. It can also pump new life into the religious communities that engage in it.

There is a role for charismatic orators to play in reviving democratic culture, as well. The scaling-up process has need of leaders with rhetorical gifts to speak on behalf of people who have done the hard work of face-to-face organizing. Many kinds of gift can be turned to democratic purposes. When organizers search for potential leaders, they are looking for people with gifts—with charisms—to be cultivated or perfected. Some of those gifts are rhetorical, the trust-generating gifts of public persuasion.

The grassroots critique of charisma, in the restricted sense of the term, expresses a justified worry about excessive reliance on a particular kind of gifted individual. The reliance need not be excessive, however, if the gifts are cultivated properly and the audience is encouraged to keep its senses. Let everyone make their gifts manifest. But let them also be mindful of the need to empower others when speaking for others or to them. Genuinely democratic oratory is an exercise in empowerment. It fosters self-reliance, as well as solidarity, in its audience and holds itself accountable to the people being spoken for.

Despite the hopeful signs I have noted, much remains to be done and many important roles in the struggle go unfilled. Too many citizens complain about injustice, violence, and corruption without ever getting around to doing anything that makes much of a difference. Their ideals are neither precisely articulated, nor transformed into effective practical power. Their concern remains inert,¹⁴³ goes fugitive, or else recoils from the whole mess and transmutes into antidemocratic or postdemocratic despair.

While demonstrators create a little mayhem, the G8 summit carries on with its business unperturbed. Radical social critics preach to the choir, while the choir says Amen, but the ritual exchange of sentiment serves only to persuade the participants that their own dispositions are righteous. Meantime, centrist politics masquerades as grassroots democracy. The only things that move easily from the bottom up in the current political-economic system are wealth and deference. Mainstream candidates offer something indeterminate to hope for and an equally indeterminate way of bringing change about. The presidential rhetoric of change puts the idealistic cart before the organizational horse, and then neglects to feed the horse.

When we expect liberty and justice to appear miraculously, like fast food, without more rigorous forms of participation, definition, and sacrifice, we are like farmers who curse the dirt and pray for

rain, but "want crops without plowing the ground."¹⁴⁴ Yet some people are already plowing.

I see always the under side turning,
fumes that injure the tender landscape.
From which up break
Iliac blossoms of courage in daily act
striving to meet a natural measure.¹⁴⁵

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