

OPPOSING & CREATING

The twin tasks of a movement

by Sam Smith

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One Of the problems with times as terrible as these is that we forget our dreams. Or even how to dream. It is, after all, dreams that give America its grace -- not its perfection but its possibility. As Herman Melville said, "The past is the textbook of tyrants. The future is the Bible of the free."

The capacity to imagine and to dream is the last refuge of the free human. Aldous Huxley, who took a particular interest in this matter, wrote once that "man's greatest strength is his capacity for irrelevance. In the midst of pestilences, wars and famines, he builds cathedrals; and a slave, he can think the irrelevant and unsuitable thought of a free man." And so must we.

We are, at the moment, wrapped in emotions variously described as 'anti-war' or 'anti-Bush.' These are sound emotions upon which any lasting sanity must be built. The marches have shown the extraordinary degree to which these emotions are shared -- from Kuala Lumpur to the Shetland islands. Although the names and circumstances inspiring these emotions are specific, the demonstrations also represent a manifestation of a still largely unappreciated truth -- that the greatest political struggle in the world today is between the peoples of the earth and their governments.

At every level -- government, business, church, media -- those who claim the legitimacy of leadership have dramatically betrayed the led out of greed, incompetence and indifference. In our own country we can get some sense of this by ticking off the wrongs: the corruption of both major parties; the rapaciousness of, and ecological rape by, corporations; the refusal of politicians, judges, and media to protect our constitution and its freedoms; the misdeeds of accountants and lawyers; the negligent obsequiousness of journalists; the protected perversions in the Catholic Church. A generation of those blessed with power -- in government, business, the law, the church, and the media -- have committed treason against the trust we placed in them, and have recklessly endangered the most vulnerable amongst us -- from the poor to the planet itself.

The marches were about far more than Iraq and Bush, just as the Boston Tea Party was about far more than tea. They were about, among other things, learning the first steps, sounds, and style of a transformation that could be applied not merely to the present circumstances but to our whole condition.

To get there, however, means moving beyond an administration and a war. It also means moving beyond just saying no with out feet. It means taking full responsibility for the struggling infant of global transformation that has been left on our doorstep.

There is in a peace movement, as with all such forces, a tradition and a bureaucracy that rises with the cause, a certain way of doing things and certain people you check with first. This led during the Vietnam years to many marches but huge ignored potential. For example, according to the Radio Advertising Bureau, "Americans average about three hours of radio listening per day. Two out of three Americans are listening to the radio during prime time and radio is the first morning news source for most people." Because radio is so taken for granted, the skill and potential involved in using it well is often discounted. Tony Schwartz, a guru in guerrilla media circles, has pointed out that the protest movements of the 60s would have been far more successful if they had put more of their money into radio and less into marches and demonstrations . . .

Then there are the quiet, unnoticed forces. The media may want you to believe that Ramsey Clark and ANSWER run the peace movement, an assertion lodged somewhere between ignorance and agitprop, but the truth is that movements are moved by the unknown, people who may be influenced by a few but still, in the quiet of their own souls and without mike or camera, make the choice to believe and to act. Where one finds the anonymous momentum of change varies from time to time and cause to cause, but two good places to look is among the young and in the pews. The greatly underrated civil rights leader Julius Hobson used to say that he could start a revolution with six people and a telephone booth. A more modest claim would be: give us the young and the church-goers and you can have the Pentagon and the Council on Foreign Relations. More modest but empirically true -- perhaps because the former have not yet learned to deceive themselves and the latter have spent their lives seeking release from the deceptions forced upon them.

There are, of course, other forces, such as those lonely, unorganized souls in the arts. As Virginia Woolf wrote, "Over the obscure man is poured the merciful suffusion of darkness. . . He may seek the truth and speak it; he alone is free; he alone is truthful; he alone is at peace." When the history of the present rebellion is written, the wise scholar will spend much time examining the graphics -- from internet animations to women making a peace sign with their nude bodies -- that helped to cause an unprecedented uprising against a war that had not yet even begun.

There are other forces not yet underway. For example, from the American civil rights movement to the anti-apartheid struggle the moral was given pecuniary value through economic boycotts. Great potential rests in such actions as with the ultimate economic boycott by labor against its use by others -- that is to say, walkouts, sit-downs, slow-downs -- as are being proposed in Britain should the war commence in earnest.

We also need multiple symbols of individual rebellion such as 'war free zone' signs for home windows and 'war free zone' resolutions by city councils. And we need a multitude of voices putting aside war not just as a weapon of mass destruction against Iraq but as an acceptable tool of diplomacy. It is, in fact, the sound of these arguments against war -- moving the issue from extraordinary pacifism to ordinary consensus -- that has already helped to make the current protests extraordinary.

But all this will not be enough unless we simultaneously declare our commitment to a major transformation, to describe our dreams, to celebrate our hope, and to define a future that makes the present course of the American elite seem what it is: corrupt, cruel, dangerous, narcissistic, and selfish.

This means coming together not just to manifest our united opposition but to discover our common purpose. It means a different language, a different standard of political tolerance, different dichotomies, and a willingness to sit down with those who may share little but a parallel sense of decency. In short, we need to open the Bible of the future even while battling the tyranny of the past.

This was what I was reaching for in my book, "*Why Bother?*" which I wrote some time before September 11 and its aftermath:

"Yet, in a perverse way, our predicament makes life simpler. We have clearly lost what we have lost. We can give up our futile efforts to preserve the illusion and turn our energies instead to the construction of a new time.

"It is this willingness to walk away from the seductive power of the present that first divides the mere reformer from the rebel -- the courage to emigrate from one's own ways in order to meet the future not as an entitlement but as a frontier.

"How one does this can vary markedly, but one of the bad habits we have acquired from the bullies who now run the place is undue reliance on traditional political, legal and rhetorical tools. Politically active Americans have been taught that even at the risk of losing our planet and our democracy, we must go about it all in a rational manner, never raising our voice, never doing the unlikely or trying the improbable, let alone screaming for help.

"We have lost much of what was gained in the 1960s and 1970s because we traded in our passion, our energy, our magic and our music for the rational, technocratic and media ways of our leaders. We will not overcome the current crisis solely with political logic. We need living rooms like those in which women once discovered they were not alone. The freedom schools of SNCC. The politics of the folk guitar. The plays of Vaclav Havel. The pain of James Baldwin. The laughter of Abbie Hoffman. The strategy of Gandhi and King. Unexpected gatherings and unpredicted coalitions. People coming together because they disagree on every subject save one: the need to preserve the human. Savage satire and gentle poetry. Boisterous revival and silent meditation. Grand assemblies and simple suppers.

"Above all, we must understand that in leaving the toxic ways of the present we are healing ourselves, our places, and our planet. We rebel not as a last act of desperation but as a first act of creation."

-- *SAM SMITH*

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