**Reflections from an Elder Activist**

*“How can I keep from singing?”\**

There is much talk these days about the three branches of government and how, hopefully, they check and balance each other. At the same time, what is happening is oddly familiar: our whole national narrative has been turned into a reality TV soap opera, with crises and conflicts occurring on a daily basis. The courtroom battles which have developed from that script are reminiscent of the many legal dramas we’ve watched for entertainment. And the legislative branch reeks with the corruption, opportunism, and cowardice we’ve come to expect in films and television shows about politicians. And it all feels out of control of citizens who are meant to be reduced to spectators.

There are exceptions, of course, in each realm: those brave souls leaking information from the White House to the “opposition party” of gutsy reporters trying their best to tell the truth; courageous congress folks like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren willing to speak up even when being shut up; and the stubborn state judges who dare to challenge the President’s executive orders.

But what’s really impressive are two other essentials of governance not acknowledged in that tri-part system: the Movement of Movements and Plans of the People. The M+ emerged with the Women’s Marches around the country in opposition to the Trump ascendency with its misogyny, bigotry, lies and threats, and continued with the widespread opposition to his executive order on immigration and refugees--as expressed through marches, vigils, and increased aid to refugees here and abroad. In my years of activism (from civil rights marches through anti-war protests to women’s liberation actions to gay rights demonstrations to environmental protests to Occupy events), I have never seen so many people of all ages, genders and backgrounds gathered together in peaceful protest as I have in the past month. This is so heartening, restoring my faith in the courage and generosity of my compatriots. Such movement in common depends on initiators and participants willing to connect with diverse others from different directions: Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, environmental groups, educational reformers, migrant workers, health access activists, faith communities, labor unions, to name a few.

If we consider that these five dimensions of democratic governance are like the parts of a collective hand, then I imagine the M+ to be the thumb, the P+ to be the pointer, the middle finger to be the legislature, the ring finger as the judicial branch, while the small finger stands for the president & company. The M+, with its flexibility and inclusivity, can touch all the fingers, while the first finger, the P+. helps point the way for the whole to move forward.

While the M+ enable a diversity of movements to flow together through action, whether in protest or in advocacy, the P+ help us chart our collective future, not just in opposition to what is currently happening but looking further along, toward progress for the whole country. Although it can be both addictive and dispiriting to follow the ups and downs, ins and outs, wins and losses within the established political system, we do need to keep one collective eye on what the digits of our government are up to, and fortunately the progressive press, having been denounced by the executive branch, is scrambling to keep us informed.

But our other eye needs to focus on our collective future, particularly the fate of our planet at this turning point of environmental threat during a national crisis generated by the dominance of the 1% --and their pretense that corporations are people—whose policies and practices have guaranteed too many Americans such unequal status with such failed dreams that, in addition to those turned off by D.C. gridlock, too many have fallen prey to the false promises made by the two myopic, self-serving men now running the White House. I believe it’s time to dig up those multiple seeds of vision nourished during previous movements and plant them all together in common ground, a potential garden of diverse identities, needs, and gifts.

Although the good advice of veteran activist Todd Gitlin that the left should use Tea Party strategies of disruption and distraction is an important guideline for pressuring or joining the legislative branch, depending ultimately on electoral politics will not be enough to turn things around, although still an important step forward. Certainly, training in non-violent resistance, as well as civil disobedience, is essential for the success of the M+. Every successful protest movement of this modern era, from Gandhi’s to King’s and beyond, has been heroically non-violent. No matter how principled or courageous combat might seem, violence cripples the progress of any movement. So the M+ moves us forward as a whole while the P+ provides the road map for our collective future. *“Without vision the people perish.”* To progress we need a shared imagination of where we are heading together and a willingness to include dimensions or foci which we personally may not care that much about, with tolerance for tactics we may not be good at or even approve. Without such shared tolerance we face the splintering and fragmentation that has crippled so many past movements.

The question then arises for each of us how we want to contribute to the M+ and the P+. If any one of us tries to do it all, we’ll soon burn out. One of the great things about a grassroots movement is how it can open up opportunities for us to try doing something our regular life does not allow for, to discover hidden talents, and to interact with people we would not ordinarily meet or get to know. Some of us will be more drawn to organizing and action (the M+) and some more drawn to problem-solving and visioning (the P+). And in between there are all sorts of needs to be addressed and skills to share, or develop, like leading songs, making speeches, cooking food, telling jokes, reflecting together, connecting people. As we’re often reminded, it takes a village.

We need also to assess our own limits in terms of risk. I, for instance, am not keen to be arrested, but I have few qualms about civil disobedience—a position which allows a narrow window for action and calls for teamwork. I believe, for instance, that, given the threats to vital organs of the federal government, a tax revolt is called for. Since I trust my own state (Vermont), the solution for me would be to shift my federal taxes to the state, but that’s not something I could do alone so I must start organizing with others who might agree with such a strategy. (And to balanced such a shift, together with the wider movement, we need to address the issue of basic rights on a national level so they are not left to the whims of states rights.) The mantra, “Don’t Mourn: Organize” remains true.

Along with assessing our own individual desires, strengths, needs, and resources, movement work can allow a fluidity of choices about how to participate, how much to participate and where to put our unique but limited resources and talents. One of the joys of communal work is the relief of not having to do it all and both the responsibility and the excitement of doing what we can do without the constraints we experience elsewhere (like some traditional jobs, for instance). Another joy is that our activism can be experienced within the context of a supportive, challenging and curious community. It’s a freer zone. And it can be a very generous one, when there are common goals, trustworthy companions, shared leadership, and collective discoveries. It can feel like turning a square into a circle.

I’ve found, as I’ve aged, that my appreciation for the contributions of others is enhanced—and realize what I have to give now is different than it used to be. I suppose that’s why I’m writing this. I realize my own life has been transformed or challenged in some root way by every movement I participated in, even from the fringes of some. I’m feeling that potential for us now. I’m guessing we can each assess our own growth areas and challenge ourselves to reach in chosen directions toward the well-being of others. Let’s not just speak truth to power but also speak truth powerfully. Where there is a need for healing, let us share medicine. Where there is a need for learning, let us discover truth together. Where there are problems, let us compare strategies. Where there is a need for vision, let us imagine, experiment, and make connections.

*\*”When tyrants tremble in their fear, and hear their death knell ringing,*

*When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?”*

*Wherever there is community dialogue related to the M+ and the P+, lets share our reflections, insights, visions, feelings, dreams, lessons for U.S.*