
CITIZENSHIP AND ACTION: What's at Stake?

Inter Pares Occasional Papers Series

Inter Pares is a Canadian organization dedicated to promoting international social justice. In Canada and overseas we work to build understanding about the causes and effects of poverty and injustice, and the need for social change. We support communities in developing countries to create healthy, safe and secure futures. We support people's struggles for self-determination and their efforts to challenge structural obstacles to change and their alternative development approaches.

Citizenship and Action: What's at Stake?

by Brian K. Murphy

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*Before considering the question that is seemingly always the most immediate one and the only urgent one, 'What shall we do?', we ponder this: 'How must we think?'*¹

Martin Heidegger

Let me tell you about an event recently where I sat in the audience like you all today, and about the lessons I learned. Last February on a cold winter evening I went along to the National Library in Ottawa to attend the annual Mandela lecture, marking Nelson Mandela's walk to freedom on February 11, 1990. This event was part of Black History week, and was organized by a great team of volunteers – a multi-ethnic team, I might add – led by the woman they call “volunteer-in-chief”, a solid and passionate black woman named June Girvan.

Now, June so deeply believes in social solidarity, civic responsibility and communal values that she almost seems old-fashioned: she wears these values on her sleeve and acts them in her life, as though all right-minded persons would share these values. The fact that these values seem out-dated in our commodified and individualized world does not make June Girvan old-fashioned, however. It makes her a radical. Because if June were successful in generating the values she promotes, society would be transformed. Now of course, while I do not know her well, I do know that June is not naïve, and she does not think this will happen tomorrow or even in her lifetime. Still, she wills it, and lives it and works for it anyway.

I think June Girvan can be the model for today: not famous, working in her own sphere, efficient and effective, building community, gettin' on with gettin' on.

June and her friends have created an organization called *J'nikira Dinquinesh*. June explained that *J'nikira* signifies that the world is one, but in oneness there is diversity and it is from this diversity that comes life and wholeness. The diverse world is one.

Dinquinesh, we were told, means “you are all wonderful and splendid!”

J'nikira Dinquinesh works to promote and affirm the idea that we are all “of one human family”. In the words of its mission: “We collaborate with others to admire and celebrate the wonder and splendour of our glorious human diversity.”

So I greet you all today, as June greeted us last February 12: *J'nikira Dinquinesh!* The diverse world is one: you are wonderful and splendid! And I offer June Girvan as an inspiration.

There are many here today that can give similar inspirations, old friends and new.

The Question: What's at Stake? Where is the Urgency?

The question posed by the organizers of this day, and for the week is “What's at stake in social change activism?” “What is the urgency?” And, “What is possible?”

This question came out of intensive planning meetings as far back as last October when the Institute team grappled with the challenge of revitalizing the Summer Program. After ten incredibly successful years, they wanted to scrutinize and revitalize, to build on what had been achieved and to remain relevant. Most importantly, they wanted to ensure that this annual program remained rooted in the daily lived concerns of the citizen activists and community workers who participate in the program from across Québec and Canada, from the United States – and from even further afield, as the circle of friends has broadened. This process is described inside the front cover of the program booklet, and reflected in the amazing range of seminars described there.

I have to acknowledge at the outset a problem of nuance around this word “activist”. The most common interpretation I hear *en français* for the English word activist, is “*militant*”, although increasingly in some quarters I hear the anglicization, “*activiste*”.

By activist what I mean is an active, engaged citizen committed to working in society to promote progressive change to improve the general quality of life. The defining quality is *engagement*, so an activist is someone intensely engaged as a citizen in the social, cultural and political life of her community. The essence is – to introduce a third language – *protagonismo*. An activist is a protagonist in society, someone who actively promotes the concrete realization of a vision of the way her society can be.

An activist is someone intensely engaged as a citizen in the social, cultural and political life of her community.

It was the view of the Institute team that there is a sense of urgency in progressive action and citizen engagement today that it is important to understand, and to which we need to give voice. They wanted to use the Summer Program to create the space for people to share and express their personal sense of urgency, to work together to frame the social and political context that is the fount of this urgency, and to seek affirmation and allies in translating this urgency into action.

And that is the goal of today, and of the entire week.

At one point I shared with the Institute team a device we use at Inter Pares that helps us through tense and difficult discussions. Inter Pares is a flat organization: no hierarchy, no bosses. We are a feminist organization, which means that we strive to avoid the pervasive patterns of patriarchy and authoritarian power in our organization, our relationships and our work, and create other ways to actualize our humanity and vitality. We are a team of co-managers – equal responsibility, equal pay – who work to consensus. Now, this does not mean we are democratic in the sense that the majority rule, or that we seek simple unanimity – which is boring, and usually wrong.

Rather we work to create something new out of all the differing positions around the table, something that is wiser, and more viable, than any of the ideas we begin with, and something creative and energetic to which we all ultimately can subscribe. When we get bogged down, when two or even several ideas are competing and we start to go in circles and frustration sets in, often someone will intervene and declare that it is time (again) to assess “what is at stake” in the discussion – that is, what do each of us think is to be gained and lost, fundamentally, in the decision process we have embarked upon?

This device is helpful because it extracts us from the dynamics of circular argument and contradiction, and focuses us

instead on vision, on anticipation, on our hopes and fears, and on intrinsic motivation. When we re-focus this way, we often can move very quickly to consensus on what is to be gained or lost in the choices we are making, and begin to assess various options based on a common understanding of what’s at stake, so we’re not struggling over unstated and contrary assumptions and competing ends.

It is in this sense, I think, that the Institute poses the question “what is at stake?” What is to be gained or lost in the choices we are making, and our families are making, and our societies, and our governments, and the world government? What do each of us think is to be gained and lost, fundamentally? What is our negative fantasy – what bad do we predict for our communities and our world? And what is our positive fantasy – to what fundamental good, or opportunity for good, do we aspire?

What’s at stake? I suspect that many of you, maybe even all of us here, participated in the historic anti-war rallies of January 18 and February 15 and others that followed once the invasion of Iraq began. One of the neatest places to get an idea of what people think is at stake today, is by reading the messages printed neatly, or simply scrawled, on the signs carried by protesters at street demonstrations like those last winter and spring. Signs like these declare people’s “what’s at stake”, often with humour and irony, a subtle joy in the very action. These are messages that try to “say it all” in just a few words, and to inspire others – to boil it all down to a succinct declaration of what is a stake for each person as she marches.

We have all been buoyed by reading such placards on a frosty morning while stamping our feet to keep warm.

The incisive feminist writer, Katha Pollitt, wrote about this last winter, and she shared her favorite from the January 18 demo in Washington². It said, simply: “WE HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE TO GIVE EVERYONE A GREAT LIFE AND NOT EXHAUST THE WORLD’S RESOURCES. LET’S DO THAT.”

Now, doesn’t that just about say it all?

“We have the knowledge to give everyone a great life and not exhaust the world’s resources. Let’s do that.”

We could do an exercise right now in this room: compose your placard. Tell the room what’s at stake. Now that’s not on the program this morning – although maybe it should be – but maybe later in the day when you have moved to the smaller group session you want to attend, the animators can open up with an exercise like this. Or you can ask them to! And maybe on the break the folks that are planning those sessions can print up placards that “say it all” in a few words: what’s at stake in the actions they will present

in the afternoon. I think mine might be borrowed from the feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin: “One common standard of opportunity and dignity for all!” – remembering that bell hooks helpfully added the qualifier, “regardless of gender, of race, or of class.”

Let me take you back to Black History week in Ottawa last February 12. The theme was “reconciliation”, as has been the tradition for several years since the Mandela lecture was inaugurated. Gerry Caplan had been invited to give the lecture, and he called his speech “the challenge of memory”. Gerry shared with us his heart-rending experience as the principal author of the Report on Genocide in Rwanda commissioned by the Organization of African Unity, and went on to explain eloquently, almost poetically, why he has started with Gen. Romeo Dallaire an amazing initiative called “Remembering Rwanda: the Rwanda genocide 10th anniversary project”.

I will return to this project and the theme of memory later. What I want to tell you about now, however, is the introduction to the lecture given by a young man, Midhane Adamsu, a senior high school student from the Ottawa area – in the program, he was billed as “the voice of youth”. Midhane’s assignment was to introduce the theme of “reconciliation”. Well, he began by telling us that this was not a word that came up a lot in conversation where he hung out; he didn’t hear it on the bus; he did not hear it a lot at school, and he certainly did not hear it around home with his brothers and sisters. So he went to his dictionary to find out what it said about “reconciliation”. The dictionary defined reconciliation as “the effect of reconciling”. This, he said, is the help that we get from the adult world!

But he gave it some thought to see how he could explain this word. And what he told us then was: “When I get on the bus and the driver gives me a dirty look and drops the transfer on the muddy floor for me to pick up – I have the option. When I am at school and a punk bumps me into my locker and makes a racist remark – I have the option. When my younger brother wears my favorite sweater to a party and I catch him in the act – I have the option.”

For Midhane, a young philosopher and activist from Ottawa, the message of Mandela is, “I have the option”.

By implication, we all have “the option”. That’s the beginning of activism, of action, of social and political engagement. And it takes wisdom to know the options,

and courage to choose the one that moves toward justice, peace and reconciliation.

So, what’s at stake in the options we take, or don’t take? And what is the urgency?

In an essay³ that has been reprinted in many places in the past few months and circulated widely on the internet, John Berger asks simply, “Where are we?”

Berger begins,

I write in the night, although it is daytime ... I write in a night of shame. By shame I do not mean individual guilt. Shame, as I’m coming to understand it, is a species feeling which, in the long run, corrodes the capacity for hope and prevents us looking far ahead. We look down at our feet, thinking only of the next small step.

People everywhere, under very different conditions, are asking themselves – where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?

This is John Berger asking what is at stake in these times. And he gives us, as he has so often, guidance about how to proceed to answer this question: “To take in what is happening, an interdisciplinary vision is necessary in order to connect the “fields” which are institutionally kept separate.”

He continues:

And any such vision is bound to be (in the original sense of the word) political. The precondition for thinking politically on a global scale is to see the unity of the unnecessary suffering taking place. This is the starting point.

This is the starting point: “To see the unity of the unnecessary suffering that is taking place.” We go back to June Girvan and her use of the expression *J’nikira*: the world is one.

What is at stake in this one world we share? My answer is that what is at stake is our very humanity. All those elements that make us human are being corroded and commodified. And we ourselves have been transformed into agents of this corrosion. To turn this around, we must reclaim our humanity, we must transform ourselves to transform the world. We have to “take the option.”

Doug Reeler of the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) in South Africa has written a wonderful reflection about what this means for him⁴. He begins:

By implication, we all have “the option”. That’s the beginning of activism.

The centre has not held. The ceremony of innocence is drowning. We have all failed. The invasion of Iraq has begun. My watch tells me it's 7:34 am precisely, on South Africa's Human Rights Day, of all days, the 21st March, 2003.... I'm in a spin. Wheels within wheels, a broken, unbalanced gyroscope in my head...

Reeler continues:

So now that I *have* to choose activism, where do I start? ... Do I choose to fight with the most urgent issue? Which one is that, the most current, the biggest? Or should I choose the least represented, the most worthy and needy of members? Or do I fight what I can, where I am, where I am affected, what hurts me the most? Or if they are all connected, where then do I take my fight, put my energy, nail my colours, where is the strategic leverage, what's the big plot? Is it mostly about fighting? Or is there a deeper place to work, behind all of this, a question which answers other questions?

As we often do, Reeler turns to the poets for inspiration. He quotes Christopher Fry, from "The sleep of prisoners":

*Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us till we take
The longest stride of soul men ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.*

Reeler concludes his reflection:

These lines have always challenged me, deeply. What's the soul size, the soul dimension, of all these issues? What is my soul size in trying to meet them? What soul size does an activist take?

This question reminds me of an observation by Anne Michaels in her beautiful novel, *Fugitive Pieces*:⁵

It's a mistake to think that it's the small things we control and not the large; it's the other way around ... we can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see.

Knowledge

Critical here is the role of knowledge in action. The single most important question we can ask ourselves is how do we know what we know, that makes us act, or not? And what kind of knowledge leads to action?

Why is this so important? As activists we blithely develop strategies and campaigns that assume that if we tell people things, people will change; that if we simply inform people, they will act. This is quite perverse, because we know from our own experience that we rarely act on what we know; indeed, in our day-to-day action we often studiously ignore what we know and act in contrary ways.

Knowledge in and of itself does not lead to action, and information is not sufficient to motivate and mobilize people to act. Knowledge, in and of itself, is not power. In my writing I talk about something I call action-knowledge: that is, knowledge that is known so personally and deeply that it is impossible not to act because the knowledge is part of self and has to be acted on to preserve self. This is knowledge that, in the words of Christopher Fry, is "soul-size".

Knowledge leads to action when people's abstract understanding becomes soul size, and heartfelt.

An example of this is in the stories of Utah Phillips, the remarkable American political raconteur/songster/popular historian. Some of these stories have been brought to us in a delightful new form by Ani Difranco in two marvelous CDs, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, and *Fellow Workers*. If you want a delightful example of inter-generational collaboration – among young and old, among women and men, integrating gender, race and class consciousness – you will enjoy these discs produced by Ani Difranco. And you will be affirmed, I promise.

At the beginning of *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, Phillips tells of his personal experience of transformation as a U.S. soldier fighting in Korea in the early 50's. When faced with the cruel brutality and mindlessness of what was happening in battle, he one day simply walked away: "I learned, I learned there and then," he explains, "that it was all wrong, all wrong, and it had to change – and that that change had to begin with me..."

What is key in this story, and so many others that Utah Phillips tells, is that what changed was not *what* Phillips knew, but *how* he knew it: deeply, personally, inescapably, this "soul" knowledge was now him, not simply something objective, but deeply subjective; he could no more deny this knowledge than he could stop breathing; in fact to do so, would have been to die. Phillips had transcended the alienation of self from experience and knowledge, he had "regained consciousness". What he knew and who he was became one: he regained his identity, reclaimed his soul. It is this kind of knowledge that has moved people into the streets against militarism and empire in the past few months. People's abstract understanding has become soul size and heartfelt.

A major issue for human survival, then, is what we know, how we know it, what knowledge we act on, what knowledge we share and pass on. In the words of Paulo Freire, how we name the world. And who controls that naming.

Central to this issue is the notion of memory. Memory is not nostalgia, but cumulative knowledge, and it is memory that is most systematically dulled and corrupted by the leveling propaganda machine of materialism, consumerism and identity politics. The root of the word memory is the Latin “memor”, meaning “mindful”. People who have lost their memory have, in a very real sense, lost their minds, or at least a fundamental part of their mind, and lost their “selves” – they have lost themselves.⁶

To remember is to be mindful of everything – not merely of the past as past, because as Utah Phillips says, “the past is not gone” – but the past as present, as the tale and the trail of the future. I refer to this as “remembering the future”. I interpret the expression common throughout Québec, “*je me souviens*” – I remember – in precisely this way.

Memory in this sense is the soul of action. This is why there has been such emphasis in the last decade on commissions of truth, in South Africa, in El Salvador, in Guatemala, very recently again in Peru. We cannot create the future without “being mindful” of the past. This is the simple wisdom of “Remembering Rwanda: the Rwanda genocide 10th anniversary project”, which I spoke of earlier, created by Gerald Caplan and Romeo Dallaire. As Gerry so trenchantly puts it, unless we remember we cannot reconcile, and if we do not reconcile, we will not create a new future but repeat again and again a cruel and evil past.

In her poem, *Pushed into the Dark*, Anne Michaels expresses that “the only experience unchanged by recollection, is horror.”⁷ This is so true. Many of the deepest truths are beyond words, and the most important history, likewise, cannot be adequately reduced to words – for example, the Rwandan genocide, or the European holocaust of 1934-45; or two hundred years of trade in African slaves and its aftermath into the present, and the systematic obliteration of this hemisphere’s native peoples over centuries, and the aftermath we are living today. And on another level, the still secret gynocide of pervasive sexual control, trafficking, violence and murder of women and children in our societies and communities, in our institutions, in our streets, in our very own families.

So what, then, allows words, and action?

In another poem, in the same volume, Anne Michaels writes, “The truth is why words fail.”⁸

So what, then, allows words, and action? Let’s return again to John Berger. Berger says, “I write in the night, but I see *not only* the tyranny. If that were so, I would probably not have the courage to continue.” [my emphasis]

He goes on to explain what he does see, in addition to tyranny: I see people sleeping, stirring, getting up to drink water, whispering their projects or their fears, making love, praying, cooking something whilst the rest of the family is asleep, in Baghdad and Chicago... I see pastry cooks working in Tehran and the shepherds, thought of as bandits, sleeping beside their sheep in Sardinia, I see a man in the Friedrichshain quarter of Berlin sitting in his pyjamas with a bottle of beer reading Heidegger, and he has the hands of a proletarian, I see a small boat of illegal immigrants off the Spanish coast near Alicante, I see a mother in Ghana – her name is Aya which means born on Friday – swaying her baby to sleep, I see the ruins of Kabul and a man going home, and I know that, despite the pain, the ingenuity of the survivors is undiminished, an ingenuity which scavenges and collects energy, and in the ceaseless cunning of this ingenuity, there is a spiritual value, something like the Holy Ghost. I am convinced of this in the night, although I don't know why.

Which Brings Us to the Question, “What is Possible?”

So much of the discussion around activism and change revolves around the question: is fundamental social change possible? It is as though we are unable to act, or to convince others to act, unless we can predict what the result will be and guarantee that this result is actually possible, if not assured. This is unreasonable; it is unwise.

If we only acted on the basis of a clearly possible and likely outcome, I doubt that we would ever much act at all, in the sense of being an “activist” – that is, act in a sustained way on the most substantial and difficult issues of social change.

Of course outcomes are important, often critically so, sometimes even matters of life itself. But my experience is that people are not motivated to extended action merely by anticipated outcomes. I believe that we are motivated by the experience of action itself, by the experience of self-in-action: yes, by the way it feels! And when we are successful in mobilizing, it is because at least in the beginning, we have attempted to make sure that it feels good, that it makes people feel alive in a way that they felt dead before, feel engaged in a way that they felt defeated before, feel hope in a way that they felt despair before.

We do this by establishing or reinforcing that there is a profound affinity of values among those mobilizing – that is, by affirming an inclusive identity – and by creating the conviction, or at least hope, that there is a possibility that the action will promote these values, and affirm the identity of those involved.

When this happens, the campaign is a “feel good” campaign in the very best sense; people are engaged in a subjective manner, not merely in an objective way – they are subjects of action, not the objects of external forces and discourse.

It is usually only after the middle and towards the end of a campaign that it begins to feel not so good, like work, and motivation tails off. This happens for two reasons: because the anticipated outcome begins to seem impossible, or is compromised by those in the lead, and because the sense of self and the identity that the action engendered begins to fade and erode into another identity, not so affirming. Subjectivity is lost: people return to the feeling that they are objects, again, rather than subjects.

There is a lesson in this: we ought not build movement solely on grandiose goals, around products and objects. We need to build movement on subjectivity, on values and affinity, on principle, and affirm these values and the inclusive affinity in everything we do. The horizon moves as we walk together, and goals can shift. It is the values and affinity that gives purpose and energy to our action, that affirms our action and is affirmed by it.

When this kind of movement is built and sustained, the short, mid- and long-term goals become tactical decisions in a sustained strategy to promote certain values and a vision of society and the human person. The formulation of goals then becomes the internal mediating process that forms discourse and debate within the movement and lessens the constant risk that competing goals will become the fault-line around which movements split.

So, again, what is possible? Some argue that very little good is possible in a world that appears more grim with each passing day; others promise the world to those who follow them. But in truth, we usually do not know what is actually possible until we have achieved it. And those who argue that something is not possible are certainly correct, in that their refusal to try itself renders their dream impossible.

History teaches that we ourselves, as well as the external world, set the limits on the possible. And if we attempt something that fails it is not necessarily because what we want is not possible, but that perhaps the moment was not ripe, or that our attempt was not adequate to the moment, and we will simply have to keep trying.

In truth, we usually do not know what is actually possible until we have achieved it.

Rebecca Solnit⁹, writing in the journal *Orion*, offers a variation on the theme introduced earlier by John Berger, that of “writing in the dark”. She tells us that:

On January 18, 1915, eighteen months into the first world war, the first terrible war in the modern sense... Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, “The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.”

Solnit goes on to reflect on Woolf’s meaning,

Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. People imagine the end of the world is nigh because the future is unimaginable. Who twenty years ago would have pictured a world without the USSR and with the Internet? We talk about “what we hope for” in terms of what we hope will come to pass, but we could think of it another way, as why we hope. We hope on principle, we hope tactically and strategically, we hope because the future is dark, we hope because it’s a more powerful and more joyful way to live. Despair presumes it knows what will happen next.

....

The world gets better. It also gets worse. The time it will take you to address this is exactly equal to your lifetime, and if you’re lucky you don’t know how long that is. The future is dark. Like night. There are probabilities and likelihoods, but there are no guarantees.

Doug Reeler reflects on the same dilemma, which we all share:

Social activism will always be about hard struggles to wage, often impossible to win, at least in obvious ways – so often every battle appears lost but over time, consciousness shifts and suddenly society shifts and the day is won. Can we learn to recognise threads of victory in our inevitable string of defeats? Can we develop new orientations and the will to do activism differently, with a different paradigm that fights, not only with fire where fire is needed, but with water where only water will do?

Reeler talks of:

...the need for a kind of patient urgency... A patience full of potential, poised to grasp the opportune and suddenly revealed moments of social, political and economic change and turn them into the next stage of broad social development.

Again to quote Anne Michaels: “Nothing is sudden ... just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysm, so history is the gradual instant.”¹⁰

In an essay called “Of Courage and Resistance”¹¹, Susan Sontag talks of “the perennial destiny of principles”:

... we don't have to think about whether acting on principle is expedient, or whether we can count on the eventual success of the actions we have undertaken. Acting on principle is ... good in itself. But it is still a political act, in the sense that you're not doing it for yourself. You don't do it just to be in the right, or to appease your own conscience; much less because you are confident your action will achieve its aim. You resist as an act of solidarity. With communities of the principled and the disobedient: here, elsewhere. In the present. In the future.

Sontag continues,

... it is important to remember that in programs of political resistance the relation of cause and effect is convoluted, and often indirect. All struggle, all resistance is – must be – concrete. And all struggle has a global resonance. If not here, then there. If not now, then soon. Elsewhere as well as here.

I know that many people believe that some things will simply never change, including many of the realities that haunt us today, and that we have to focus on the possible. For my part, I believe that while we must obviously work in the context of what we believe is possible today, it is precisely those things that many believe will never change – those things that politicians and technocrats say are impossible to change: poverty, war, tyranny, sexual exploitation and oppression – these are the things on which we should most relentlessly focus as change agents.

It is precisely those things that many believe will never change on which we should most relentlessly focus.

At the same time, activism is a patient calling. I have a friend, his name is Mike Kelly, who loves to quote Bob Dylan to illustrate many things. For example: “To live outside the law, you must be honest.”

He once observed to me that many activists he met were frustrating because they wanted us to be “dealt a card so high and so wild we will never have to be dealt a card again...” What card is this? Absolute power. And certainty.

But it does not work this way. History is long, and few things that are worthwhile can be achieved complete in our lifetime. And absolute power and certainty are the tools of tyranny, not liberation.

So, what is possible? Everything: it's all a question of timing.

Activism is like gardening. Gardening consists of building and nurturing soil. We till the soil, we plant, we harvest what grows, and we replant. It is not sunlight that does the work, but the leaves, not the rain but the roots. The roots live in the soil – the soil we are given and the soil we create. Therefore activism should focus on the soil, the good earth of our lives and our livelihoods. The soil of action is the neighbourhood, and this neighbourhood is local and global. And so, as I said, activism is like gardening: it is life-promoting, it is conservation in the most profound and radical sense: it is culturing, it is cultural action, it is social agriculture.

So, what is possible? Everything: it's all a question of timing.

Doug Reeler uses a similar image:

So my response to the madness being played out between Baghdad and Washington is to go on planting seeds, to be a patient gardener, regardlessly and relentlessly, looking for the right people to work beside. That is the quiet urgency I have, to connect more at that level, to connect with myself at that level....

Reeler then spins off on a sublime reflection on time, and timing,

I can see this planting of seeds being based on a new respect for human time, not politicians' or activists' time or donors or back-donors' time, but time between time and beyond clocks, many times the rhythms, poly-rhythmic, southern time. All kinds of time for all kinds of things, it-depends-time, male time, female time, children's time ('tooty-fruity time'), story-telling time, mourning time, celebration time, a time to confront, work time, learning time, cooking time and eating time (slow-food time), dreamtime, loving time. Tea drinking time. We live day-by-day, by the clock, in the burning present, but we are also living into the future unevenly, between those two gods: Chronos, the god of chronological clock time, linear, planned, now-time, the beating time, calculated time, and then Kairos the god of timing, unfolding, non-linear time, rhythmic, cyclical, wild time, sensed time. If only somebody would make us kairological clocks to enable us to feel when the time is right to act, we wouldn't need clocks... we might be less calculating and more discerning, judging more by the heart, a bit less by the head.

Human Nature

Now somehow all of this brings us to human nature: we are told that the reason that things are the way they are, and that much that we dream about is impossible, is because of human nature. Human's are just so bad! And if you want things to be good, you gotta control all those bad tendencies that lurk in our nature. People are selfish. People are vain. People are short-sighted. People are larcenous and violent and xenophobic. People are only in it for themselves.

Now I get confused by all this. When people do bad things, this is human nature. But when people do good things, they are doing it in spite of human nature. And when people are promoting a society where we all share and build and live considering others as ourselves, and making decisions openly and cooperatively in messy public forums, well these people are *really* going against human nature. These people are dangerous.

When people do bad things, this is human nature. When they do good things, it is in spite of human nature.

Why are my good deeds not evidence of human nature, but only my bad deeds? Why is all the good that people do not evidence of what is possible, rather than the relatively little bad? I have spent almost forty years of working life rubbing my nose in some of the ugliest corners of this planet at some its worst moments and while I have experienced the hot breath of terror in the crucible of violence and cruelty, and the cold grip of horror at what humans can do to each other, my lasting impression, day-after-day, year after year, is not of terror or of horror, but of wonder at the capacity of people to transcend, of people to do good, of people to do the right thing, who care for others as themselves, often more than themselves. I have been moved, and remain moved, by the joy that people can bring to the worst days.

And I am here to tell you that the good outnumber the bad a million to one, and that the good acts outnumber the bad by a similar factor. So what is human nature? Human nature is diversity. It is in our nature to be selfish and cruel and even criminal. It is equally in our nature to be caring and generous, brave and self-sacrificing.

Today we have come face-to-face with the great Manichean deceit: that good and evil are competing principles in nature, in the natural law of the universe, constantly at war, and that our lives are the embodiment of this war of good vs evil. We must choose good and defeat evil.

This notion is wrong and dangerous: what we call good and evil are co-existing and overlapping possibilities, not

a dichotomy, but a unity: options whose creative tension drives our lives and human history.¹²

We are not pawns in a great struggle between universal principles, but the very authors of the principles of life and of death, constantly choosing in our imagination and in our actions, to live or to die, to promote life or to promote death.

Milan Kundera, in a recent essay¹³ talks about the loss of a sense of the comic and the tragic in human existence – the loss of a sense of irony – that has come about by the resurgence of the moralist conviction that politics is a zero sum struggle between two absolutes, good and evil, rather than the eternal tension of complementary possibilities in the human soul. He reminds us that this tension has been the subject of great literature for centuries, literature made possible only because the protagonist contains *within* both possibilities, not merely the inevitable good, or the inevitable evil. Tragedy, and transcendence, flow from how this tension is resolved through human will.

Kundera says,

Freeing the great human conflicts from the naïve interpretation of a battle between good and evil, understanding them in the light of tragedy, was an enormous feat of mind; it brought forward the unavoidable relativism of human truths; it made clear the need to do justice to the enemy.

“But”, he concludes, “Moral manicheism has an indestructible vitality.”

Yes, indeed: an indestructible vitality. And it is manicheism – the myth of good and evil as opposing absolutes – that carries the day at the present moment, and not merely with the fascist right, but within its opposition on the left.

We need to scrutinize and resist this tendency, seductive as it is. The universe is alive; its possibility is life, and the extinction of life – that is, the extinction of possibility itself. Good, and life, co-exist with the possibility of their negation, which we call evil.

To be good is not to defeat evil, but merely to be good, to be actively alive, and to promote life, however we define life.

Why is this important? Because when we accept that we are the object of competing and equal principles of good and evil we lose the essential subjectivity that defines the human being, the subjectivity that justifies our active existence. We accept the schizophrenia, the dichotomization of human possibility. We accept that existence is a war, a constant inexorable struggle against an evil force (the dark side). Instead of promoting the life force that is the universe,

we engage life in terms of death. We accept that we are at war and we accept the metaphors of war that are anti-life.

What is Possible?

So, what is our present possibility? Jonathan Schell has written about what he sees as being at stake, and as being possible, at this time.¹⁴ Schell argues that during this modern epoch in which the world has experienced the consolidation of superpower militarism based on zero sum equations of mass destruction and total war, a different kind of political power has also been making its debut – “the political power of people to resist oppressors and achieve self-rule” – and, he says, this power does not “flow from the barrel of a gun.”

He continues,

Nor was the appearance of this force – let us call it cooperative power, as distinct from the coercive power of warfare and other violence – a marginal historical phenomenon. Political power is a capacity to decide something and make the decision stick in the realm of human affairs. In conventional wisdom, power has been equated with force. If you didn't use force you would lose, and therefore to shun force was to abdicate... But in our era the bearers of superior force have, in an ever-widening sphere, failed to make their decisions stick, [testifying] to the capacity of cooperative power to defeat superior force.

Schell argues that this new “cooperative” power has become a “second superpower”¹⁵ challenging the hegemony of global militarism. Schell borrows the image from Robert Muller, former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations – a Costa Rican, incidentally – who said about the worldwide peace marches and rallies against the British-American invasion of Iraq:

Never before in the history of the world has there been a global, visible, public, viable, open dialogue and conversation about the very legitimacy of war... there are [now] two superpowers: the United States and the merging, surging voice of the people of the world... waging peace.¹⁶

Millions around the world are successfully waging peace, promoting justice, life and diversity. What is a stake today at this level is the rule of might, the rule of force: the law that the biggest and toughest and meanest – the one with the biggest gun – wins and rules. The hawks are well aware of what Jonathan Schell has pointed out: we are witnessing militarism's last stand – and it is going to be a mean, tough and brutal stand before it falls at last. But it will fall. The only thing that can prevent it is if we do not stand against it ourselves. But if peaceful civil disobedience persists,

militarism will crush itself, and we will begin anew the universal project of promotion of tolerance, diversity and reconciliation.

The Counter-Culture

We have returned to the epoch of the counter-culture: a culture that runs counter to the momentum of the main current, that slows, diverts and ultimately changes the course of the mainstream. We are a counter-culture, and like any kind of true culture, to thrive ours must be a culture of resonant diversity – not a monoculture, but an ecology. John Berger tells us that “Democracy should not be confused with the ‘freedom’ of binary choices.”¹⁷ Our counterculture is, and has to continue to be, a democracy of the many, imagining and nurturing diverse options, diverse possibilities, so that no single option can impose its tyranny of truth and ways, the tyranny of law over nature, the tyranny of death over life.¹⁸

Our counterculture is a democracy of the many, imagining and nurturing diverse options, so that no single option can impose its tyranny of truth.

Reclaiming Language

Berger also tells us that,

The new tyranny, like other recent ones, depends to a large degree on a systematic abuse of language. Together we have to reclaim our hijacked words and reject the tyranny's nefarious euphemisms; if we do not, we will be left with only the word shame.

Yes, “reclaim our words”. It for this reason that in my text today I have devoted a lot of my time sharing with you not only my own words, but the words of others, the “texts” and narratives of others. And so my talk has been fabricated from moments and mementos. I have tried to connect moments and people and words that have been important in my own process that are now part of my fabric, part of my naming.

Why? We are not alone, and it is this profound fact that empowers us – a fact that so many around the world discovered again, with delicate wonder, on February 15.

Resistance happens every moment, everywhere, and has from the beginning of time. If we can connect these moments, we have a tapestry, a banner, a history, a visible and irresistible movement: we have an open conspiracy, possibilities in process, the past as the trail of the future.

It is interesting that we see evil in this way, connected, irresistibly – so much so that we are accused of being conspiracy

theorists, of being paranoid. If we pattern evil into a monolith of great power, why do we not perceive good this way, and present it this way? What we call “evil” – militarism, totalitarianism, tyranny, the empire – seems connected over time and space, inexorable, indomitable, invincible. Somehow what we call “good” does not seem connected. We must make it so.

Let us be conspiracy theorists of the power of good. Let us conspire and conspire openly. Let us make our conspiracy visible and inexorable, and scary and joyful and righteous and wondrous and irresistible.

Anne Michaels joins us again in our discourse:

Important lessons: look carefully, record what you see. Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful.¹⁹

And this echoes the insight from Francis Ponge: “Beauty is the impossible which lasts.”²⁰

If we can consciously recuperate our narrative, share our stories, our past becoming our present into our future, if we can consciously connect the diverse and myriad moments of beauty and good that we experience collectively in this world, making good visible and powerful, we can build a coherent visible movement out of its own presently invisible momentum. By doing this, by naming the world for ourselves, and including the naming of others, we spin the cloth of our mutual dreams and weave the tapestry of concerted change.

And in this, having relied on John Berger’s inspiration throughout my remarks, I have to challenge one central conclusion of Berger. It is a conclusion that is a critical fault line in today’s activism, and one which we need to bring into the open and debate.

Berger concludes his essay by saying, “Every form of contestation against this tyranny is comprehensible. Dialogue with it is impossible.”

Let us say, yes, every form of contestation against tyranny is comprehensible – except tyranny itself! We must not become our enemy to defeat it. We have the option.

So in contesting tyranny, we have to reject tyranny and choose dialogue. By dialogue, I do not mean mediation and compromise, but speaking to power, creating discourse: speaking in our own voice, naming reality, bearing witness, reclaiming words so that they can no longer be turned against us, but themselves become our tools and our banner.

Dialogue is the dramatic text through which conflict and contradiction are revealed, contested and transcended. Contrary to Berger’s (quite understandable) angry assertion,

dialogue is not impossible in contesting tyranny; rather, it is essential. Only in dialogue can we name things, meaningfully.

Monologue is private speech without contest; dialogue is the private moved into the public sphere. That is how we reclaim our words from those who have expropriated them – by reappropriating language in discourse. Without dialogue – the dramatic and political text – it is impossible to reclaim our word, and recuperate truth.

It is through dialogue that the subversion of the false word of tyranny unfolds. The tyrant, knowing this, fears dialogue. Dialogue is a contested space and the tyrant prevails by outlawing contest, outlawing dialogue. When authentic contest of power and truth emerges even a hint, the tyrant’s overthrow is already prefigured – it is only a question of time.

So, we must embrace a subversive dialogue. The process of change is rarely catastrophic, one thing being destroyed and another replacing it, good replacing evil. Change occurs more gradually than the mythic revolution, but no less fundamentally. When a new reality is added to an old reality, reality changes. Remembering Anne Michaels: “Nothing is sudden ... just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysm, so history is the gradual instant.”²¹

So, my friends, this has been a meandering discourse I have led you on this morning. What is at stake for me in this dialogue I promote?

Our humanity itself is at stake, as I said earlier. We reclaim our language, and our freedom, by expressing our humanity. This is what is at stake for me. For regardless of outcome, we must act, for to act is human, and to be human we must act – that is “act out”.

Act out what? Our human-ness. And our humanness is interior, it is reflection, it is vision, it is dreams, is ideas and ideals. These are what we act out in the world, the interior, socialized: the word made flesh – the radical meaning of the New Testament, and all revolutionary testaments of all spiritual traditions on earth.

And part of our vision is how the world must be, but is not yet – and that world includes others.

Doug Reeler concludes,

I start to feel hopeful, even relieved, if I can see my work as long-term, in it for the long haul ... if my anger and urgency can be stretched into long chords

Dialogue is not impossible in contesting tyranny; rather, it is essential. Only in dialogue can we name things, meaningfully.

over many years to keep time with my longest heartbeats and deepest breaths, patiently, resonant with hope. Why live otherwise?

Why live otherwise? This question can be read two ways: why else would we live? And how else would we live if we are going to bother to live at all? I think Reeler means both.

Activism as I have discussed it today is a secular vocation. Literally, “vocation” means “calling”, something to which we are “called to”. But it also means “calling out”. The activist vocation is a calling to, and a calling out.

Called to by what? Called by life and by the yearning of our being-ness.

Calling out what? Calling out the vision of life and wonder to which our being-ness aspires.

Activism is a calling to our humanity, and a calling out of the best that our humanity dares to envision, and dares to will.

Why live otherwise?

In closing I want to share with you a few other gifts from others who are engaged with us in this struggle, a few words that I have jotted down along the journey when I was able to take joy and courage from the courage of others.

From Susan Freilicher,

Dreamwalker’s heart is in the south...brings the medicine of passion and creativity into our lives. She asks us to remember when our lives held promise and passion, when life was so exciting that our hearts beat like the pounding of horses’ hooves. She dares us to expect our dreams and fantasies to become reality. She brings us the medicine of our own potential.

And Jill Ruckelshaus, from a speech she made in 1977,
We are in for a very, very long haul... I am asking for everything you have to give. We will never give up... You will lose your youth, your sleep, your patience, your sense of humour and occasionally, the understanding and support of people who love you very much. In return, I have nothing to offer you but your pride in being a woman, and all your dreams you’ve ever had for your daughters and nieces and granddaughters... and the certain knowledge that at the end of your days you will be able to look back and say that once in your life you gave everything you had for justice.

In closing, I think it is only fitting that I leave you with a story from my own narrative.²² I was in El Salvador in the mid-eighties, one of many, many visits I made to that country during its terrible civil war, visits that brought me

to the edge of hope and faith in humanity. I traveled often in the countryside across the invisible lines that marked the zones controlled by the army and the guerrilla forces of the FMLN, faced continuously with the tragedy of this struggle and the violence that the people suffered. It was very easy to be overwhelmed with the sheer inhumanity of it all, and the seeming hopelessness of the cause.

One day I was in a small *asentimiento* – a settlement for displaced people whose agricultural projects we were supporting. We were walking about and came upon a family of women in their humble adobe and straw home. It was early evening and the sun was setting on this little group: an old, old woman who might easily have been a hundred years old; her daughter, almost seventy; her daughter, the old woman’s grand-daughter, who was in her mid-thirties; and a teenage girl, about sixteen, the new generation. A mother, a daughter, a grand-daughter, and a great grand-daughter. Four generations of struggle in one circle.

I must have looked very, very serious, and humourless, because the women laughed and chided me, and asked me why I was visiting them if I had nothing to say. Then the old woman said to me that I should relax and enjoy the evening with them, and stop my frowning. “Don’t feel sorry for us”, she said; “We are alive, and we will survive. You are welcome to be with us, but only if you can enjoy our place with us and see what there is to celebrate in our simple lives.”

“Are you happy?”, she then asked.

I responded that I didn’t think so; what was there to be happy about? She replied that if she had what I had, she would be very happy, and would enjoy it every day. “Do not be ashamed of what you have,” she said, “Enjoy it! That is what you owe to us. To enjoy, and then to share your joy with us. We do not need your sadness, or your shame.”

We had quite a conversation then, about home, and family, and children, and the war, and struggle. But the beginning of the conversation will always be with me: a gift, a lesson, offered to me who had so much, from an old woman who had so little, but who had more to give than I could have imagined until I met her. From that day I was pledged whenever I felt despair to defeat it with a celebration of the life I had, and the courage to be, and to live, that she had shown me. Her gift was a gift of life.

This is the real meaning of struggle, and if we have the wisdom and the will, we can sustain each other by celebrating ourselves, and the struggle – personal and political – that defines our being and our lives.

Endnotes

- ¹ Heidegger, Martin, "The Turning", in *The Question of Technology and other Essays*, Harper Torchbooks (Harper & Row), NY, 1977, p.40.
- ² Pollitt, Katha, "The Smiths go to Washington", in *The Nation*, February 10, 2003, p.9.
- ³ Berger, John, "Introduction" to *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, by David Levi Strauss, *Aperture*, April, 2003, excerpted in the monthly English language edition of *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2003.
- ⁴ Reeler, Doug, "If you meet the White Rabbit on the road, steal his watch! Or what began as an attempt to write a donor report but became a crazy stream of consciousness on development-land, activism and developmental practice", in the newsletter of Community Development Resource Association (CDRA). April 2003.
- ⁵ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1996, p. 21.
- ⁶ This is why there is a significant literature that uses as its premise the amnesiac tossed up on an alien and unknown shore without any recollection of the past, and therefore, no knowledge of the present, and no way to anticipate the future.
- ⁷ Michaels, Anne, "Pushed into the Dark", in *The Weight of Oranges, and Miner's Pond*, McClelland & Stewart, Toronto, 1998, p. 31.
- ⁸ Michaels, Anne, "What the Light Teaches", in *The Weight of Oranges, and Miner's Pond*, p. 116.
- ⁹ Solnit, Rebecca, "Acts of Hope, Challenging Empire on the World Stage", in *Orion-Online*: see: http://www.oriononline.org/pages/oo/sidebars/Patriotism/index_Solnit.html
- ¹⁰ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 77.
- ¹¹ Sontag, Susan, "Of Courage and Resistance", in *The Nation*, May 5, 2003.
- ¹² For an excellent treatment of this theme, and many many others of critical importance to contemporary dilemmas emerging from the totalitarian technocracy that he saw emerging from the science he was part of, see Norbert Wiener's, *The Human Use of Human Beings, Cybernetics and Society*, published in 1950 and revised in 1954 (the most trenchant section on the Manichean diversion is on pp 190-191 of my dog-eared Anchor Books Revised Edition, 1954). Norbert Wiener (1894-64) was Professor of Mathematics at M.I.T. where he invented the science of Cybernetics, the science which developed the theoretical and practical application of information and communication systems. A re-issue of this classic – one of the most important and prescient philosophical works of the 20th century – was published by De Capo Press, Plenum Publishing, New York, in the early 1990s. The DeCapo edition declares: "Only a few books stand as landmarks in social and scientific upheaval. [*The Human Use of Human Beings*] is one of that small company."
- ¹³ Kundera, Milan, "Fragments from an Essay, the Theatre of Memory", in *Le Monde diplomatique*, English Edition, May 2003.
- ¹⁴ Schell, Jonathan, "No More unto the breach, why war is futile", in *Harpers Magazine*, March 23, 2003, pp. 33-46.
- ¹⁵ Schell, Jonathan, "The Second Superpower", in *The Nation*, April 23, 2003.
- ¹⁶ Quoted by Schell, op cit. It is worth noting that an unprecedented "above the fold" editorial on the front page of the *New York Times* on Sunday, February 16, also announced that the worldwide demonstrations of the previous day had heralded a "second super power" to challenge the uni-polar hegemony of the US.
- ¹⁷ Berger, op cit.
- ¹⁸ One of the most important readings on this theme is Paul Feyerabend's *Against Method* (Verso, 1975, 1993, New York). Paul Feyerabend, who died in 1994, was a friend and philosophical contemporary of Thomas Kuhn. While many are

now familiar with the significance of Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), fewer are aware of Feyerabend and this remarkable reflection on science, politics and knowledge. *Against Method* is an invaluable treatise on what I have elsewhere called 'political epistemology' – the politics of knowledge and the relationship between the formulation of knowledge in the abstract and the practice of knowledge in the (political) world. *Against Method* is an incisive and trenchant, but always personal and good-natured, exploration of the nature of inquiry and knowing, and its reflections on diversity, subjectivity and self-determination are central to many issues that preoccupy us in this epoch of hegemonic corporate science and coercive global social engineering.

¹⁹ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 44.

²⁰ Ponge, Francis, "The silent world is our only homeland", in *Against Forgetting, Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (edited by Carolyn Forché), Norton, New York and London, 1993, pp. 223-225.

²¹ Michaels, Anne, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 77.

²² Adapted from Brian K. Murphy, *Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World, An Open Conspiracy for Social Change* (ZED Book & Fernwood, 1999); see Chapter One, "The Courage to Be", pp. 11-12.

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