

When Will Your Neighbor Join the Movement?

by Megan Wade

“In America... mass resignation represents a public manifestation of a private loss, a decline in what people think they have a political right to aspire to – in essence, a decline of individual political self-respect on the parts of millions of people.” -

*-Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment**

Do you ever wonder why everyone around you isn't screaming in outrage? How do they go on with their lives as though the earth isn't burning, as though wars are not being waged across the globe, as though people's lives aren't harmed by mass injustices every day?

I encounter such frustrations frequently, from those justifying their own lack of participation as well as energetic organizers facing harsh realities. The majority of people have no interest in joining a movement for truly democratic change, an apathy central to our current social and political climate. There is, as Lawrence Goodwyn put it, a form of “mass resignation” in America. Such resignations are not new, however, and those of us exasperated with the general public (and often our family members, neighbors, and friends) would do well to quit sighing and ask ourselves how past organizers challenged that resignation and inspired dedicated action among once passive fellow citizens.

The Importance of Learning from Past Movements

I want to underscore the importance of studying earlier social movements. Understanding these movements, their successes and failures, is fundamental to

thinking and planning strategically for the democracy movement today.

We at Democracy Unlimited of Humboldt County (DUHC) take time to consider the work of those who've gone before. We bring staff and volunteers together to read, examine and discuss the work of the American revolutionaries and Abolitionists, the labor movement and the Populists among others. We find a deep familiarity in these movements, see them as vital to our own efforts and want to keep their stories fresh in our minds. If we lose fluency in our own cultural history we perpetuate our own oppression, both internal and external.

Furthermore, this shared course of study, analysis, vocabulary and stories has made our work more cohesive. Bringing our volunteers into the process increases their effectiveness in education and outreach efforts and in the organization's design of strategy and decision-making. As we reflect on past organizing, wide-ranging questions arise: when is direct action required? How do we weigh the risks of imprisonment and police brutality against our ability to continue important work? What is the role of electoral politics in radical social change? What about the role of the arts? But the most critical question of all is how can we bring people along? What attracts them to systemic work despite societal pressures to do otherwise and the risks inherent in challenging existing power structures?

Applying History: How do We Bring Others into the Movement?

In recent study groups we've begun to answer this question and judged several

possibilities as false in spite of wide acceptance by many social change activists.

First, most people will not join a movement for democracy – a movement aimed at altering the balance of power – because they've heard a plethora of facts. It doesn't matter how overwhelming the evidence, people will not rise up to join the movement when bludgeoned with statistics. People participate in social movements when doing so meets a need, whether that be emotional, psychological or physical. People often see risk in opposing a system that meets at least some of their needs. They want assurance that those basic needs will continue to be met even if they rock the boat. Cold statistics, even in abundance, are cold comfort.

Second, few people join a social movement even when very few of their needs are being met by the dominant system. The reason is that we as organizers fail to do the necessary work of organizing these constituencies. We don't assist them in attaining basic needs. We often assume they won't want to be involved – too busy making ends meet. So we target those, like students, who seem to have time on their hands. Furthermore, the ingrained cultural doctrine of meritocracy, of “pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps,” is so strong that many will continue to blame themselves for their inability to “get ahead,” even amidst deep recession.

Consider that the first wave of feminist organizers in the US did not convince many women to join them, despite their lack of rights or ability to make decisions

about their own economic future. Even today, many women refuse to work for feminist causes because they accept the dominant narrative concerning their societal role.

Also, in periods of severe economic hardship, organizers looking to assist those exploited by the capitalist industrial system, often found themselves rejected, betrayed or labeled “communist” by those in greatest need.

Self-Respect is the Opposite of Resignation: Lessons from the Populists

Lawrence Goodwyn, in *The Populist Moment*, details how the Populist movement only came about after several generations had tried nearly every method of “bootstrapping” imaginable, when people finally saw more clearly the myth of meritocracy. With their farms being lost after lifetimes of hard labor, they understood the need for new solutions.

Just how did that happen? In part, because the Farmers' Alliance helped to meet some of their basic needs. When individual labor was not enough, they tried, through the Farmers' Alliance cooperatives and more, to aid one another without the help of government. For this they were crushed by the capitalist powers in new and unanticipated ways. But the experience of collective and democratic support in the Alliance inspired many to keep pushing forward. Hence the Alliance's political arm, the People's or Populist Party, was born. This movement became one of the largest in U.S. history.

How did such growth occur against the power of bankers and industrialists? Goodwyn's introduction outlines the pattern through which successful social movements develop. He bases his theory on the Populists' many successes, identifying the elements of a strong educational and recruiting component and the building of movement-serving institutions. But the most important element of that pattern is what he calls “personal political self-respect.” Goodwyn writes:

“Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. To put it another way,

they are not culturally organized to conform to established hierarchical forms. Their sense of autonomy permits them to dare to try to change things by seeking to influence others.”

It is a few of these individuals who begin the movement, and gradually their outlook spreads. Describing the process, Goodwyn continues:

“In intellectual terms, the generating force of this new mass mode of behavior may be rather simply described as 'a new way of looking at things.' It constitutes a new and heretofore unsanctioned mass folkway of autonomy. In psychological terms, its appearance reflects the development within the movement of a new kind of collective self-confidence. *'Individual self-respect' and 'collective self-confidence' constitute, then, the cultural building blocks of mass democratic politics.* Their development permits people to conceive of the idea of acting in self-generated democratic ways – as distinct from passively participating in various hierarchical modes bequeathed by the received culture. In this study of Populism, I have given a name to this plateau of cooperative and democratic conduct. I have called it ‘the movement culture.’” (*Italics -MW*)

Individual self-respect and collective self-confidence as the building blocks of democracy rang true for the members of Democracy Unlimited's study group. But for some it was also a moment of exasperation. How, in an age saturated with a corporate media structured around disempowering social and political institutions and based on the individual as passive consumer, do we build genuine individual self-respect and collective self-confidence?

Generating Political Self Respect: Answers and Lessons from Labor

The group came up with many potential answers to this important question, which we decided was like asking: “Why do people join the movement and then stay on to strengthen it?”

To summarize our collective thoughts: people participate in radical democratic movements when the movement (1) meets their concrete and tangible needs; (2) offers individuals experiences in real

democracy; (3) provides a sense of community; (4) makes available ongoing education and skills training; (5) shows direct and effective ways for people to take further action.

A story that illustrates these points comes not from the Populists but from the 20th-century labor movement.

In Richard O. Boyer's, *Labor's Untold Story*, Boyer deftly tells the story of the Grossups, a conservative Midwestern family hit hard by the depression in the 1930s. Boyer sketches the psychological and emotional toll of the depression on Peter Grossup, a cabinetmaker who loses his lifelong job. Despite the hard times, the Grossups try to hold on to their pride. For Mr. Grossup, that pride requires not turning to those whose political sympathies he believes to be radical, even in the face of eviction from his house.

Boyer describes how, at Mrs. Grossup's suggestion that they join the Unemployment Council, Mr. Grossup was deeply shocked.

“Go down to that bunch of Communists? I'd die first!”

“They can take my house,” he said and his voice broke queerly, “but I am asking no help from any Communist!”

But the Unemployment Council did not wait for the Grossups to come to them. The day the sheriff arrived with deputies, emptying their furniture onto the street, the Grossups found themselves suddenly surrounded by an interracial group of unemployed men and women. Staring down the sheriff and five deputies, the Unemployment Council ordered the furniture be moved back. Assessing the group of thirty, the deputies complied.

As the Grossups met the folks at the Unemployment Council and began to comprehend what happened, Boyer writes: “It was like a party. Everyone was shouting and laughing and Mr. Grossup shook hands with at least two dozen men he had never met before. The Negro leader of the unemployed, Hugh Henderson, a sandwich in his hand, was making a speech from the front porch.

“Mr. Grossup somehow found himself making a speech too. ‘After a life of hard

work, taking a man's home. It isn't right. They put my chair, everything, out on the street. Worked hard all my life. It isn't right.”

This story neatly captures one family's experience of a restored sense of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence. And we can see in it each of the five points mentioned above.

First, the Unemployment Council meets a concrete, tangible need for the Grossups – not only a basic need for shelter, but also protection from potential police intimidation.

But their neighbors at the Unemployment Council do more than just help the Grossups keep their house. From the moment the Council members arrive at the house, they pulled the Grossups into an experience of *community sovereignty*. Collectively, as citizens, they determined what would happen, rather than allowing the wealthy, through their use of the state and law enforcement, to do so. And in exercising this community sovereignty, they strengthened not only the Grossups sense of political self-respect (evident in Mr. Grossup's words) but also their own sense of what they could achieve through collective action.

And the work continued. The Unemployment Council did not leave but hung around, talked with one another and had a meal together. They made sure the Grossups' experience was not one of impersonal services rendered, but of being part of a strong community.

Boyer ends the story with: “A great tension, an awful loneliness, was slowly seeping from Mr. Grossup's veins. He hadn't known how miserable he had been. A man couldn't do anything by himself. He hadn't known how many people had been going through the same things he had.

“Something had happened to him. He felt as if he had broken from the prison of his baffled self. No longer did he sit in his home all day. Still there were times on the picket line or while defying police as he helped move someone else's furniture, that he wondered at the tight, little intuned man he once had been. And it hadn't been much fun. He was growing under the

impact of adversity and most of America was growing similarly.

“Mr. Grossup is not left to be self-satisfied with his return to his house. He is put into action. He is trained to resist police on the picket line. He is given opportunity to take action in a way he knows is immediately beneficial to others. He becomes part of the movement culture. In part, because his neighbors knew his needs, met them, and used that as a springboard for so much more.”

We can imagine other parts of this story, knowing that the labor movement at that time was doing an intensive amount of education, both through literature and through training centers such as the Highlander Folk School, begun in 1932. Education, training and action were woven together and repeated, again and again. This weaving brought the meeting of basic needs, opportunities in true democratic experience, and the strengthening of individual and community sovereignty.

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All good philosophers know that a good answer is only a new question in disguise. Surely this is true of the brief answers I've sketched here. Hiding in a description of how people join and build movements is the question of how to make that happen today. How are we – especially those of us in the movement for radical democracy – creating opportunities for people to meet their needs in empowering, democratic, and community-building ways? How are we training them and making sure meaningful actions are ready and waiting? How can we help ourselves and those around us acquire individual self-respect and collective self-confidence?

How and when will our neighbors, the Mr. Grossups everywhere, rise up and join us?

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By What Authority (ISSN: 524-1106) is published by the Program on Corporations, Law & Democracy. The title is English for *quo warranto*, a legal phrase that questions illegitimate exercise of privilege and power. We the people and our federal and state officials have long been giving giant business corporations illegitimate authority. Today, a minority directing giant corporations and backed by police, courts, and the military, define our culture, govern our nation, and plunder the earth. **By What Authority** reflects an unabashed assertion of the right of the sovereign people to govern themselves.

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