

BIGGER / S BETTER

NAVIGATION

There is a widespread belief, that passes for common sense, that fighting for small goals is more practical than fighting for big ones, and it's totally and completely wrong. Counterintuitive as it may seem to people facing decades of losses and compromises, it remains harder to organize for small gains than for big ones, and trying to solve one problem at a time almost always leads to betrayals and mistakes.

Take the compact fluorescent bulb—please. The supposedly green choice for illumination uses less electricity to light up your days and nights than incandescent bulbs. That's the only problem it was designed to address, and we're encouraged to think that by buying them, we contribute to a greener, more sustainable world. But compact fluorescent bulbs are packed with toxic mercury that affects both producers and consumers. The work of making them is outsourced to nonunion, coal-fired Chinese factories, putting US workers out of work and Chinese workers into danger. And once made, the bulbs must be shipped from China to the United States on freighters fueled by oil. The problem is that lowering our electrical consumption is too small a goal.

What we really need is a way to produce energy that is ecologically and socially clean—no coal, no oil, no union busting, no black lung and mercury poisoning, no devastated communities and poisoned landscapes.

In order to achieve that, in spite of the immense resources of greedy oil companies with their power to overthrow governments and repress labor movements, we need many more people passionately committed to the task.

But once we let go of the illusion that we can save the planet by making small consumer choices and leaving the greater structures intact, once we reach for the stars, we have way more power to inspire each other. Once we think big, the indigenous people of Amazonian Ecuador and the residents of Richmond, California, can join forces with the heirs to murdered Nigerian environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Gulf Coast fishing communities devastated by the massive BP oil spill to fight the rule of oil corporations together.

Once we think big, innovators in technology and participatory democracy can collaborate. When we think big, hope is no longer deferred. Our small steps add up to a journey. We stop thinking that limiting our scope increases our chances. We don't throw anyone overboard for the sake of a little gain. When we think big, we fight for everyone.

In fact, anytime what we're fighting for brings us into conflict with the legitimate needs of another group of people, it's a sure sign that the picture is too small. There is no inherent conflict between the preservation of forests and the employment of loggers. We just need to devise a sustainable form of forestry and an economy that is built to support people and trees with equal care. True, it's a much bigger job, but it's a lot more interesting and has a much better chance of working than letting us be pitted against each other.

Big goals have another advantage. When you aspire to something that takes time to achieve, something historic and magnificent, it rises above the landscape of everyday tasks and give us a point of reference beyond our tumultuous weather. A big goal is like a star map, unchanged by wind and rain. Each time the clouds clear, we can check our positions against that reliable point of light and correct course as needed.

L A C O Y U N T U R A

There's a term in Spanish that was part of all the leftist speeches of my youth: *la coyuntura*. It means "the situation," "the circumstances," "the current historical moment." If the big picture is a constellation of stars by

which we plot our course, the coyuntura is the muddy ground we stand on while we stargaze. The bloody, difficult present. In the coyuntura, we have not yet won. Each act carries risks we must weigh. Not all our alliances will hold. Repression can escalate alongside bribery. Some of what we want to build can't yet be built. We point ourselves toward those dreams, but the conditions don't yet exist to make them happen. Standing there in the mud, our job is to keep talking about stars while we shovel slush, add gravel, pass around hot Thermoses. Sometimes that means supporting solutions that are painfully inadequate, that cost us, but that still move us toward the universally humane future we long for.

Since my teens I have fought for women's right to abortion. I do believe that life begins at conception. I do believe that aborted fetuses die real and significant deaths. But here in the coyuntura, I believe the reproductive sovereignty of women is an essential foundation of the world I'm building. All of us, those who support abortion and those who oppose it, should be demanding the development of safe, free, 100 percent effective birth control. Parenting should be well-paid, well-supported work, so that no woman aborts because motherhood will bankrupt her and smother every other dream. And until we achieve those goals, I choose the sovereignty and safety of women who are pregnant against their wishes or best interests over the brief, precious lives of those barely formed seedlings. When Rafael Correa, former president of Ecuador, said he would resign sooner than legalize abortion, he was refusing to recognize that when we can't yet have it all, we must choose the path that most expands our capacity to get it all in the future.

Supporting Ecuadorian women's right to abortion is actually the least damaging path toward protecting Ecuadorian children. Empowered, sovereign, with control over their reproductive lives, Ecuadorian women can fight for effective birth control, social support for the work of child rearing, and the rights of mothers, and make abortion unnecessary.

In each situation we face, we need to ask ourselves if the fights we take on, the models we create, are steps on the path toward our biggest dreams or Band-Aids meant to make oppression more tolerable. For this reason, I don't have a fixed position on how or if I vote in elections. My goal is not to have a slightly less oppressive president or a single politician not wholly at the service of corporate donors. I want to end all oppression

and free this country and all others from cruel social policies driven by a hunger for profit, so I think carefully about how my actions challenge or support the illusions of democracy that keep people passive.

Some campaigns put candidates with radical visions where they can raise their voices often and speak for us. Some allow us to focus in on specific liberation issues in a big way. Others bolster illusions of choice where none exist. Sometimes I vote for someone because in the coyuntura, their opponent will cause more acute suffering and lives will be lost. In those cases, I am voting to protect people and resources for the real work. At other times, I vote for the radicals who have no chance of winning, because our presence needs to be declared and because they openly challenge lies about reality and ignite necessary conversations.

The combination of celestial navigation and a good working knowledge of mud gives us the flexibility we need to respond in powerful and creative ways to even the most harrowing of circumstances.

TRAVELING SHOES

Big pictures and strategic grappling with the coyuntura, essential as they are, aren't enough. In spite of the revolutionary bravado I inherited alongside my lessons in strategy, injustice is traumatic. It does real damage to our bodies, our relationships, our emotions and intellects. We're all trying our best, hampered by millennia of PTSD.

In order to stay true to our biggest visions and stay accurate in our day-to-day assessments of our next steps, we need to heal, actively, consciously, continuously. Internalized oppression, or historical trauma, is a big backpack full of rocks we haul around on our backs. It slows us down, tires us out, and skews our aim. There's a left tradition of seeing attention to our psyches as "navel gazing," a self-indulgent preoccupation with personal affairs, a kind of fiddling while the world burns. But that comes from old, male-dominated, overly narrow understandings of how people and societies change. If the personal is political, so is the political personal. If it is true, as Che Guevara so eloquently said, that a revolutionary commitment to human liberation is fueled by love, then how can we not be heartbroken by oppression? When Emma Goldman declared, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution," she was

talking about the necessity of joy. Joy, hope, love, healing, are powerful forces. Just because at times these ideas have been manipulated to reinforce individualism doesn't make them sentimental distractions.

Travelers setting out on long journeys have to pack responsibly. We need food and water, first-aid kits and flashlights, journals and harmonicas, sun hats and thermal underwear, and really good shoes. As radicals with long-term plans, we need to prepare for whole lifetimes of challenging work. We need to keep inventing and honing practices that keep us fit. This means consciously building our tool kits and medicine bags, facing and recovering from the traumas of ongoing, violent oppression in the middle of trying to dismantle it, channeling grief and outrage into more finely honed visions, more powerful and effective strategies, stronger and more open love for our people, instead of letting them drag us into urgency, impatience, in-fighting, burnout, or giving up.

WHAT'S IN YOUR BAG?

My personal medicine bag and tool kit have been gathered over a lifetime of activism. Here are the main ingredients.

Cultivate Hope

My ability to think and imagine is a resource belonging to the commons, of which I am a steward. I have a responsibility to increase my resistance to discouragement and despair. I actively seek out stories of solidarity, generosity, creative social projects, inventions that serve people instead of corporations, discoveries that support my view of human nature and possibility, and in my capacity as a public artist, I spread them around. Most bad news is repetitive. I learn nothing new from the details of massacres, torture, corruption. They don't give me new insight into the possible. They just depress me. So I don't read emails that invite me to watch horrifying footage. I turn to news sources that often have inspiring stories. I monitor Telesur, Latin America's left tv network, which highlights my continent's resistance to US domination and the many amazing ways that wealth, access, and participation are being redistributed in places like Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador. I read *Portside*, an often uplifting online digest of news and analysis for the left that includes music videos, cultural analysis, interesting science features, and accounts of local struggles and

inspiring history. I travel to Cuba when I can, to experience life outside consumerism and a culture where human solidarity is an actively cultivated value. And when people tell me hopeful things, I decide to remember them.

Practice Consciousness Raising

By “consciousness raising” I mean the exchange of stories within a social group that allows us to map out the ways that social injustice impacts us personally, as we did in the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union consciousness-raising group I joined at fifteen. The more I understand about the way that internalized oppression distorts my thoughts, feelings, and actions, the better able I am to compensate for its effects and develop specific strategies to undo them. Knowing, for example, that the Ashkenazi Jewish history of cyclical expulsions, massacres, and attempted genocide has left us jumpy, urgent, inclined to leap into action too fast and talk a lot helps me monitor my own urgency and disbelieve it. Knowing my ancestors survived by trying to be indispensable helps me rein in my tendency to take on way too much.

I make frequent use of reevaluation counseling, a set of anti-oppression, peer-counseling tools shared throughout an international organization of people collectively researching how to heal from the effects of a hurtful past so we can totally claim the present and shape the future. I have co-counseling sessions several times a week, and some of my counseling partners have been doing this with me for decades. I tell and retell my stories, sob, shake, and laugh aloud, and new insights emerge, and that brings flexibility to wounds that have become rigidly scarred. I also listen and learn from other people’s lives, because the exchange of stories is the currency of transformation.

Build Solidarity

I try to practice the words of my former colleague Victor Lewis: Solidarity must be unilateral, unconditional, and universal. I try to be on everyone’s side, recognizing that interrupting someone’s inappropriate or oppressive behavior is being on their side. It’s standing up for their full humanity. I try to take every opportunity for connection. I ask the cashier at the market how her day is going, ask the paratransit driver to teach me a word in his language, stop and chat to picketers, smile at harassed parents on the bus

and assure them their children have a right to make noise. I look for the stories underneath people's stories and reach for points of connection. Of every proposal for any kind of social action I ask whether it will increase the sum of human solidarity, because solidarity is the antidote to oppression, which always seeks to dehumanize and divide us.

Collectivize My Struggles

Our society is constantly telling us our struggles are individual problems—defects of character, personal deficiencies, bad luck, too little ambition or energy or focus. Every chance I get, I seek out other people dealing with similar issues to my own and look for ways to join forces, because the more I participate in small examples of the kind of world I want, the more I experience in my daily life the difference it makes to work with others, and the more rooted in possibility I become. The privatization of suffering is a hallmark of capitalism, and the isolation and exhaustion it brings with it are real dangers, not only to our morale but to our survival. Every time we can join forces to create joint responses to formerly individual challenges, something significant shifts.

Connect with My Ecosystem

I tend my connection with the rest of the natural world of which I am part, and cultivate my awareness that it is not an “environment” but an intricate, living web of beings, a kinship. When I step away from my computer to stand barefoot on soil, to visit trees and streams, oceans and swamps, when I notice the movement of clouds and light and air, I regain my sense of relatedness. The separation that the attempted conquest of nature imposed on us begins to break down. Part of that tending is to grow plants and gather them, to use plant medicine and think of the donors of leaf and root and stem as living allies, not raw ingredients. Another part is to know the sources of what I eat, what the plants are like, what peoples first cultivated them, whose hands planted and harvested, packed and transported the food to my table. Every acknowledgment of connection is a victory against the assault on our bonds that domination inflicts on us all the time.

I remember that history is wide and deep, that there are many other lives being lived around me, and that generations stretch backward and forward from my moment in time. How I live my life right now extends

the impact of my ancestors and enriches the soil my descendants will plant their own lives in. Thinking this way makes the difficulties of the moment shrink against that grand background.

To quote from my poem “History Lesson”:

A thousand years from now
people will be telling this story,
how we were the first to circle the globe with protest. . . .
At such a distance they won’t imagine how you feel tonight,
sifting through my voice on the radio for what you need. They won’t
imagine
the way we couldn’t decide, moment to moment,
if we were losing or winning.
Our great-great fifty greats grandchildren will only say
they were brave, and something changed. It was a beginning.