

# SOUL of A CITIZEN

*Living with conviction in a cynical time*

by Paul Rogat Loeb

illustration by Mike Reed

Most Americans are thoughtful, caring, generous. We try to do our best by family and friends. We'll even stop to help a fellow driver stranded by a roadside breakdown, or give spare change to a stranger. But increasingly, a wall separates each of us from the world outside, and from others who have taken refuge in their own private sanctuaries. How can we renew the public participation that's the very soul of democratic citizenship?

To be sure, the issues we face are complex. It's hard to comprehend the moral implications of a world in which Nike pays Michael Jordan millions to appear in its ads while workers at its foreign shoe factories toil away for pennies a day. The 500 richest people on the planet now control more wealth than the poorest 3 billion, half the human population. Is it possible even to grasp this extraordinary imbalance? And, more important, how do we begin to redress it?

Certainly we need to decide for ourselves whether particular causes are wise or foolish. But we also need to believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile, that what we might do in the public sphere will not be in vain. The challenge is as much psychological as political. As the Ethiopian proverb says, "He who conceals his disease cannot be cured."

We need to understand our cultural diseases—callousness, shortsightedness, denial—and learn what it will take to heal our society and our souls. How did so many of us become convinced that we can do nothing to affect the future our children and grandchildren will inherit?

And how have others managed to work powerfully for change?

Pete Knutson is one of my oldest friends. During 25 years as a commercial fisherman in Washington and Alaska, he has been forced to respond to the steady degradation of salmon spawning grounds. He could have accepted this as fate and focused on getting a maximum share of the dwindling fish populations. Instead, he gradually built an alliance between Washington fishermen, environmentalists, and Native American tribes, and persuaded them to demand that habitat be preserved and restored.

Cooperation didn't come easily. Washington's fishermen are historically individualistic and politically mistrustful. But with their new allies, they pushed for cleaner spawning streams, preservation of the Endangered Species-Act, and increased water flow over regional dams to help boost salmon runs. Fearing that

these measures would raise electricity costs or restrict development opportunities, aluminum companies and other large industrial interests bankrolled a statewide referendum, Initiative 640, to regulate fishing nets in a way that would eliminate small family operations.

At first, those who opposed 640 thought they had no chance of success: They were outspent, outstaffed, outgunned. Similar initiatives backed by similar corporate interests had already passed in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. But the opponents refused to give up. Pete and his coworkers enlisted major environmental groups to campaign against the initiative. They worked with the media to explain the larger issues at stake and focus public attention on the measure's powerful financial backers. On election day in November 1995, Initiative 640 was defeated. White fishermen, Native American activists, and Friends of the Earth staffers threw their arms around each other in victory. "I'm really proud of you, Dad," Pete's 12-year-old son kept repeating. Pete was stunned.

We often think of social involvement as noble but impractical. Yet it can serve enlightened self-interest and the interests of others simultaneously, giving us a sense of connection and purpose nearly impossible to find in private life. "It takes energy to act," says Pete. "But it's more draining to bury your anger, convince yourself you're powerless, and swallow whatever's handed to you."

We often don't know where to start. Most of us would like to see people treated more justly and the earth accorded the respect it deserves. But we mistrust our own ability to make a difference. The magnitude of the issues at hand has led too many of us to conclude that social involvement isn't worth the cost.

Such resignation isn't innate or inevitable. It's what psychologists call learned helplessness, a systematic way of ignoring the ills we see and leaving them for others to handle. We find it unsettling even to think about crises as profound as the extinction of species, depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of

the rainforests, and desperate urban poverty. We're taught to doubt our voices, to feel that we lack either the time to learn about and articulate the issues or the standing to speak out and be heard. To get socially involved, we believe, requires almost saintlike judgment, confidence, and character—standards we can never meet. Our impulses toward involvement are dampened by a culture that demeans idealism, enshrines cynicism, and makes us feel naive for caring about our fellow human beings or the planet we inhabit.

## CHANGE *Happens* —*Slowly*

A FEW YEARS AGO, ON MARTIN Luther King Day, I was interviewed on CNN along with Rosa Parks. "Rosa Parks was the woman who wouldn't go to the back of the bus," said the host. "That set in motion the yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery. It earned Rosa Parks the title of 'mother of the civil rights movement.'"

The host's description—the standard rendition of the story—stripped the boycott of its context. Before refusing to give up her bus seat to a white person, Parks had spent 12 years helping to lead the local NAACP chapter. The summer before, she had attended a 10-day training session at the Highlander Center, Tennessee's labor and civil rights organizing school, where she'd met older activists and discussed the Supreme Court decision banning "separate but equal" schools. Parks had become familiar with previous challenges to segregation: another Montgomery bus boycott, 50 years earlier; a bus boycott in Baton Rouge two years before Parks was arrested; and an NAACP dilemma the previous spring, when a young Montgomery woman had also refused to move to the back of the bus. The NAACP had considered a legal challenge but decided the unmarried, pregnant woman would be a poor symbol for a campaign.

In short, Parks didn't make a spur-of-the-moment decision. She was part of a movement for change at a time when success was far from certain. This in no

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way diminishes her historical importance, but it reminds us that this powerful act might never have taken place without the humble, frustrating work that preceded it.

We elevate a few people to hero status—especially during times of armed conflict—but most of us know next to nothing of the battles ordinary men and women fought to preserve freedom, expand democracy, and create a more just society. Many have remarked on America's historical amnesia, but its implications are hard to appreciate without recognizing how much identity dissolves in the absence of memory. We lose the mechanisms that grassroots social movements have used successfully to shift public sentiment and challenge entrenched institutional power. Equally lost are the means by which participants eventually managed to prevail.

Think about how differently one can frame Rosa Parks' historic action. In the prevailing myth, Parks—a holy innocent—acts almost on a whim, in isolation. The lesson seems to be that if any of us suddenly got the urge to do something heroic, that would be great. Of course most of us wait our entire lives for the ideal moment.

The real story is more empowering: It suggests that change is the product of deliberate, incremental action. When we join together to shape a better world, sometimes our struggles will fail or bear only modest fruits. Other times they will trigger miraculous outpourings of courage and heart. We can never know beforehand what the consequences of our actions will be.

## Not for SAINTS —Only

"IT DOES US ALL A DISSERVICE," SAYS Atlanta activist Sonya Tinsley, "when people who work for social change are presented as saints. We get a false sense that from the moment they were born they were called to act, never had doubts, were bathed in a circle of light. But I'm much more inspired learning how people succeeded despite their failings and uncertainties."

Enshrining our heroes makes it hard for mere mortals to measure up. Because we can't imagine that an ordinary human being might make a critical difference in a worthy social cause, many of us have developed what I call the "perfect standard": Before we take action on an issue, we must be convinced not only that the issue is the world's most important; but also that we have perfect knowledge of it, perfect moral consistency, and perfect eloquence with which to express our views.

As a result, we refrain from tackling environmental issues because they're technically complex. We don't address homelessness because we aren't homeless. Though we're outraged when moneyed interests corrupt our political system, we believe we lack the authority to insist that campaign financing be reformed.

Proliferation of information makes it even more likely that we'll use the perfect standard to justify detachment rather than seek the knowledge we need to get involved. Now we can spend our lives garnering information from books, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, satellite cable channels, and radio talk shows, yet we don't dare speak out unless we feel prepared to debate Henry Kissinger or Trent Lott on *Nightline*.

Eloquence, however, is not as important as kindness, concern, and a straightforward declaration of belief. Will Campbell has been a Baptist preacher, civil rights activist, farmer, writer, and volunteer cook for his friend Waylon Jennings. Years ago, he was invited to participate in a student conference on capital punishment at Florida State University. At the last minute he discovered that he was

supposed to formally debate an erudite scholar, who delivered a long philosophical argument in favor of the death penalty as a means of buttressing the legitimacy of the state. When Campbell got up to present the opposing view, nothing equally weighty came to mind. So he said, slowly and deliberately, "I just think it's tacky," and sat down.

The audience laughed.

"Tacky?" the moderator asked.

"Yessir," Campbell repeated. "I just think it's tacky."

"Now, come on," the moderator said, "tacky is an old Southern word, and it means uncouth, ugly, lack of class."

"Yessir. I know what it means," said Campbell. "And if a thing is ugly, well, ugly means there's no beauty there. And if there is no beauty in it, there is no truth in it. And if there is no truth in it, there is no good in it. Not for the victim of the crime. Certainly not for the one being executed. Not for the executioner, the jury, the judge, the state. For no one. And we were enjoined by a well-known Jewish prophet to love them all."

I'm not lobbying for disdainful reasoned arguments. But modern society, by virtue of its complexity and sophistication, makes moral engagement difficult; we don't need to compound the problem by demanding perfection. Simple can still be forceful and eloquent. Social change always proceeds in the absence of absolute knowledge, so long as people are willing to follow their convictions, to act despite their doubts, and to speak even at the risk of making mistakes. As the philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore once wrote, "If you shut your door to all errors, truth will be shut out."

According to another version of the perfect standard, we shouldn't begin working for social change until the time is ideal—when our kids are grown, say, or when our job is more secure. We wait for when our courage and wisdom will be greatest, the issues clearest, and our supporters and allies most steadfast. Hesitation is reasonable; we are subject to real pressures and constraints. Yet when will we not be subject to pressures?

There is no perfect time to get involved in social causes, no ideal circumstances for voicing our convictions. Instead, each of us faces a lifelong series of imperfect moments in which we must decide what to stand for. We may have to seek them out consciously, sometimes in discouraging contexts or when we don't feel ready. The wonder is that when we do begin to act, we often gain the knowledge, confidence, and strength that we need to continue.

### LEADERS *Are Born* —*And Made, Too*

I'VE HEARD COUNTLESS PEOPLE SAY they'd like to do more but are just not "the kind of person who gets involved." The suggestion here is that the ability to make a difference is innate and immutable, either part of our character or not. But if developmental psychology theories are correct, there are no natural leaders or followers, no people who by sole virtue of superior genetic traits become activists. There are only individuals whose voices and visions through happenstance or habit have been sufficiently encouraged. Being able to stand up for our beliefs is a learned behavior, not an inherited disposition.

In fact, seemingly powerless people may be in a better position to change history than their more fortunate counterparts. Consider Martin Luther King Jr. early in his career, a 26-year-old preacher heading into Montgomery, Alabama, uncertain of what, if anything, he might achieve. Indeed, King's campaigns failed as often as they succeeded. Lech Walesa was a shipyard electrician before events thrust him into the forefront of Poland's Solidarity movement.

Wei Jingshen, the long-imprisoned dissident who helped inspire the Tiananmen Square protest by placing his democracy essay on a public wall, was a technician at the Beijing Zoo. Lois Gibbs was an ordinary housewife until she organized her neighbors at Love Canal, then founded Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste. These people were not fulfilling a preordained destiny. They were developing character—their own unique character—by speaking out for what they believed. As the 18th-century Hasidic rabbi Susya once put it, "God will not ask me why I was not Moses. He will ask me why I was not Susya."

### EXPERIMENTS *in Truth* —*Leave Room for Error*

IF PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE IS A developmental process, then taking action is also an experiment in self-education. Sociologist Todd Gitlin argues that learning often takes place precisely when we enter "that difficult, rugged, sometimes impassable territory where arguments are made, points weighed, counters considered, contradictions faced, and where honest disputants have to consider the possibility of learning something that might change their minds." Social activism, in other words, is as much a matter of learning how to listen, especially to those who disagree with us, as it is of learning how to voice our beliefs.

How do we know the changes we're promoting will do more good than harm? Advocates for the perfect standard would have us believe that uncertainty is an insurmountable obstacle, but it can also be a blessing. "The fact that we don't get it could be the best news of all," writes Sister Mary Smith of Portland's Franciscan Renewal Center, "because in not getting it we are opened up to a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing, and possibly a new way of living."

Those of us who work for social justice often have no choice but to pursue our fundamental goals by means that are unclear, ad hoc, half-baked, contradictory, and sometimes downright surreal. I remember going to one Vietnam-era demonstration that focused on the

role of major oil companies in promoting the war; my friends and I drove to the demonstration because there was no other cheap and efficient way to get there. As we stopped to fill up at a gas station along the way, it dawned on us that we were financially supporting one of the companies we would soon be vocally opposing. We felt more than a little absurd, but it was the best choice available.

We learn to live with contradictions in our personal lives. A lonely few wait indefinitely for partners who match their romantic ideals, but most of us fall in love with people who, like ourselves, fall short of faultlessness. Children are the embodiment of unpredictability; we can influence but not control them. We respond to those dear to us moment by moment, as lovingly and mindfully as possible, improvising as we go. We embrace uncertain human bonds because the alternative is isolation.

Public involvement demands a similar tolerance for mixed feelings, doubts, and contradictory motives. When we act, some may view us as heroic knights riding in to save the day, but we're more like knights on rickety tricycles, clutching our fears and hesitations as we go. Gandhi called his efforts "experiments in truth," because their results could come only through trial and error.

How then shall we characterize those who participate in our society as active citizens? They are persons of imperfect character, acting on the basis of imperfect knowledge, for causes that may be imperfect as well. That's a profile virtually any of us could match, given a willingness to live with ambiguity, occasional failure, and frustration. Imperfection may not be saintly, but wielding it in the service of justice is a virtue. Whoever we are, we can savor our imperfect journey of commitment. Learning as we go, we can discover how much our actions matter.

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