

*Howard
Zinn*

**You Can't
Be Neutral
on a
Moving Train**

A Personal History of Our Times



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B O S T O N

nomics department, a white South African who was outspoken in her disagreements with Silber about South Africa, was approved by her department, then vetoed by the president's office.

Much of the evidence in the trial centered on the importance of Julia Brown's book on Jane Austen. Silber expressed disdain for Jane Austen as a "lightweight" among novelists, but in the trial admitted he had not read Julia Brown's book. He did not deny that he had called the English department "a damned matriarchy."

The jury quickly came to a conclusion. Boston University and John Silber were guilty of sex discrimination. Julia Brown was awarded \$200,000. The judge, in an extraordinary decision (courts customarily stay out of tenure disputes), ordered B.U. to grant her tenure. It had taken six years of persistence on her part, but in the end, like her hero Sugar Ray Leonard outlasting Marvin Hagler for the middleweight championship, she won.

For so many of us who worked at Boston University, it was often discouraging to see how a tyrannical president could hold on to power for so long. But the administration, though it had its admirers, never won the affection of the campus community. And it never succeeded in beating down those students and faculty who were determined to speak their minds, to honor the idea that a university should provide a free and humane atmosphere for humane learning.

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The Possibility of Hope

I have tried hard to match my friends in their pessimism about the world (is it just *my* friends?), but I keep encountering people who, in spite of all the evidence of terrible things happening everywhere, give me hope. Especially young people, in whom the future rests.

I think of my students.

Not just the women of Spelman, who leapt over a hundred years of national disgrace to become part of the civil rights movement.

Not just the fellow in Alice Walker's poem "Once," who acted out the spirit of a new generation:

It is true—

I've always loved

the daring

ones

Like the black young

man

Who tried

to crash

All barriers

at once,
 wanted to
 swim
 At a white
 beach (in Alabama)
 Nude.

I think also of my students at Boston University and of young people all over the country who, anguished about the war in Vietnam, resisted in some way, facing police clubs and arrests. And brave high school students like Mary Beth Tinker and her classmates in Des Moines, Iowa, who insisted on wearing black arm-bands to protest the war and when suspended from school took their case to the Supreme Court and won.

Of course, some would say, that was the *sixties*.

But even in the seventies and eighties, when there was widespread head-shaking over the "apathy" of the student generation, an impressive number of students continued to act.

I think of the determined little group at B.U. (most of them had never done anything like this, but they were emulating similar groups at a hundred schools around the country) who set up a "shantytown" on campus to represent apartheid in South Africa. The police tore it down, but the students refused to move and were arrested.

In South Africa in the summer of 1982 I had visited Crossroads, a real shantytown outside of Capetown, where thousands of blacks occupied places that looked like chicken coops, or were jammed together in huge tents, sleeping in shifts, six hundred of them sharing one faucet of running water. I was impressed that young Americans who had not seen that with their own eyes, had only read about it or seen photos, would be so moved to step out of their comfortable lives and act.

It went beyond the obviously political issues. Young women were becoming more involved in demanding sexual equality, freedom of choice for abortion, control of their own bodies. Gays and lesbians were speaking out, gradually wearing away the public's longtime prejudices.

Beyond those activists, however, there was a much larger population of students who had no contact with any movement, yet had deep feelings about injustice.

Students kept journals in my courses, where they commented on the issues discussed in class and on the books they had read. They were asked to speak personally, to make connections between what they read and their own lives, their own thoughts. This was in the mid-eighties, supposedly a bad time for social consciousness among students.

A young woman wrote: "After reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, I cried for Mr. Wright, for the atrocities that he endured. . . . I cried for all blacks, for the unfair treatment they have continued to receive because they are black. And I cried for myself, because I realized that society has instilled some prejudice in me which I cannot get rid of."

A young man: "Two summers ago I worked at the General Motors plant in Framingham. . . . I learned a great deal in that one summer about what life is to many people. The usual scenario goes something like this: A young kid out of high school is 'lucky' enough to land a job at G.M. . . . Soon he realizes that working at G.M. sucks. The work sucks, the management sucks, and the union isn't even there half the time. . . . So the youngster thinks about his future: 'I hate this place and would love to leave, but I've already got five years under my belt. In only 25 years I can retire with a full pension. And so he decides to stay. Whoosh!!! And his life is gone.'"

A young woman studying in the school of communications: "I'm photostating logos at work. Logos for television sets. 'Sony. The One and Only.'—'Toshiba, In Touch With Tomorrow'—'Panasonic. Just Slightly Ahead of Our Time.' . . . Why am I surrounded by such nothingness that pretends to be something? My major is advertising. How can I work week after week creating nothingness? . . . Today in the library . . . I spent three hours looking through books on Vietnam. I need to know more. . . . More and more I find myself wondering if I could become a schoolteacher. Somehow I will tell people what I have learned. Show them where to find things out. This will be my war."

A young man from Dorchester (a working-class neighborhood in Boston which led the nation in the proportion of men who died in Vietnam) who worked in the library to help pay his tuition: "America to me is a society, a culture. America is my home; if someone were to rob that *culture* from me, then perhaps there would be reason to resist. I will not die, however, to defend the honor of the *government*."

A young woman in the R.O.T.C. program, after seeing the documentary film *Hearts and Minds*: "I thought I was doing pretty well 'keeping my cool' until I saw the American soldier shoot the Vietnamese. Then I lost it. And then there was a soldier dragging a mutilated dead body, and another kicking a live one. I watched the student next to me dab his eyes and felt glad someone else was just as upset. . . . General Westmoreland said 'Orientals don't value lives.' I was incredulous. And then they showed the little boy holding the picture of his father and he was crying and crying and crying. . . . I must admit I started crying. What's worse was that I was wearing my Army uniform that day. . . . After the film I tried to think of what was the worst war. . . . I don't think there is a 'worse war'. They're all insane."

A young man in R.O.T.C., whose father was a Navy flier, his brother a Navy commander: "My entire semester has been a paradox. I go to your class and I see a Vietnam vet named Joe Bangert tell of his experiences in the war. I was enthralled by his talk. . . . By the end of that hour and a half I hated the Vietnam war as much as he did. The only problem is that three hours after that class I am marching around in my uniform . . . and feeling great about it. . . . Is there something wrong with me? Am I being hypocritical? Sometimes I don't know . . ."

A young woman: "As a white middle class person I've never felt discriminated against at all. But I'll say this: If anyone ever tried to make me sit in a different schoolroom, use a different bathroom, or anything like that, I would knock them right on their ass. . . . Until hearing the black student in class speak I never realized how strong blacks really feel."

A young woman, a junior in liberal arts: "A lot was said in class

that my grandparents worked hard and blah blah blah. . . . Believe me, people have worked just as hard as other people's grandparents have and they have nothing at all to show for it. . . . I was once told that 70% of the people on welfare were under the age of sixteen. . . . If 70% of welfare recipients are children, how do we as the great nation we claim to be justify budget cuts?"

Another young woman: "But the people are the last ones that need their rights stated on paper, for if they're abused or injusticed by government or authority, they can act on the injustice directly, which is direct action. . . . It is really government and authority and institutions and corporations that need laws and rights to insulate them from the physicality, the directness of the people."

I found my students, in the supposedly placid eighties, fascinated by the movements of the sixties. It was clear they *longed* to be part of something more inspiring than taking their scheduled places in the American commercial world.

The great popularity of certain readings I assigned told me something about these young people. They were moved by the life story of Malcolm X, by the passionate declamation against war in *Johnny Got His Gun*, by the anarchist-feminist spirit of Emma Goldman in her autobiography *Living My Life*. She represented to them the best of the revolutionary idea: not just to change the world, but to change the way you live, now.

One semester I learned that there were several classical musicians signed up in my course. For the very last class of the semester I stood aside while they sat in chairs up front and played a Mozart quartet. Not a customary finale to a class in political theory, but I wanted the class to understand that politics is pointless if it does nothing to enhance the beauty of our lives. Political discussion can sour you. We needed some music.

In the spring of 1988 I made a sudden decision to quit teaching, after thirty-odd years in Atlanta and Boston and three visiting professorships in Paris. I surprised myself by this, because I love teaching, but I wanted more freedom, to write, to speak to people around the country, to have more time with family and friends.

I would have more opportunities to do things with Roz, who

had stopped doing social work, was playing music and painting. Our daughter and her husband, Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn, lived in the Boston area and we would be able to spend more time with their children, our grandchildren—Will, Naushon, Serena. Our son Jeff and his wife, Crystal Lewis, were settled in Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, where he was directing and acting with the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater. We would be able to pay more attention to his work, while enjoying the magnificent ocean beaches and sea air of the Cape, where we shared a beach house with our old Spelman friends, Pat and Henry West.

I also looked forward to pursuing my interest in writing plays. I had watched all of my family members get into theater. Myla and Roz had acted, in Atlanta and Boston. Jeff had made it his life. When the Vietnam War ended, and I felt some breathing space, I wrote a play about Emma Goldman, the anarchist-feminist who, at the turn of the century, created a sensation all over the United States with her daring ideas.

Emma was first produced in New York, at the Theatre for the New City, and Jeff directed it. I enjoyed the idea that my son and I were working together as equals, but no, he as director was in charge! It was a warm and wonderful collaboration. The play was then staged in Boston, brilliantly directed by Maxine Klein, and both theater critics and audiences were enthusiastic. It ran for eight months, the longest-running show in Boston in 1977. There were more productions, in New York, London, Edinburgh, and then (translated into Japanese) a tour of Japan. I caught the fever of the theatrical world and was never cured.

News of my leaving Boston University seemed to spread; my last class was especially crowded, with people there who were not my students, standing against the wall, sitting in the aisles. I answered questions about my decision, and we had a final discussion about justice, the role of the university, the future of the world.

Then I told them that I was ending the class a half-hour early and explained why. There was a struggle going on between the faculty at the B.U. School of Nursing and the administration, which had decided to close the school down because it was not making enough

money, in effect firing the nursing faculty. The nurses were picketing that very day in protest. I was going to join them and I invited my students to come along (Roz had given me that idea the evening before). When I left the class, about a hundred students walked with me. The nurses, desperately needing support, greeted us happily, and we marched up and down together.

It seemed a fitting way to end my teaching career. I had always insisted that a good education was a synthesis of book learning and involvement in social action, that each enriched the other. I wanted my students to know that the accumulation of knowledge, while fascinating in itself, is not sufficient as long as so many people in the world have no opportunity to experience that fascination.

I SPENT THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS responding to invitations to speak here and there around the country. What I discovered was heartening. In whatever town, large or small, in whatever state of the Union, there was always a cluster of men and women who cared about the sick, the hungry, the victims of racism, the casualties of war, and who were doing *something*, however small, in the hope that the world would change.

Wherever I was—whether Dallas, Texas, or Ada, Oklahoma, or Shreveport, Louisiana, or New Orleans or San Diego or Philadelphia, or Presque Isle, Maine, or Bloomington, Indiana, or Olympia, Washington—I found such people. And beyond the handful of activists there seemed to be hundreds, thousands more who were open to unorthodox ideas.

But they tended not to know of each other's existence, and so, while they persisted, they did so with the desperate patience of Sisyphus endlessly pushing that boulder up the mountain. I tried to tell each group that it was not alone, and that the very people who were disheartened by the absence of a national movement were themselves proof of the potential for such a movement. I suppose I was trying to persuade myself as well as them.

The war in the Persian Gulf against Iraq, in early 1991, was especially discouraging to people who had hoped that the era of large-

scale military actions by the United States had ended with Vietnam. The newspapers were reporting that 90 percent of those polled supported President Bush's decision to go to war. The whole country seemed festooned with yellow ribbons in support of the troops in the Gulf. It was not easy to oppose the war while making it clear that we were really supporting the troops in our own way, by wanting to bring them home. In the heated-up atmosphere that seemed impossible to do.

Yet wherever I went I kept being surprised. I was not just speaking to small, self-selected antiwar audiences, but to large assemblies of students at universities, community colleges, and high schools—and my criticism of the war, and of war in general, was being received with vigorous agreement.

I concluded not that the polls were wrong in showing 90 percent support for the war, but that the support was superficial, thin as a balloon, artificially bloated by government propaganda and media collaboration, and that it could be punctured by a few hours of critical inspection.

Arriving at a community college in Texas City, Texas (an oil and chemical town near the Gulf Coast), in the midst of the war, I found the lecture room crowded with perhaps five hundred people, mostly beyond college age—Vietnam veterans, retired workers, women returning to school after raising families. They listened quietly as I spoke about the futility of war and the need to use human ingenuity to find other ways to solve problems of aggression and injustice, and then they gave me a great ovation.

As I spoke, I noticed a man sitting in the back of the lecture hall, a man in his forties, in coat and tie, dark-haired, mustached, and I guessed that he was from somewhere in the Middle East. During the long question-discussion period, he was silent, but when the moderator announced, "Time for one more question," he raised his hand and stood up.

"I am an Iraqi," he began. The room became very quiet. He then told how two years before he had become an American citizen, and that during the citizenship ceremony members of the Daughters of the Confederacy had handed out tiny American flags to the new cit-

izens. "I was very proud. I kept that little flag on my desk at work. Last week I heard on the news that my village in northern Iraq, a place of no military significance, was bombed by American planes. I took the flag from my desk and burned it."

The silence in the room was total. He paused. "I was ashamed of being an American." He paused again. "Until tonight, coming here, and listening to all of you speak out against the war." He sat down. For a moment, no one made a sound, and then the room resounded with applause.

Larry Smith, my host in Texas City, was a faculty member at the college, a lean, bearded Texan who looked like Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. He became the object of controversy when a colleague of his accused him of being radical and anti-American, suggesting that the trustees fire him. A meeting was held, at which student after student spoke of Larry Smith as a wonderful teacher, and of how he had broadened their thinking in so many ways.

A woman who had been his student said, "All instructors are like pages in a book and without the unabridged edition we'll never get the whole story." The college president said, "If criticizing our government constitutes being anti-American and pro-Communist . . . I suspect we are all guilty." The Trustees unanimously voted to support Smith.

In the spring of 1992 I was invited to Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. There, in the Wyoming Valley, where the Lackawanna and Susquehanna rivers meet, where just before the Revolution all Indian homes in the valley were burned to ashes at the behest of a land company, were several hundred people of conscience joined in an interfaith council. In that council, feminist groups and disarmament groups worked together, and much of their activity was in aid of people in Central America who were struggling against military governments supported by the United States.

A nun and a priest were my hosts there. The priest, Father Jim Doyle, taught ethics at Kings College in Wilkes-Barre. He had been an Italian translator in prisoner-of-war camps in the second World War, and later was galvanized into political activity by the war in Vietnam.

I left Wilkes-Barre thinking that there must be activists like this in a thousand communities around the nation, ignorant of one another. And if so, were there not enormous possibilities for change?

In Boulder, Colorado, I met the remarkable Sender Garlin. He was eighty-eight years old, an old-time journalist for radical newspapers, a short, thin compression of enormous energy. He had organized my visit and said to me with confidence, "I've been publicizing the meeting. I think at least five hundred people will be there." There were a thousand.

Boulder, it turned out, was alive with all sorts of activity. The local radio station was a mecca of alternative media, airing dissident views all over the Southwest. I met its ace interviewer, David Barsamian, an ingenious impresario of radical broadcasting, who shared his cassettes with a hundred community radio stations around the country.

Going around the country, I was impressed again and again by how favorably people reacted to what, undoubtedly, is a radical view of society—antiwar, anti-military, critical of the legal system, advocating a drastic redistribution of the wealth, supportive of protest even to the point of civil disobedience.

I found this even when speaking to cadets at the Coast Guard Academy in Newport, Rhode Island, or to an assembly of nine hundred students at the reputedly conservative California Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo.

Especially heartening was the fact that wherever I have gone I have found teachers, in elementary school or high school or college, who at some point in their lives were touched by some phenomenon—the civil rights movement, or the Vietnam War, or the feminist movement, or environmental danger, or the plight of peasants in Central America. They were conscientious about teaching their students the practical basics, but also determined to stimulate their students to a heightened social consciousness.

In 1992, teachers all over the country, by the thousands, were beginning to teach the Columbus story in new ways, to recognize that to Native Americans, Columbus and his men were not heroes, but

marauders. The point being not just to revise our view of past events, but to be provoked to think about today.

What was most remarkable was that Indian teachers, Indian community activists, were in the forefront of this campaign. How far we have come from that long period of Indian invisibility, when they were presumed to be dead or safely put away on reservations! They have returned, five hundred years after their near annihilation by invading Europeans, to demand that America rethink its beginnings, rethink its values.

It is this change in *consciousness* that encourages me. Granted, racial hatred and sex discrimination are still with us, war and violence still poison our culture, we have a large underclass of poor, desperate people, and there is a hard core of the population content with the way things are, afraid of change.

But if we see only that, we have lost historical perspective, and then it is as if we were born yesterday and we know only the depressing stories in this morning's newspapers, this evening's television reports.

Consider the remarkable transformation, in just a few decades, in people's consciousness of racism, in the bold presence of women demanding their rightful place, in a growing public awareness that homosexuals are not curiosities but sensate human beings, in the long-term growing skepticism about military intervention despite the brief surge of military madness during the Gulf War.

It is that *long-term* change that I think we must see if we are not to lose hope. Pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act.

There is a tendency to think that what we see in the present moment we will continue to see. We forget how often in this century we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions, by extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible.

The bad things that happen are repetitions of bad things that have always happened—war, racism, maltreatment of women, re-

ligious and nationalist fanaticism, starvation. The good things that happen are unexpected.

Unexpected, and yet explainable by certain truths which spring at us from time to time, but which we tend to forget:

Political power, however formidable, is more fragile than we think. (Note how nervous are those who hold it.)

Ordinary people can be intimidated for a time, can be fooled for a time, but they have a down-deep common sense, and sooner or later they find a way to challenge the power that oppresses them.

People are not *naturally* violent or cruel or greedy, although they can be made so. Human beings everywhere want the same things: they are moved by the sight of abandoned children, homeless families, the casualties of war; they long for peace, for friendship and affection across lines of race and nationality.

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zig-zag towards a more decent society.

We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world.

TO BE HOPEFUL in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live *now* as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.