

Which Side Are You On?

Leslie Feinberg

Feinberg, a transgender activist, received an honorary doctorate from Starr King School in May 2007. Feinberg delivered this speech at the school's Graduates Dinner.

The diploma I received in high school taught me a lot. I was a butch lesbian high school student who worked second shift doing industrial work, less and less interested in mandatory attendance and classroom rote. One of my English teachers persuaded me to attend my high school graduation ceremony. I sat in the back, in denim and sunglasses, cap pulled low over my eyes. They announced my name, handed me a diploma, an English award and a \$10 gift certificate to a local bookstore.

I got an education from that diploma itself. I had seen how many African American classmates who had worked hard to stay in school had been expelled for speaking up, or for minor infractions of arbitrarily punished rules. The majority of the white students was middle class and expected to go on to the university. Although I was blue-collar, headed for the factories, as a white student I was given the gift of a diploma.

I tossed the diploma out, kept the understanding and the gift certificate to the bookstore, and set out to find my education in the roiling world around me.

I came of age and consciousness at the height of the Civil Rights movement, the rising Black Power and American Indian Movement, the Young Lords and the Chicano Farm Workers organizing factories in fields, women's and gay liberation--and the demand to bring the troops home, now, from yet another Pentagon war, at that time against the Vietnamese people.

The struggle is a great educator. All of the products of my labor have been as a working-class scholar of struggle. And your bestowing of an honorary doctorate, a letter of humanities, for me for my intellectual labor and activist work--has great meaning for me. This is a diploma I will treasure.

I think what brought us together here tonight is that we each sincerely want to change the world for the better. We may or may not agree on how.

But we can meet by bridging conscience and consciousness.

As a secular Jewish revolutionary communist, I know that many of you have heard, out of context, Marx's phrase that religion is the "opium of the people."

Marx was actually writing with great compassion for the suffering of the class that was, and still is, exploited, downtrodden and disenfranchised. He wrote, "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering."

Religion, he wrote, "is the sigh of the oppressed," it is, "the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions." It was in that context that Marx said religion is an opiate for pain and suffering.

Many of us in this room share this in common--we feel that suffering, hear the sighs and moans around us, struggle to change the soulless conditions.

How can we unite to change those conditions?

Working in factories in which I was in a union, or trying to be, gave me two important tools. The first was a critical compass: Which side are you on? The other was a honed principle: An injury to one is an injury to all.

My analytical work as a transgender lesbian was sharpened and deepened by the tool of historical materialism, which allowed me to understand how I got to this place in the world by allowing me to see the vista of the hills and valleys of human social development .

The most startling find I discovered was that greed and bigotry are not hard-wired human characteristics. The truth that for the vast majority of human history our earliest ancestors lived cooperatively and communally is downright subversive. It means that human nature is not fixed and immutable, but really quite changeable in changing material conditions.

Because of the role of gender variant, transsexual and intersexual people in the belief systems of many cooperative societies, I could see that science and belief had not yet split in early communalism. They were all one effort to understand and to explain the world around us.

It was only at the point where human society first cleaved into have- and have-nots--into slave-owners and slaves, feudal landowners and serfs, capitalist patriarchs and workers--that religion and science split, as well.

To our early ancestors, who would have starved without cooperation, the decree, "Thou shalt not steal" would have been inexplicable. But with changing economic organization and exploitation, the Lord's Prayer changed too. Only under feudal privatizing--the enclosure of common land--could trespass be a crime that required absolution. Only under a money-based capitalism system could debt require mercy.

Virtually every emperor or king or imperial president has flown a religious flag over their class battles to expand their empires. Those who resist, often do so under the banner of the same religion, or an oppressed religion.

Denmark Vesey, the great leader of rebellion of enslaved peoples, was a African Methodist while Leonidas Polk, an Episcopal bishop, was a Confederate general in the Civil War. The struggle to abolish slavery split the denominations on this continent, based on who suffered from slavery and who profited from slavery.

It was not moral suasion that ended slavery, but a civil war, in which each had to answer, as the union song demands: Which side are you on?

Today, we are being asked to line up behind Halliburton and Big Oil, Wall Street and its banks, to go kill or be killed in a war for empire in the Middle East. This so-called “war on terror” carries the banner of Christian fundamentalism in a war against Muslims who are resisting enslavement, who are defending their land, their labor, their lives.

As a Jewish revolutionary, I say here that I am shoulder-to-shoulder with Muslims who are fighting for their sovereignty and self-determination all over the world.

I live in Jersey City, which I believe at this point has the largest per capita immigrant population in the U.S. Muslim, Arab and South Asian neighbors, co-workers and friends are being discriminated against, disappeared, detained, deported and tortured.

For those who ask, how could Japanese Americans have been rounded up and interned in this and other states in the U.S. during WWII, this is how it begins.

They are not the only political prisoners in the U.S. Tomorrow, people from around the country and around the world will be in Philadelphia to pack the court and the streets outside in support of death-row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal--Black revolutionary journalist known as “the voice of the voiceless.”

Tomorrow I will wear this sticker that says “New trial now! Free Mumia!” to help bring this demand for justice everywhere tomorrow. I have more stickers for those who would like to demonstrate their solidarity.

The struggle to free Mumia is a defining case of our era, like the struggle to free the Scottsboro Brothers and the Rosenbergs. It is part and parcel of the fight against racism and national oppression, against the prison industrial complex and the death penalty, used as a weapon by today’s rulers just as the emperors lined the road to Rome with crucified slaves to warn others against trying to rise up to break their shackles.

Leonard Peltier, the Cuban Five being held in U.S. jails, immigrant workers in detention after police state raids on factories, the prisons filled with those whose crimes are those of survival. The cities are being starved to pay for endless war.

Overt war against the peoples of Iraq, Palestinian, Afghanistan, Lebanon. Threats of impending war against Iran and saber rattling at North Korea. Covert dirty wars against Cuba, Venezuela and Sudan.

The promoting of fascist ideology and vigilantes against undocumented immigrants trying to survive imperialist globalization. Bigotry and violence, hunger and homelessness.

The pope orders liberation theologians to offer the poor only spiritual sustenance, not struggle with them for an economic system that can provide food for all.

To some, the idea of struggle sounds anathema to peace. But struggle is the road to peace that those who are beleaguered by oppression must take. There is a great centeredness and joy and freedom to be found in doing what is historically necessary, in taking up the tasks that history hands us.

Cuban Revolutionary Che Guevara said so well, “At the risk of seeming ridiculous, a revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.”

It is the love felt by people who are willing to risk their lives for changes that generations yet unborn will cherish. It is the love we feel for all who are resisting tyranny, because we know which side we are on.

In the succinct eloquence of former enslaved laborer, abolitionist, writer and orator Frederick Douglass: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet avoid confrontation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its waters.”

I know that many of us will find each other as we take to the streets for demands for economic and social justice and against the war. But I, and millions more in this country and around the world, will not stop fighting until every battle is won. We are modern-day abolitionists, who are organizing to end this system of capitalist economic enslavement and build a society in which each individual can contribute what they can and in return, receive all that they need and desire.

So I leave you with this question: Which side are you on?

***STARR KING SCHOOL for the MINISTRY**
Educating Unitarian Universalist ministers and
progressive religious leaders since 1904*