

“Fight What’s Wrong”

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I spent much of Governor Peterson’s memorial service at the Chase Center, about to tear up. For various reasons. A lot of it was about losing a truly great man. I don’t care if he was 94, I was still sad. The tributes were moving, especially the ones by his son and daughter. They almost made me cry. Martin and Scott’s music almost got me, too. But the moment where I finally lost it was watching some footage of the governor speaking. A younger, stronger version of the man I knew, so persuasive. I watched him, and I felt hope rising within me – that people *could* fight injustice, that people *were* more important than money, that people *could*, as Chris Hedges puts it, be drawn to the good by the good. I felt hope rising. He said, “Stand up for what’s right. And fight like hell what’s wrong!”

There was a soft titter in the crowd – it was a great line. But I wonder if there were other people there who were hit where I was – at that soft place that still believes. Nobody wants to be a sucker – to hope in the face of disappointment, to hope after your heart has been broken by the cruelty and indifference of the world’s powers. To hope when you have no reason to. Russell Peterson’s message was: you have to hope. And I’ll be there with you.

We need a lot of help these days, to feel a sense of hope about our country. I found this near-shut down of the government especially discouraging. The policy riders impacting institutions I love and respect – Planned Parenthood, National Public Radio, the Environmental Protection Agency. The sense of fiscal emergency being trumped up to a state of hysteria, being used to promote a socially conservative and especially mean agenda. Paul Krugman of the New York Times said that the same representative, Paul Ryan, whose proposals were applauded in this current budget has proposed about \$4 trillion in cuts over the next decade – 2/3 of which are aimed at services for the poor. They would cripple essential public functions, like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. (Paul

Krugman, “Ludicrous and Cruel”, NYT April 7, 2011) It seems so cold, just breathtakingly, dizzyingly cold.

Things got cold in Wisconsin. If you were following the teachers’ strike in Wisconsin, you saw the rise and fall of hope there. People protested on the steps of the capitol building in Madison. In the bitter cold of a Wisconsin winter, it was not an easy commitment to make. It was thrilling to see photographs of the crowds - 85,000 to 100,000 people. National coverage, growing public outrage. If this were a movie, we would see the softening of the governor’s heart, or the dawning of political reality that would show that he could not win this one, the people had spoken. But this was not a movie, so he and his Republican Party Caucus controlling state legislation, passed it, anyway. They took away the teachers’ collective bargaining rights, as well as those of other public workers. It wasn’t even about the money anymore. Union leaders had agreed to the cuts before the bargaining rights were taken away. Wisconsin’s budget deficits weren’t even that big compared to states like Texas and California. This was a pure power grab – taking power away from the Democrats, who consistently get support from unions.

Meanwhile, Michigan. Governor Rick Snyder is doing what any sensible person might do during a fiscal crisis – raising taxes. He’s raising \$1.7 billion in taxes. But he’s raising it from senior citizens and poor people. Oh, and people who give money to state universities. And he is not applying this money to make up his state’s deficit. He’s giving away \$1.8 billion in corporate tax cuts. When I heard about this, the cool precision of those two numbers took my breath away. A colleague of mine wrote on Facebook, “This makes a certain amount of sense until you think about the people involved.” His state legislature has also passed a law that gives the governor the ability to declare a state of financial emergency in any city or town in his state, take over their elected government, and put in someone of his own choosing to run things. This could be an individual, or it could also be a corporation. They would have the power to dissolve any agreements the town has made with its workers, including collective bargaining. They could also dissolve the whole town if they wanted.

Altogether, sixteen states are waging similar battles against unions and collective bargaining.

I truly didn't understand it until I read an article in Vanity Fair that is online, coming into print next month. It's called "Of the 1%, by the 1% and for the 1%." The top richest 1% of our country own one quarter of America's income. If you're measuring this in wealth, the top 1% owns 40%. They are doing quite well. Twenty-five years ago, they only owned 12% of the income and 33% of the wealth. And most of the people who comprise our congress – house and senate – come from the top 1%! They were financed by them and naturally they have their interests at heart. They also must be quite heartened by the Supreme Court's decision last year to make corporate campaign contributions limitless. So when a General Electric can make 14 billion in profits and pay no taxes, they have quite an incentive to cast a lenient eye.

Vanity Fair author, David Weigel, writes, "So what if this person gains and that person loses? What matters, [some would] argue, is not how the pie is divided but the size of the pie. That argument," he says, "is fundamentally wrong. An economy in which MOST citizens are doing worse year after year – an economy like America's – is not likely to do well over the long haul." Growing inequality means shrinking opportunity – for most people. It also skews the direction our young people go in with their careers. If the real money is in finance, why would you want to be, say, a teacher? And it doesn't "invest much in our country's infrastructure, education, and technology." We have been steadily cutting back in all these areas, and our congress has just agreed on cutting another \$38 billion. (David Weigel, "Of the 1%, by the 1% and for the 1%" Vanity Fair, May 2011)

Where do we begin to respond to something like this? We need to fight like hell.

Bill Moyers reminds us that all rights gained throughout our history were "launched as citizens' movements and won the endorsement of the political class only after long struggles and in the face of bitter opposition and sneering attacks." ("This Is Your Story. Pass It On", in *Moyers on America*, 2004) It took a long time, he says. It took people staying with it. The story of unions in our country is about this. Unions had been a lot more powerful than they are now. In 1960, Mark Shields reports, about a third of American households belonged to a union. They won for us all kinds of things we take for granted: the five-day work week and eight-hour work day, child labor laws, paid vacations, worker safety, minimum

wages, pensions, social security. Philip Dray in his book, *There Is Power in a Union*, writes, “Such rights were not handed down by anyone, or distributed, ready-made, but were organized around, demanded, and won by workers.” (Dray, p. 674)

Workers in the early days of industrializing America, found their country “did not care much for labor unions.” “In no other nation,” Dray says, “has organized capital so resisted organized labor”. More here than in Europe or England, perhaps, because powerful American corporations organized before there was a centralized government. The right to own property, to own and conduct competitive business has been deemed sacred – witness the long history of the rights of slave owners to protect their “property” and the number of court decisions in favor of business owners to earn a profit. I know there is a rough side to unions and union history – they are far from perfect. Still, they were people who saw their fates as bound together with others. They believed something was wrong with the people at the top holding all the power, and they fought like hell.

My father was in a union. I learned this when I was seven or eight, and saw a picket sign resting on our front porch. It was probably there because it had gotten dirty, and my mother didn’t want it in the house. I don’t remember what it said, but I knew what it was for. This was the late 1960s, and signs like it were all over the television – they were waved at sit-ins, and carried in marches for civil rights, women’s lib, and against the Vietnam War. My dad’s teacher’s union was on strike, and he was out on the picket line. School was shut down for a few weeks, which I considered a plus. I was pro-union in that regard. Actually, I found it kind of thrilling that my father was in a *protest*. My father was far less excited, middle-aged and nobody’s activist. But he was loyal. Perhaps he was thinking about his own father, a railroad man, who did hard, physical, and somewhat dangerous work, and valued the protections that came from belonging to a union. He grew up in the 30s, one of the most powerful and positive times associated with unions. Mostly, I think he was out there because they were his friends, and he just couldn’t face them if he didn’t go.

This, it turns out, is our greatest hope. People tend to fight the good fight because their friends are fighting; they see an obligation. Malcolm Gladwell writes that prolonged social justice movements require strong ties among members.

Studies of the sit-ins and summer voter registration drives of the early 1960s show that about a quarter of those who started dropped out. This is not surprising. Participants in the freedom rides as they were called, were arrested, shot at, beaten and sometimes kidnapped and murdered. They were often followed by young white men in pick-ups carrying rifles. Helping with the Freedom Rides was not for the faint of heart. (“The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted”, Malcolm Gladwell, October 4, 2010) Those who stayed were not the ones who were the most passionate about racial justice and the movement. They were the ones who had friends also committed to the movement. The four original college students who sat in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, were two pairs of dormitory roommates. All four had gone to the same high school. The night before the sit-in, Franklin McCain said to his three friends as they talked late into the night: “Are you guys chicken or not?” From those humble beginning - four young men daring each other and unable to back out - 70,000 students became activists. It was like a fever.

But it wasn’t a fever. All important fights take a long time. As Salman Rushdie says, “Democracy is an ongoing argument about what is right.” (Interview with Bill Moyers, “Faith and Reason”, PBS) Certain things in our history were considered “right” for a long time – at least “right” in terms of being completely legal, and among some Americans, morally acceptable. Slavery, segregation, the lack of a vote, or to own property, for women. The ability for police to raid any establishment serving gays and lesbians and arrest them on charges of public obscenity. The civil rights movement started in the early 1900s, if you remember that the NAACP was formed in 1909, that there were movements in the 20s and 30s. The Montgomery Bus strike happened in 1955, and it took 9 years to get an amendment for equal voting rights.

They stayed in the fight because the churches were organized as means of support. They stayed in the fight because of what it meant, not just for their own families but for whole communities. They stayed in the fight because they had to – or they, and everyone they knew would be living the dead life – the life without hope.

Maybe the birds in our Sufi story were the same way. Maybe the thirty that went were the ones who couldn’t abandon their friends. Maybe they were the ones

who simply couldn't live without hope. Once they set out together, once they started to face all kinds of dangers and setbacks, something happened. They saw their fates tied up together. They became the god they sought. What we keep forgetting, is just how tied up our fates are with one another's. We have this strange idea that we are separate, that I can just worry about myself and about my family, and not be concerned with you or yours.

And so we look at the Wisconsin teachers' strike with some hope. "What was supposed to be an isolated budget debate awakened and united workers and activists perhaps more than any event in a generation," write Nick Nyhart and David Donnelly in *The Nation*. "Tens of thousands across the country have rallied at statehouses against anti-worker legislation and in solidarity with Wisconsin." People are filing lawsuits. The Wisconsin court system is tying things up as best they can. Attention drawn from the teachers' strike almost elected a state supreme court justice sympathetic to workers. She didn't win. But she closed a 30-point gap in just two months. This is not over.

So much of the story that's been told in all of these struggles has been cast in terms of survival. How will we survive if – fill in the blank – if we keep running a deficit? If we can't be competitive in the global economy? If we can't keep the power we have and get more of it? We have to change the story. We have to talk about what ALL of us need to survive – not just our side, but all sides. We have to change the story.

How about this? The states are not broke. The money is there, in the pockets of the wealthy. The money is, well, it's in the banks. "Banks and Wall Street caused the financial crisis. Their fraud and deception wiped out an estimated \$40 billion in global wealth. They rewrote tax laws so that Bank of America doesn't have to pay taxes – they didn't pay last year, or the year before." (Chris Hedges, on *Truth Dig*, April 3, 2011) And there are now protests at branches of Bank of America, organized by community organizers and faith-based organization and the Service Employees International Union. Protests have temporarily shut down Bank of America branches in Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, New York, Detroit, Kansas City, Oxford, Connecticut, New Brunswick, Baltimore, Austin, Berkeley, Ithaca, Tucson,

Charlotte, North Carolina, and Olympia, Washington. None in Delaware, but who knows? You would definitely see me out there on Naamans Road if there was.

You would see me because I need hope.

More than an afternoon of protest, I find my hope in serving a church, in building community. I need to see hope in the eyes of my friends, and to hear it in their voices. When I am low on hope, I know others in my community will carry it for me. I will carry it for them. But building community also takes time and effort. “The building of community – and the interdependencies that make it possible – doesn’t happen at 2:00 a.m. sitting solo in front of a computer screen with a bag of Doritos and a super-sized Mountain Dew. It happens two people at a time as ideas are debated and alliances are formed. It happens through a process of negotiation where individuals concede their need for one another.”

(wordpress.com)

The only choice besides hope is giving up. The danger we face is the danger of giving up. It is the danger of going dead inside. I hope because I don’t want to go dead inside. Communities can help us find hope when we cannot. Our church community has hard-working people who are fighting the good fight. Talk to our Green Sanctuary people or the group that is doggedly fighting global warming. Talk to our Allies for Racial Justice, who are celebrating Loving Day on June 12, honoring the hard-won fight for couples to marry across race. Russ Peterson said many times that he got his start as an activist from being involved in this church. Maybe you will, too. If you are angry about the stripping of unions’ rights or the gutting of important programs, talk to people at your church. Talk to me. We will stay in this fight with you. We will keep hope alive. So may it be. Amen.