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Shoving at the Thing From All Sides

Margaret Killjoy

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NO ONE WAY WORKS,
it will take all of us
shoving at the thing from all sides
to bring it down.

–Diane di Prima, Revolutionary Letter #8

I went and did a talk and a reading in a small town in West Virginia last weekend, and with everything going on in the world, it took me a moment to concentrate on reading fiction. If you remember all the way back to the crisis of three days ago, versus the crises of this week thus far, the US president was busy playing chicken with other world leaders, threatening to tank the entire world's economy. My truck parked outside was filled with staple foods I'd picked up on the way to the talk.

I read some folklore anyway, and I'm glad I did, because I needed a moment of levity, a moment to watch a small town arts community come together. I also need the vegan cupcakes that someone made for the event. Then, afterwards, we talked.

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I've been asked an awful lot, in the past couple weeks, some variation of the question "what the hell should we do?" I'm shy with answers, because, on some level, what do I know? I'm as lost in this shit as anyone else. If I look back on twenty years of protests, it feels sometimes like I'm looking back on a string of failures.

Then I realize: looking back on, and learning from, failures is exactly what we ought to be doing. Then, bigger picture still, you realize: those protests weren't failures.

We don't live in utopia, that's true. Where I live drifts (or runs) closer and closer to dystopia every day. So nothing the rebels before us have done has "worked," in that they did not create a stable, perfect society.

But by that standards, neither has anything the reactionaries have done, because we don't live in the hell they imagine we ought to be in. We live in a beautiful, terrible place full of wonderful and awful things that ebb and flow into one another. Every little bit of safety and happiness in our lives was bought with the labor and blood of social movements that have come before us.

The protests I've been to haven't been failures. The alter-globalization protests of 1999–2003 or so were far more successful at stopping the wholesale plunder of the global south than we realized at the time. On a more intimate level, one of the first protests I ever went to, in 2002, was for Leonard Peltier, who will be released from prison this month because of fifty years of organizing.

So I did that talk in West Virginia last weekend, and afterwards we talked about what's to be done. The core of it, the core of organizing really, was that they decided they ought to get together and talk on a regular basis. That's it. That's the core of organizing.

Do you want to know what I think you should do? You should find likeminded people in your local area—some of whom you know already, some of whom you don't—and talk. Talk about the problems you face, the problems you're likely to face, and talk about what to do about them.

They picked “seed swap” as the format for how they were going to meet, because food sovereignty mattered to them and it played to their strengths and interests. They figure they can get together and share seeds and help one another with gardens and orchards and talk about their problems and talk about what’s coming and sort out how to help one another.

And when all of us do that, we change the world.

I don’t know what works, exactly, but I know what doesn’t work.

What doesn’t work is the endless and obsessive search for the “one right way” to fix the world. There is no single vanguard who can save us, just like there is no politician or revolutionary leader who will lead us all into a bright, shining future. There’s also no single ideology—not even my beloved anarchism—that’s going to do it.

The Zapatistas have a saying that lives in my head, that they’re fighting for a world in which many worlds are possible. If we are fighting for a pluralistic, multicultural world, then we must fight for it in pluralistic, multicultural ways.

It’s going to take seed saver circles in the mountains, working with native crops that are resilient to the whims of climate change to make sure people stay fed. It’s going to take people burning police precincts to the ground. It’s going to take video game characters in green overalls. It’s going to take angry sign-wielders and polite sign-wielders. It’s going to take saboteurs and it’s going to take atheists and it’s going to take interfaith coalitions.

And the only way we can have this beautiful, messy, powerful movement is if we stop imagining that one way is the right way. Ironically, religious radicals have a step up in this regard... after thousands of years of arguing about religion, a large number of people have realized “there is no true and perfect religion, there is only the one that works for me.” So we see interfaith coalitions. We see people not only “setting aside” differences, but celebrating differences.

To continue to throw a series of cliches and slogans at you, what we need is a “diversity of tactics.” This means, in short, stop talking shit on people who do things in different ways than you would. It means not calling the cops on people who break bank windows, it means not looking down on peaceful marchers. I means recognizing that we are in a very bad situation and different people are going to be drawn to use different methods to address that bad situation.

The strategies that can work are the strategies that embrace diversity as our strength, rather than seek to force cultural, strategic, or political homogeneity on us.

The Greek anarchists have a saying (there are so many slogans and sayings in protest culture), that they aren’t a movement, they’re a constellation of stars. They are the night sky. They don’t have to all line up, they don’t even have to be pushing the same direction. They just need to break the power structure that is immiserating the world.

Personally, I don’t mind imagining us as a “movement,” so long as it’s a “movement of movements.” (There’s another too-easy slogan for you!)

From a pure, practical point of view, there’s a set of principles that activists adopted in 2008 during protests against the Republican National Convention that might be of use:

1. our solidarity will be based on respect for a diversity of tactics and the plans of other groups.
2. the actions and tactics used will be organized to maintain a separation of time or space.
3. any debates or criticisms will stay internal to the movement, avoiding any public or media denunciations of fellow activists and events.

4. we oppose any state repression of dissent, including surveillance, infiltration, disruption and violence. we agree not to assist law enforcement actions against activists and others.

So how do we get through this? The same way that humans evolved to get through everything: solidarity.

We’ll get through this by sharing seeds and hiding neighbors and blocking busses and not calling the cops on each other. We’ll get through this by conflict resolution and by accepting our own imperfections. We’ll get through this by recognizing that we all need a livable world and that fascism is a threat to every living creature on earth.

Some of us won’t get through this. That’s alright too. None of us were immortal anyway.

we are
endless as the sea, not separate, we die
a million times a day, we are born
a million times, each breath life and death:
get up, put on your shoes, get
started, someone will finish
–Diane di Prima, Revolutionary Letter #2