

IT AIN'T EASY TO BE RIGHT (LEFT): an open letter to young radical women

By Suzanne Sunshower

This fall, it will be 40 years since I agitated at my grade school to get girls into shop class and sports (and out of typing class). My success with that mission prompted me to later start the Radical Student Union at that school, which then led me into a lifetime of activism. I guess what's kept me going all these years is that I've won a few battles; and, more importantly, I've kept on learning. You can win battles, but you have to learn how not to lose the war.

At school after school, I pushed to change the racist and sexist attitudes held by most staff and many students. This was the main reason how I came to attend five high schools and three universities. However, I believed that a catalyst was needed to achieve change and that my agitation was one necessary catalyst. So, I pushed. And by pushing, I did my part to give slow, painful, birth to change.

Be realistic...

"It was time for us to change, we needed it at this university. I don't think we would have done it so fast, had you not been here," the Dean of Women at my first college told me, just before she asked me to leave, saying that my presence had become too distracting to campus life. I was expelled for a year.

As catalysts for change, radical activists push social evolution when others are afraid to do so. Often, once the need for change is acknowledged, and while new ways of seeing and doing things are still being implemented, the catalyst is expelled. Few wish to be reminded of the labor pains attendant to a long-coming change; the radical activist is society's mirror, the persistent memory of its ugliness. If you think that fighting for your cause is rough and isolating, just remember that you can win battles for yourself and your peers, and still be shunned. It happens.

A radical activist should expect to be asked to leave a few places — sometimes, under threat of harm. Before I left that university, one administrator had threatened to "lose" my academic records (for my gay rights position on-campus), and I had received bomb and death threats from the local redneck community. The town press had become leery of my activist work in the greater region (challenging Dow Chemical over local water pollution; politicizing American Indian youth on the area reservation, et al) and was no longer supportive of my efforts. My freshman college roommate was assistant editor at the town paper, and even she would no longer meet with me in public, saying she feared for her job and that it was "too dangerous" to be seen with me.

My advice is to know when the battle is over and your job is done; don't feel defeated if you must move swiftly on to the next challenge, particularly if it will save your life. You haven't lost anything; you have lived to fight another day. No one can fault you for that.

If you are a young woman who thinks my advice sounds melodramatic today, let me remind you that in the U.S., peri-

ods of social growth are always followed by periods of reactionary, social retardation. Advancements after slavery led to Jim Crow and the KKK; women in the workforce during World War II retracted into 1950s across-the-board repression; the 60s-70s led to Reaganism and an expansion of the evangelical right-wing; Clinton led to another Bush. Overall, we have come a long way, but if you think that all of your battles will be won under Obama, you can probably expect to be rudely awakened. So, be prepared.

Focus...

At first, as a 'free radical,' I was all over the place. I was concerned about everything: poverty, war, racism, women's rights, gay rights ... you-name-it. In the 1980s, though, I decided to narrow my attentions to one or two primary issues that I wanted to fight to protect, or to change. At that time (the Reagan era), I settled on "abortion rights" and "racism." I believed that, in my lifetime, these were the two issues that were key to all else that disturbed me about American society. I maintained, and still do, that the fight for control over women's bodies is a human rights issue (as is gay rights); and that poverty and environmental issues often hold a racial component. Even war — who goes to war, and who war is declared upon — has always held racial overtones.

Focusing on one or two core issues doesn't mean that you don't care about the others, sometimes it's the best way to both conserve your energy and to build the most comprehensive arsenal. After all, almost all issues, and certainly all people, are inextricably connected. Also, the people and causes who need your voice, will know they can count upon you to step-up if you have concentrated your efforts in that area. In this society, there is still enough that needs to be done to go around. You can't fix everything by yourself, so let others do their part too.

It's a faith...

Just as you are a radical activist because you deeply desire to help others, please let others help you. When you are exhausted or out of funds (and you will experience both), ask for help from your activist sisters. It's hard to do, I know. But they know how tough you are, and how committed you are, and they don't want you to burn out or feel alone in these struggles. Besides, they might need your help at a later date, too. Just reach out to them. And don't forget to meet new people — through attending demonstrations, or contributing writings about your work to publications — so that you can continue to expand your networks, and so that you don't begin to feel suffocated within a small circle of friends.

Radical activism should feel more uplifting than draining. Although pushing for change can seem never-ending and overwhelming, it is your passion, and you have chosen to live it. Your faith in a radical life tells you that tomorrow will be different and better, for all people. You have dedicated your life to that. So, celebrate!

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