

Another World is Possible: Reflections on the 2010 U.S. Social Forum

In June 2010, over 18,000 progressive and radical activists converged in Detroit, Michigan, for the U.S. Social Forum. (USSF) This gathering, which was modeled on the World Social Forums that have been taking place across the globe since 2005, was more than just a conference. The USSF was a vital encounter in movement building, including youth, elders, indigenous people, and activists of all colors, classes, and abilities in conversations about the direction of our country and the future of our planet. Here are some reflections of four spiritually inspired activists who were there.

Building Alliances towards Transformation

by Jacks McNamara



Like many, I originally came to spiritual practice looking for peace and liberation. The further I engaged with different traditions, primarily Zen Buddhism and vinyasa yoga, the more clear it became to me that radical transformation does not happen through talking alone; it requires practice, and this cannot be a solely personal practice. The liberation of the bodhisattva is not realized through a private inner enlightenment, but through a peace that includes everyone. We vow to stay in the wheel of life and death long enough to end the suffering of *all* beings. Peace requires justice, and justice requires that we all commit to the struggle.

For me, the USSF was a historical convergence of people committed to the struggle; people coming together from across the entire country to practice, share experiments, network, and prefigure liberation. Though I learned from many different groups, I came aligned with two primary organizations: *The Icarus Project*, a radical mental health support network and media project with groups all over the U.S., Canada, and abroad; and *Generative Somatics*, a California based, social justice-oriented organization that offers an integrative approach to transforming trauma and oppression using somatic awareness, somatic bodywork and somatic practices to create lasting change.

My work with both of these groups is deeply aligned with my spiritual practice and the ways it has unfolded beyond the doors of the zendo. In opposition to the alienation, apathy, overconsumption, and dissociation so common in mainstream American culture, I aspire to practice becoming more present, more embodied, more connected, more creative, and more strategic in my resistance to systems of power. My daily practices of centering, meditation, jo, and

prayer are not just something I do for my own piece of mind; they are the cornerstones of my ability to engage in complex collective projects aimed at transformative social change.

My work with *The Icarus Project* is all about building community with people who have been labeled “mentally ill” and disenfranchised. It is about creating collective space to come to know our complex natures and find honest language for our experiences; it is about practicing compassion and mutual aid while we work for change; bearing witness to the many untold stories and sharing the skills we need to survive; and so much more. At the Social Forum, *Icarus Project* members attended numerous workshops offered by other groups, networking and learning all along the way, as well as facilitating two vastly popular workshops of our own: “Our Mental Health as Activists,” and “Radical Mental Health and Collective Liberation.” In addition to opening up such dynamic conversations, we also rented a group house for the week where *Icarus* members from all across the country and Canada could live together and model the kind of wellness support we want to see at big, stressful convergences like the USSF. Through cooking communal meals, practicing meditation and reiki at the end of the day, brainstorming, debriefing, laughing, and checking in we were able to make this historic event accessible and sustainable for people with different levels of mental wellness.

My connection to *Generative Somatics* offers a different set of skills and connections; with these people, I am finding mentorship and tools for political analysis and embodied presence in the struggle for justice. At the Social Forum, I attended an exceptional workshop on Somatics and Social Justice, which emphasized the need for those of us working within social movements to become most fully whole in order to do effective work. If we draw on the vast resources offered by our entire bodies, not just our brains; learn daily practices

and group practices that can help us resolve old trauma and work through the legacies of oppression together; come to understand personal and collective trauma and the ways it impacts our communities and our collective projects, we might have a shot at both personal transformation and transformative organizing. As suggested by the group Social Justice Leadership, in their pamphlet *Transformative Organizing*, which was widely distributed at the USSF, we might be able to join a wider struggle that “does not confine itself to systemic or structural change alone. Rather, it seeks to integrate personal transformation and transformation of our relationships into the process of fighting for structural change.” These teachings feel like such a

potent extension of engaged Buddhist principles. If we hope to achieve the USSF’s motto that “Another World is Possible” and build on the visionary alliances made possible by this historic convergence, we will need every available tool, including community support and concrete, mindfulness-based practices that allow us to be most available for collective work and the co-creation of new realities. ❖

Jacks McNamara is a San Francisco Bay Area-based visual artist, poet, songwriter, designer, educator, activist, and co-founder of The Icarus Project. A student of the San Francisco Zen Center and of Generative Somatics, Jacks explores spiritual practice, healing, and transformation from a number of perspectives.

On the Language of the Heart at the USSF

by David Belden, D. Phil



When I go into a big mainstream Left event, I find myself recalling why for so many decades I retreated from the Left into writing novels, earning my living as a carpenter, and trying to practice loving people, my own family to begin with.

In the big echoing hall at the USSF in Detroit, I had a hard time hearing what people were saying. But the difficulty I had hearing the speakers felt like a metaphor to me about the difficulty America will have hearing their message, not because of the technology but because of the content and the language, which was the familiar content and language of the secular Left.

When I became ashamed of my political passivity, aware that the Bush warmongers and torturers had come to power through the passivity of too many like me, I sought a politics that would not be self marginalizing in the ways of the current Left. I looked for something more like the 19th century Left, which opposed slavery, inhumane prison and factory conditions, low wages, and other evils in the language and deepest values of the masses, who then as now were much more overtly religious than, say, the Europeans.

The best political voice I found of this kind, that I felt I could get behind, was that of Michael Lerner, *Tikkun*, and the *Network of Spiritual Progressives*. Unlike so many spiritual people who see their spirituality through an individualistic, even consumerist lens,

prophets like Lerner, in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Heschel, the Quakers who pioneered slavery abolition, and a host of others, see the struggle to reform this world as a spiritual imperative. They have absorbed Marxism and its lessons. But unlike the secular left, they constantly talk of why we need radical change in universal human terms: which these days means not so much a language of religious belief, as a language of spirituality, of caring, empathy, awe and wonder at the universe, interdependence of all life, the inherent worth and dignity of every living person and being; they make the moral appeal in ways the middle of the road person can more likely hear.

America apparently does not want to hear that poverty is unacceptable, that mass imprisonment, war, the purchasing of Congress by big money, and all the other evils identified by the Left are unacceptable and counterproductive. Certainly the corporate-owned media doesn’t want to report that message—so it is partly the technology, of which they have the lion’s share, that isn’t working for us. But the media that do promote the Left’s views are hardly bursting with their readers’ and viewers’ donations. The connections aren’t being made. I think it is because we are so clear about what we are against but only talk about what we are for in terms of policies and interests, not in the popular language of the heart.

Maybe one day, when corporate policies have led to greater inequality and impoverishment, and to more ecological disaster and climate change, the fact that the Social Forums have been bringing activists together over the years will mean that people’s movements are

better organized and interconnected and able to take center stage nationally. If many people feel this Social Forum moved that agenda on substantially then I will be glad to hear it.

But maybe new content and language are emerging, and in future people may look back to this Social Forum and find these threads highly significant. I am talking of the relatively few people at the Forum who spoke in the language of Martin Luther King Jr.,

or of the healing and repair of the world (which is what *Tikkun* means), or of Buddhist economics. We—at least I—felt lonely at the Forum, our presence small. I expect I missed a lot. ❖

David Belden, the managing editor of Tikkun Magazine, has been a carpenter (20 years), business writer (10 years), novelist (two published), president of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, cofounder of a countercultural store and café, and college teacher. He doesn't know what's next.

Exploring Right View in Detroit

by Susmita Barua



This summer I was delighted to accept Sarah Weintraub's invitation to present a workshop on mindful system change at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit. The USSF's slogan, "Another World is Possible; Another U.S. Necessary," resonated with my own vision for the planet and the cyber activism work I've been doing since 2001. After coming to the U.S. in 1985 as a graduate student, I felt quite uprooted, homeless, and alienated from my mother, my culture, and my community in Calcutta, India. Some raw experiences of 'dukkha' made me question the conventional model of a happy life. Treading a skillful middle ground between the norms of two cultures, the Indian and Buddhist values I grew up with, and the American values I absorbed in Tucson, Arizona, was quite tricky. Ultimately I decided to quit my professional career path and follow my heart. Following a profound awakening in 1993, my whole worldview and the center of my being shifted.

This past June at the USSF 2010, I was delighted and humbled to join the colorful opening rally of more than 20,000 fellow grassroots activists, organizers, and advocates of many causes merging in a great rainbow of bodhisattvas. Living in Kentucky, at times I feel quite isolated from other activists and like-minded Buddhists, but in the USSF arena I found a safe and cheerful haven for activists. Here, I felt secure, included, and respected.

As a child, my creative imagination was most captivated by the opening verse of the *Dhammapada*: "We are what we think." Our thoughts create our worldview and shape our experience. In this way the

power of intention can help clarify and becomes an unseen force of nature, the formless and immeasurable dimension the Buddha talks about. While researching the economics of war funding, I came to realize the shocking truth of our monetary system and its deep implications—that the basic foundation of our currency, banking, and financial capital is based on what Buddhists call "wrong view." I shared my discovery in a Buddhist Women's forum at the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference in Vietnam in 2010. To my surprise my radical approach to Buddhist economics was joyfully embraced by the lay practitioners, nuns, and academics who attended my workshop.

At the USSF I found a lot of effort was expended by activists addressing the symptoms of the problem—fighting corporations or going back to socialist/Marxist ideology—but very few activists talked about how to address the blind spots of the system itself. The diagnosis of the problem was lacking—the suffering fueled by greed and sustained by apathy and lack of awareness—and that is where the solution lies.

Happily at the USSF, I found some people were quick to make connections to my presentation of the eightfold noble path as the working template for both the diagnosis and solution to the economic, social, and environmental illness facing us all. After years of trying to reach out to people who couldn't or wouldn't hear me, finding a supportive environment at the USSF and Sakyadhita International gave me the nourishment and inspiration to keep working for compassionate solutions to create a just and sustainable economic system. ❖

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Slowing Down at the USSF

by Maryam Roberts



As my teacher Natalie Goldberg says, “people who are active and creative need quiet peace at their back; otherwise, they burn up.” Until a few years ago when I learned to slow down, sit, breathe, and walk slowly one foot in front of the other along the edges of the

zendo, I was burning up. I was burnt out.

It’s the nature of activism. I work with communities of color, youth, women, queer folks, and veterans of the U.S. military—the populations impacted most by militarism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Together with my colleagues, I’ve organized and facilitated workshops and made collective art, all towards healing and building peace in our communities. The work is very active. We don’t have the military’s budget, so we have to work twice as hard to do a tiny fraction of what the military can accomplish with the stroke of a pen, signing billions more to fund the wars. But it’s amazing how far we can go with what we do have.

I went to the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit this year not as a representative of a program or organization, but as myself, unaffiliated. I had just completed a week-long volunteer gig facilitating a Leadership and Organizing Training with Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW) in Chicago. The week was packed full of strategy brainstorming sessions and community building, as we uncovered strategies to raise veterans’ voices against the war. We worked late nights and early mornings. We even worked through a power outage in the pitch-dark basement room of a church—people pulling headlamps and flashlights from their satchels and backpacks as thunder cracked open the sky.

I had one day of rest and reflection before flying to Detroit for the Social Forum. I sat on the beach next to Lake Michigan with a few veterans and allies from the training. I swam in the cool waters as thunder storm clouds gathered overhead. I floated, staring at the big open sky as the small lake waves tossed me about, washing away any stress.

The next morning I was on the move again, like all the other busy bees swarming down on the hard-hit community of Detroit. We were all burning the candle

at both ends. The number of overlapping workshops on every issue was overwhelming—there were literally hundreds of workshops from groups all over the country. I narrowed my participation to workshops building Veterans and G.I. leadership and resistance. It was a good choice and allowed my understanding of the current landscape to grow deeper. My awareness expanded so I could see the links between militarism and other issues. The places where issues intersect are where the most powerful solutions emerge.

The buzz of a national event like this was exciting. Many community-based networks wouldn’t have coalesced without a space like the USSF, as valuable connections sparked everywhere. I still missed plenty of crucial workshops.

Activist culture tends to be overly active and less reflective. Where are the healing aspects that we, and the people we serve, so desperately need? Certainly there’s a case to be made that there’s just too much work to do, with all the crises our communities face—there’s just no time to stop or rest. At the USSF, it was my ability to slow down, pause and reflect, whether by the waterfront in downtown or just outside the convention center on a narrow patch of grass, that kept me going. Friends of mine found a way to replenish by ducking into a hotel for 20 minutes of silent meditation between workshops. Many people shared that the march on the last day to call attention to a local polluting incinerator was a rejuvenating experience as people walked together in joyful solidarity.

The USSF was more about the face-to-face interactions and network building, than showing up for every single workshop. The quality of the work that happened in Detroit showed up in the trust and relationships I built—both the new and old. Focusing on one issue was like the focus I bring to meditation. Each time I show up to my sitting practice, I cultivate that quiet peace to be present. The more present I can be with myself, the more I have to give, the more active I can be in supporting veterans’ resistance and healing, and working for an end to the wars. ❖

Maryam Roberts is an Oakland-based writer, veteran advocate, and ally. She has worked on U.S. militarism issues, with a focus on gender, racial justice, and queer rights, for nearly a decade. A co-founder of Art in Action Youth Leadership Program, she also teaches digital storytelling workshops.

So the Future

by Sarah Weintraub

*"The next Buddha will be a Sangha."
—Thich Nhat Hanh*

So the future is to teach meditation to people held
in prison,
but also it is that we are in prison—
for sitting meditation on the missile silos,
for settling our cushions in front of the Colombian
Embassy,
for crossing the line, and then writing poetry on the
walls.

And the future is there are no more prisons.

The future is a careful of kale and tomatoes and a
marching band
and it's growing our own food in Montague, in
Hawai'i, in community gardens in Detroit,
and the future is a ring around Congress to end
childhood hunger,
and all hunger,
and for a decent job with a living wage for everyone,
and to stop them from stealing and selling our
ancestors' seeds.

And it's the monks in Burma who said, with open
hearts—we love you
and said, with clear discernment—No. And
overturned their begging bowls.
It's the people in Birmingham, proud and happy
to march together, smeared with ketchup and with
blood.
And the bloody smeared handprints on a tree in
northern Colombia
where the Peace Community says—No.
Where they say—We know they'll kill us eventually,
but we're not scared anymore.
It's Make Levies not War.
It's jugs of water in the Arizona desert.
It's doing what needs to be done and saying what
needs to be said.

The future is caring for our monasteries and our
careful forms,
and letting our practice and our practice places be
refuges of silence, of welcome, for everyone.

And the future is taking our practice and our practice
places out—
into the streets of Bogotá, of San Francisco, of Yonkers
into Auschwitz
into the giant Sequoias and the redwoods and the
Amazonian rainforest.
This, our joyful practice—which is also painting the
goddess, a dance party in the zendo,
a cafecito and chatting after zazen in Medellin, a hug,
a song, a hand.

The future is—
Mom, what was the dream of the man who killed
him?
is—Can I walk with you to the little red schoolhouse
on the hill?
is—What brings you here? (And then, listen.)
is—How can I help?
is—All you have to do is show up, and come back.
is—May all beings be free from killing one another.
May all beings be free from torturing one another.
May all beings be happy.

It's living with this broken heart, this broken world.
It's loving anyway.

So the future is a sangha
because our human nature, our buddha nature,
is a sangha nature:
this is because that is.

So the future is us,
together with all beings. ❖

*Sarah Weintraub is the executive director of the
Buddhist Peace Fellowship. She presented this poem in
a slightly different form at the Symposium for Western
Socially Engaged Buddhism organized by the Zen
Peacemakers in Montague, Massachusetts, in August, 2010.*