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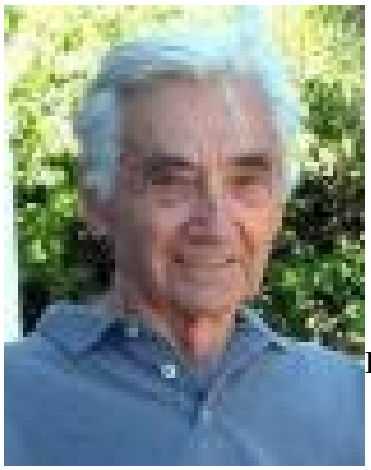
Howard Zinn: Small acts multiplied by millions

John Dear | Feb. 2, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Last week, we lost one of the great original voices in the nation, 87-year-old historian and peace activist Howard Zinn. His was a unique voice -- of truth, clarity, wisdom, sanity, humanity. He was the first of his kind, and his history lessons influenced millions.

A combat veteran of World War II, Howard Zinn taught political science at Spellman College and Boston University and authored dozens of books. A long-time activist, he addressed peace rallies, wrote countless essays against militarism, and repeatedly committed civil disobedience against war and landed in jail.



But it was his breakthrough, two-million-copy-selling masterpiece, *A People?s History of the United States*, that opened the door for many to embrace a new vision of peace. In this classic work, he told not an ?alternative? history of our nation, but the real history -- the story of the movements that resisted slavery, oppression, sexism, racism, greed, the story of ordinary people who changed the country. It is a history that few knew about it, much less taught.

We?ve all been told that history is the story of the rich, the powerful, the warmakers. Howard Zinn taught us that true history is the story of the nonviolent, the peacemaking, the resisters who struggled for justice and peace, from Jesus to Dr. King. With this truth, we know that each one of us can make history, as Howard himself did.

?People, when organized, have enormous power, more than any government,? Howard wrote in his book, *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*. ?Our history runs deep with the stories of people who stand up, speak out, dig in, organize, connect, form networks of resistance and alter the course of history.

> There is a basic weakness in governments, however massive their armies, however vast their wealth, however they control images and information, because their power depends on the obedience of citizens, of soldiers, of civil servants, of journalists and writers and teachers and artists. When the citizens begin to suspect they have been deceived and withdraw their support, government loses its legitimacy and its power. We have seen this happen in recent decades all around the globe. It?s the history of the

> Philippines, Indonesia, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Russia, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Think of Argentina and South Africa and other places where change looked hopeless and then it happened. Remember Somoza in Nicaragua scurrying to his private plane, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos hurriedly assembling their jewels and clothes, the shah of Iran desperately searching for a country that would take him in as he fled the crowds in Tehran, Duvalier in Haiti barely managing to put on his pants to escape the wrath of the Haitian people.

I knew Howard for more than 20 years through our friend Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan. Howard wrote a chapter for my 1996 book of essays in honor of Dan, *Apostle of Peace*. There, Howard told in detail the story of their famous January 1968 journey to Hanoi, where they suffered under U.S. bombs and received three U.S. airmen who had been held as prisoners of war. Later in Boston, in 1970, Howard hosted Dan while Dan evaded FBI agents hot on his trail. Like Dan, Howard took bold risks for justice and peace. He practiced the lessons of history he taught.

?Of course Dan violated the law, but he was right,? Howard wrote about Dan?s ?Catonsville Nine? action.

> And it is the mark of enlightened citizens in a democracy that they know the difference between law and justice, between what is legal and what is right. It is the mark of wise men and women to know what is important and what is unimportant. The flesh of Vietnamese men, women and children, the blood of young American soldiers, the anguish of parents grieving over lost children -- that is important. The papers and paraphernalia of the system that selects people for war -- these are unimportant. Let us hope that our country will become wise. But until it does -- indeed, in order that it should -- we as its citizens must act in the wisdom of our own conscience.

Over the years, I met him on various occasions -- at events and gatherings -- and I invariably found him friendly, warm, and kind. He always encouraged my efforts to make peace. Last month, I sent him my new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, which I knew he would enjoy.

That warm smile, shock of tousled hair, the truth that he spoke so casually -- Howard was an original. He belonged in that rare pantheon of original voices who despite long odds somehow keep the disparate parts of the movement moving -- Amy Goodman, transforming the media through ?Democracy Now;? Michael Moore, transforming film through documentary; Paul Farmer, transforming medicine through his preferential option for the poor; Helen Prejean and Kathy Kelly, transforming charity work into powerful advocacy for justice and disarmament; Martin Sheen and Susan Sarandon transforming celebrity into activism; Joan Baez and Pete Seeger, transforming music into political action; Thomas Gumbleton, Joan Chittister, and Daniel Berrigan transforming church routine into steadfast peacework; and so many others.

Howard laid the groundwork. He showed us that the purpose of academic work and research, in his case, history and political science, is to help the global grassroots movements of social change for justice and peace. He taught us the past, precisely that we might all work to create a new future.

?The challenge remains,? he wrote.

> On the other side are formidable forces: money, political power, the major media. On our side are the people of the world and a power greater than money or weapons: the truth. Truth has a power of its own. That age-old lesson -- that everything we do matters -- is the meaning of the people?s struggle here in the United States and everywhere. A poem can inspire a movement. A pamphlet can spark a revolution. Civil disobedience can arouse people and provoke us to think. When we organize with one another, when we get involved, when we stand up and speak out together, we can create a power no government can suppress.

?Look for a peace movement to join,? he told students last November in a talk. ?It will look small, pitiful and helpless at first, but that?s how all movements start.?

Over lunch in Santa Fe a few years ago, Howard told a group of us that after a lifetime of studying the history of U.S. social movements, he had come to a conclusion. He said every major movement for social change in our history was hopeless. Here, I thought, was a discouraging word.

Hopeless from the beginning, hopeless through the middle, hopeless up to the very end -- people laboring toward a hopless goal. But then, like a bolt out of a blue sky, a breakthrough. The key, he said, was that ordinary people kept at it despite all evidence. Ordinary people doing their small acts for justice every day -- here was the key. Over time peaceful acts add up to something big. What the powerful fear most, he said, are the grass-roots movements that won?t go away.

So our job is not to give up, give in, or go away. Take action, speak clearly as you can, and trust the lesson of history -- a kind of holy principle in the nature of things. Truthful, nonviolent movements are destined to win.

?Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power no government can suppress, a power than can transform the world.?

Over these last painful years, Howard became a true prophet to the nation. He preached that we mustn?t depend on governments to abolish war -- national and economic interests are too entangled in militarism. He preached a radical inclusiveness, where we regard the world?s children as our own. He preached the end of war isn?t just desirable; it?s necessary for the survival of the world. With that, Howard joined a long legacy of prophetic visionaries who reclaimed the imagination for a disarmed world.

How abolish war? he asked.

> Perhaps it will take a combination of factors to end war. It will become intolerable for the people and impractical for the Establishment. And the crucial factor making it impractical will be, as it was for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and the United States in Vietnam, that the citizens of warmaking nations will no longer tolerate the deaths of their offspring and the theft of their national wealth. There is still time to make this twenty-first century different from the last century. But we must all play a part.

In his 2005 commencement speech to Spellman College, where he began his academic career in 1956, he encouraged the graduates to look beyond government chicanery and media deception. He told them to trust the resiliency of truth -- and trusting truth, work toward building a world we can be proud of. ?My hope,? he said, ?is that your generation will demand that your children be brought up in a world without war.?

Howard did his part by giving us hope and vision. He?s gone from us now. Now it?s our turn. Let?s do what we can for a future of peace. And like Howard, let?s never give up.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John?s latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org

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