

Transforming Power



by Bill Krampe,
Vendor & Editorial
Contributor

And boy, do I feel transformed! I've read this book twice already. The new MP for Halifax, Megan Leslie, sent me this book just a week ago, and since then I have drunk deeply, attempted to infuse it into my bloodstream, and absorb it into my DNA. Wow! It's that it's hopeful, more than anything else. And just about the time I unhappily continue to go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning, fretting about whether or not anybody out there, among the seven billion of us on the planet is doing anything substantial besides political tinkering and tokenism, in terms of dealing with environmental meltdown and/or world poverty, and/or positive social and political change, I have finally spotted a lantern out there, swinging in the deep darkness. This light indicates to me that something is indeed happening. And not just a singular lantern. Many lights, and eventually I discern many voices, even many movements.

Why twice? I raced through the book, and then again, very slowly, taking numerous notes. I guess I have been wandering in the night wilderness so long, that I have almost given up hope. Or I have been like a starving man, or a thirsty sojourner in the deserts, craving some simple nourishment, desperately seeking water. *Transforming Power from the personal to the political* by Judy Rebick has satisfied me in a special way. It has fed my starved body, quenched my thirst, and even given me hope for my exhausted mind and mournful spirit.

I guess it's too glib to claim that there's a new political energy out there that's beginning to transform the landscape, or beginning to transform how peoples in various and sundry locales are working for change. Much of this energy is ancient, actually, or rather from ancient wisdom. Just the one part of the book that talked about a new way to confront violence filled me

with a feeling of inspiration and hope. It was about the government of Venezuela, when after he was elected leader, Hugo Chavez was attacked and, as incredible as it sounds, arrested, by rightwing thugs and biz types who were acting with the encouragement and support of the USA. What happened was a peaceful, nonviolent response by 100,000 people who massed in the streets.

Springing Chavez was a successful example of people power, which also witnessed absolutely no revenge, no reprisals, no violence against those who plotted against him, even though the people had plentiful vengeful resources to respond.. So this is a new way of exercising power, Rebick writes. And another example of this new kind of politics was evident in Bolivia. Bolivia derives its power from massive poor peasants organizations, and the disciplined and well structured groups of the campesinos and indigenous peoples. When the duly elected revolutionary government was attacked, the Bolivian authorities called upon its huge number of supporters to show up by the thousands and confront, in a peaceful way, the thugs and violent business and political types, such that the situation was resolved peacefully. The bullies were overwhelmed, and so they backed off. Government officials had the option to utilize vast police powers or the army but it did not, even with their control of these forces. Power from the bottom up, flat or horizontal structures, poor people's organizations, not middle class NGOs, nor Environmental NGOs nor middle class academics and politicians are what's happening. Truly a people's revolution. Also, non-violence and spirituality are key in these conflicts.

When I comment "Boy, do I feel transformed!" I guess I am mostly focused upon the more spiritual themes in the book. That spiritual and political activism have resonant energies working in concert to truly transform the exercise of power and in part to change, or transform the world. This kind of activism, according to Rebick, blends politics and spirituality in workable and successful strategies of equality, a powerful voice for women, inclusion, diversity, a respect for differences, work to create sustainable politics, and when bumping up against each other, a mutual

regard between social movements and political parties is a must. (But more on this debate regarding movements versus parties later).

What she has also discovered from her many trips around the world is that leadership from the bottom up is also very important with the poorest many times in the driver's seat, with respect to decision making. There is a new energy of compassion, of collective effort, of commonality and in exercising this new power, we find that it is strengthened by the close relationships people have built over time with each other. Also, when and where relevant, decentralization is necessary, with decision making by way of consensus. Finally, *participatory democracy is beginning to replace representative democracy.*

With representative democracy, the minority must bow to the majority. In realizing that about 35% plus or minus of the population elected the government like in a recent Canadian federal election, we find that this upsets the balance in terms of governance, to put it mildly, and really skews how policies truly reflect the will of the people. So, as a result many question arise. How are all the people involved in this kind of diminished democratic process? How are all the people participating? Also other questions emerge, like are the old left parties, the old left strategies of demonstrations, protests, traditional lobbying and letter-writing a thing of the past? However, we are beginning to become aware now that a new world is possible, and even that a new world is actually starting to happen!

There is so much that is rich and resourceful, inspirational and hopeful in this book but what I want to concentrate upon are the stories Rebick tells about dealing with nonviolence and also the growth of a spiritual politics which is emerging on the world stage, albeit painfully slowly in many cases.

I remember the spirituality of the internet fueled *World Bank Protest*, in April, 2000, at the USA capitol, which followed on the heels of another internet enhanced protest, the Battle of Seattle during November and December, 1999. These internet events alerted me to the role of computerized connecting between people and groups with mass

communications like the internet. This is only one of the many new ways that Rebick has pointed out which facilitates global and also local revolutionary political organizing.

At the end of the Washington, D.C. event I recalled the debrief when we finally, a bit deranged and exhausted from the nearly month long event, staggered into the Dalhousie University SUB. Surprisingly the talk was all about spirituality and nonviolence. We had so much to relate regarding the gazillions of experiences, exciting tales to tell, vicious arrests, and mega-brutality, also no sleep and little or no food for most of this time amidst all the other laments, gripes, groans, and proud exhortations.

But someone said it all after recounting the stories of disciplined nonviolence of the 50,000 direct action protestors, along with 50,000 more nonviolent activists all over the city, virtually paralyzing the most powerful city on earth with a 144 square block shut down.

That something spiritual had been unleashed. What was meant was lost to all in the exclaiming but I remember during the debriefing that spiritual energy had been recalled. A fellow from one of the large InterFaith clusters (which is a grouping of a number of like minded, or related issues affinity groups) remarked that he agreed about the palpable spiritual energy we experienced.

"Something had been unleashed, he said.

"Something spiritual and Gandhian, I think, for the most part."

When I got home I reviewed a few emails about this effect. One response mentioned that it seemed at times that our protest had been seized by the "crazy wisdom" of the Lineage of the Vidyadhara, Chogyam Trungpa Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Some others felt that maybe the controversial Mother Meera's hand could be sensed moving on the waters? Still other emailers referred to Western mythic or folkloric patterns, citing St. George in his Teutonic glory slaying the dragon of chaos? I don't know, maybe so. I began to think of anthropological readings from years gone by. The earliest religions or spirituality was sparked by magic and mysticism. That magic and mysticism were actually the earliest forms of spirituality and religion.

But in the end I figured

that the Hindu perspective may have been closest to what we experienced. What I think the Hindus call *prana*. *Maybe this phenomenon, in part, heralded a new spiritual energy working alongside political activism?*

Beyond the internet, but utilizing the internet and related cell phone and texting technologies, this new kind of social revolution that is emerging around the earth, is beginning to find traction first and foremost in Latin America. Of course, other countries and regions are starting to pick on these ideas now. What this involves is often a blend of poverty engagement, aboriginal leadership and the local and appropriate form of participatory democracy.

Rebick also referenced this new kind of inclusive democracy when she told the story of the civic elections in Guelph, Ontario. Students polled the community door to door recording the five pet peeves, or the five values or the five most important issues raised in each household. During the elections, the candidates reflected what the community expressed to the student pollsters. The Civic organization, called the Guelph Civic League swept the elections, winning nine out of ten seats.

In feminist terms, in both the West, and in poorer and less literate regions, this new participatory democracy idea seeks to build leadership by encouraging the most voiceless and impoverished members of society to lift up their voices. This blend of dealing with the participatory goals meshes with educating, strengthening, supporting and encouraging those with the fewest resources and least education.

However, a great effort is needed to build trust. Over many centuries of colonialism, especially in those regions where the boot heel oppression of the imperialist was most severe, women, the poorest of the poor, people of colour, indigenous First Nations peoples, immigrant groups must confront all the deceptions, and the divisive strategies used against them, especially the damage of racism. Consequently, much slow, patient work is needed at healing.

The *World Social Forum (WSF)* response to the annual Davos, Switzerland meetings of the wealthiest and most powerful elite began nearly a decade ago.

This is a quick study in how the world is beginning to emerge with a new truly revolutionary energy to lead the movement from the bottom up. The earliest WSF gatherings demonstrated top down leadership by middle class types and NGOs.

More recent events witnessed a coming together of all kinds of peoples, gathering to share stories, share strategies, even sometimes life skills training and education, also more advanced political skills and concepts. The landless in Latin America, the poorest in Africa, the untouchables in India were slowly gaining ground, that is, beginning to take over the reins of leadership. To encourage leadership from those living on the bottom of society were and are engaged by being asked how they would handle a particular crisis, or a particular policy disagreement. People's life experiences and emotional history were and are probed and nurtured, in terms of story telling and also digging deeper into hurt and historical injuries, in order to facilitate venting and healing. To make a meeting move along efficiently by ignoring personal needs and feelings of individual group members is wrong. Leaders who ignore these life experiences and stories and were and are criticized. This is the new feminist personal is political spiritual politics, and seems to be catching on in diverse parts of the planet.

Eventually the WSF gatherings developed three essential rules. Diversity: extend a warm welcome to all, especially encouraging those on the bottom rung of society that they too can be leaders. Leadership: no leader speaks for the WSF. Speakers can only enunciate positions and policies for themselves or for their individual organization. Decision-making: by consensus only.

There are allowances for people's life experience stories, and delving into painful recollections. Healing and nurturing now more and more replace the impatient leader's need to run a fast and efficient meeting. There's room, now, at the table for all and the journey to the table must be respected no matter how lengthy and arduous the telling of the tale.

Once leadership has been discussed and agreed upon by all members, and fully supported by all, then the larger frames of reference can come into focus, like political battles in the streets