

The Branches Are Hope; the Roots Are Memory

"Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair," the theologian Walter Brueggeman noted. It's an extraordinary statement, one that reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past. We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope.

Amnesia leads to despair in many ways. The status quo would like you to believe it is immutable, inevitable, and invulnerable, and lack of memory of a dynamically changing world reinforces this view. In other words, when you don't know how much things have changed, you don't see that they are changing or that they can change. Those who think that way don't remember raids on gay bars when being queer was illegal or rivers that caught fire when unregulated pollution peaked in the 1960s or that there were, worldwide, 70 percent more seabirds a few decades ago and, before the economic shifts of the Reagan Revolution, very, very few homeless people in the United States. Thus, they don't recognize the forces of change at work.

One of the essential aspects of depression is the sense that you will always be mired in this misery, that nothing can or will change. It's what makes suicide so seductive as the only visible exit from the prison of the present. There's a public equivalent to private depression, a sense that the nation or the society rather than the individual is stuck. Things don't always change for the better, but they change, and we can play a role in that change if we act. Which is where hope comes in, and memory, the collective memory we call history.

↑ From new intro, "Grounds For Hope"

ny I drew from for my 2009 book *A Paradise Built in Hell* suggested how much we want lives of meaningful engagement, of membership in civil society, and how much societal effort goes into withering us away from these fullest, most powerful selves. But people return to those selves, those ways of self-organizing, as if by instinct when the situation demands it. Thus a disaster is a lot like a revolution when it comes to disruption and improvisation, to new roles and an unnerving or exhilarating sense that now anything is possible.

This was a revolutionary vision of human nature and a revelation that we can pursue our ideals not out of diligence but because when they are realized there's joy, and joy is itself an insurrectionary force against the dreariness and dullness and isolation of everyday life. My own research was, I realized by its end, a small part of an enormous project going on among many disciplines—psychology, economics, neurobiology, sociology, anthropology, political science—to redefine human nature as something more communal, cooperative, and compassionate. This rescue of our reputations from the social darwinists and the Hobbesians is important, not to feel positive about ourselves but to recognize the radical possibilities that can be built on an alternative view of human nature.

The fruits of these inquiries made me more hopeful. But it's important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it's not a substitute for action, only a basis for it. "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced," said James Baldwin. Hope gets you there; work gets you through. "The future belongs to those who prepare for it today," said Malcolm X. And there is a long history of that work, the work to change the world, a long history of methods, heroes, visionaries, heroines, victories—and, of course, failures. But the victories matter, and remembering them matters too. "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope," said Martin Luther King Jr.

The other affliction amnesia brings is a lack of examples of positive change, of popular power, evidence that we can do it and have done it. George Orwell wrote, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." Controlling the past begins by knowing it; the stories we tell about who we were and what we did shape what we can and will do. Despair is also often premature: it's a form of impatience as well as of certainty.

My favorite comment about political change comes from Zhou En-Lai, a high-ranking member of Chairman Mao's government. Asked, in the early 1970s, about his opinion of the French Revolution, he answered, "Too soon to tell." Some argue that he was talking about the insurrections of 1968, not the monarchy-toppling of 1789, but even then it demonstrates a generous and expansive perspective. To retain a sense that even four years later the verdict isn't in is to live with more open-minded uncertainty than most people now can tolerate.

News cycles tend to suggest that change happens in small, sudden bursts or not at all. As I write, the military men who probably murdered Chilean singer and political activist Victor Jara in 1973 are being charged. More than forty years have gone by; some stories take far longer than that to finish. The struggle to get women the vote took nearly three-quarters of a century. For a time people liked to announce that feminism had failed, as though the project of overturning millennia of social arrangements should achieve its final victories in a few decades, or as though it had stopped. Feminism is just starting, and its manifestations matter in rural Himalayan villages, not just first-world cities. Susan Griffin, a great writer in the present who was also an important part of 1970s feminism, recently remarked, "I've seen enough change in my lifetime to know that despair is not only self-defeating, it is unrealistic."

Other changes result in victories and are then forgotten. For decades, radicals were preoccupied with East Timor, brutally occupied by Indonesia from 1975 to 2002; the liberated country is no longer news. It won its liberty because of valiant struggle from within, but also be-

cause of dedicated groups on the outside who pressured and shamed the governments supporting the Indonesian regime. We could learn quite a lot from the remarkable display of power and solidarity and East Timor's eventual victory, but the whole struggle seems forgotten.

For decades, Peabody Western Coal Corporation mined coal on the Hopi/Navajo land at Black Mesa in ways that contaminated the air and drained vast amounts of water from the region. The fight against Black Mesa was a totemic struggle for indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice; in 2005, the mines were shut down, and the issue disappeared from the conversation. It was also a case of tenacious activism from within and good allies from without, prolonged lawsuits, and perseverance.

We need litanies or recitations or monuments to these victories, so that they are landmarks in everyone's mind. More broadly, shifts in, say, the status of women are easily overlooked by people who don't remember that, a few decades ago, reproductive rights were not yet a concept, and there was no recourse for exclusion, discrimination, workplace sexual harassment, most forms of rape, and other crimes against women the legal system did not recognize or even countenanced. None of the changes were inevitable, either—people fought for them and won them.

People adjust without assessing the changes. As of 2014, Iowa gets 28 percent of its electricity from wind alone, not because someone in that conservative state declared death to all fossil fuel corporations or overthrew anyone or anything, but because it was a sensible and affordable option. Denmark, in the summer of 2015, achieved 140 percent of its electricity needs through wind generation (and sold the surplus to neighboring countries). Scotland has achieved renewable energy generation of 50 percent and set a goal of 100 percent by 2020. Thirty percent more solar was installed in 2014 than the year before in the United States, and renewables are becoming more affordable worldwide—in some places they are already cheaper than fossil-fueled

energy. These incremental changes have happened quietly, and many people don't know they have begun, let alone exploded.

If there is one thing we can draw from where we are now and where we were then, it is that the unimaginable is ordinary, that the way forward is almost never a straight line you can glance down but a convoluted path of surprises, gifts, and afflictions you prepare for by accepting your blind spots as well as your intuitions. Howard Zinn wrote in 1988, in what now seems like a lost world before so many political upheavals and technological changes arrived, "As this century draws to a close, a century packed with history, what leaps out from that history is its utter unpredictability." He was, back then, wondering at the distance we'd traveled from when the Democratic National Party Convention refused to seat Blacks from Mississippi to when Jesse Jackson ran (a largely symbolic campaign) for president at a time most people thought they would never live to see a Black family occupy the White House. In that essay, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," Zinn continues,

The struggle for justice should never be abandoned because of the apparent overwhelming power of those who have the guns and the money and who seem invisible in their determination to hold onto it. That apparent power has, again and again, proved vulnerable to moral fervor, determination, unity, organization, sacrifice, wit, ingenuity, courage, patience—whether by blacks in Alabama and South Africa, peasants in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Vietnam, or workers and intellectuals in Poland, Hungary, and the Soviet Union itself.

People Have the Power

Social, cultural, or political change does not work in predictable ways or on predictable schedules. The month before the Berlin Wall fell, almost no one anticipated that the Soviet Bloc was going to disintegrate all

of a sudden (thanks to many factors, including the tremendous power of civil society, nonviolent direct action, and hopeful organizing going back to the 1970s), any more than anyone, even the participants, foresaw the impact that the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street or a host of other great uprisings would have. We don't know what is going to happen, or how, or when, and that very uncertainty is the space of hope.

Those who doubt that these moments matter should note how terrified the authorities and elites are when they erupt. That fear signifies their recognition that popular power is real enough to overturn regimes and rewrite the social contract. And it often has. Sometimes your enemies know what your friends can't believe. Those who dismiss these moments because of their imperfections, limitations, or incompleteness need to look harder at what joy and hope shine out of them and what real changes have emerged because of them, even if not always in the most obvious or recognizable ways.

And everything is flawed, if you want to look at it that way. The analogy that has helped me most is this: in Hurricane Katrina, hundreds of boat-owners rescued people—single moms, toddlers, grandfathers—stranded in attics, on roofs, in flooded housing projects, hospitals, and school buildings. None of them said, *I can't rescue everyone, therefore it's futile; therefore my efforts are flawed and worthless*, though that's often what people say about more abstract issues in which, nevertheless, lives, places, cultures, species, rights are at stake. They went out there in fishing boats and rowboats and pirogues and all kinds of small craft, some driving from as far as Texas and eluding the authorities to get in, others refugees themselves working within the city. There was bumper-to-bumper boat-trailer traffic—the celebrated Cajun Navy—going *toward* the city the day after the levees broke. None of those people said, *I can't rescue them all*. All of them said, *I can rescue someone, and that's work so meaningful and important I will risk my life and defy the authorities to do it*. And they did. Of course, working for systemic change also matters—the kind of change that might prevent

calamities by addressing the climate or the infrastructure or the environmental and economic injustice that put some people in harm's way in New Orleans in the first place.

Change is rarely straightforward, and that is one of the central premises of this book. Sometimes it's as complex as chaos theory and as slow as evolution. Even things that seem to happen suddenly arise from deep roots in the past or from long-dormant seeds. A young man's suicide triggers an uprising that inspires other uprisings, but the incident was a spark; the bonfire it lit was laid by activist networks and ideas about civil disobedience and by the deep desire for justice and freedom that exists everywhere.

It's important to ask not only what those moments produced in the long run but what they were in their heyday. If people find themselves living in a world in which some hopes are realized and some joys are incandescent and some boundaries between individuals and groups are lowered, even for an hour or a day or several months, that matters. Memory of joy and liberation can become a navigational tool, an identity, a gift.

Paul Goodman famously wrote, "Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society that you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!" It's an argument for tiny and temporary victories, and for the possibility of partial victories in the absence or even the impossibility of total victories. Total victory has always seemed like a secular equivalent of paradise: a place where all the problems are solved and there's nothing to do, a fairly boring place. The absolutists of the old left imagined that victory would, when it came, be total and permanent, which is practically the same as saying that victory was and is impossible and will never come. It is, in fact, more than possible. It is something that has arrived in innumerable ways, small and large and often incremental, but not in

that way that was widely described and expected. So victories slip by unheralded. Failures are more readily detected.

And then every now and then, the possibilities explode. In these moments of rupture, people find themselves members of a "we" that did not until then exist, at least not as an entity with agency and identity and potency; new possibilities suddenly emerge, or that old dream of a just society reemerges and—at least for a little while—shines. Utopia is sometimes the goal. It's often embedded in the moment itself, and it's a hard moment to explain, since it usually involves hardscrabble ways of living, squabbles, and eventually disillusion and factionalism—but also more ethereal things: the discovery of personal and collective power, the realization of dreams, the birth of bigger dreams, a sense of connection that is as emotional as it is political, and lives that change and do not revert to older ways even when the glory subsides.

Sometimes the earth closes over this moment and it has no obvious consequences; sometimes empires crumble and ideologies fall away like shackles. But you don't know beforehand. People in official institutions devoutly believe they hold the power that matters, though the power we grant them can often be taken back; the violence commanded by governments and militaries often fails, and nonviolent direct-action campaigns often succeed.

The sleeping giant is one name for the public; when it wakes up, when *we* wake up, we are no longer only the public: we are civil society, the superpower whose nonviolent means are sometimes, for a shining moment, more powerful than violence, more powerful than regimes and armies. We write history with our feet and with our presence and our collective voice and vision. And yet, and of course, everything in the mainstream media suggests that popular resistance is ridiculous, pointless, or criminal, unless it is far away, was long ago, or, ideally, both. These are the forces that prefer the giant remain asleep.

Together we are very powerful, and we have a seldom-told, seldom-remembered history of victories and transformations that can

give us confidence that yes, we can change the world because we have many times before. You row forward looking back, and telling this history is part of helping people navigate toward the future. We need a litany, a rosary, a sutra, a mantra, a war chant of our victories. The past is set in daylight, and it can become a torch we can carry into the night that is the future.

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Looking Into Darkness

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, "The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think." Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.

Who, two decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? Who foresaw the resurgence of the indigenous world of which the Zapatista uprising in Southern Mexico is only the most visible face? Who, four decades ago, could have conceived of the changed status of all who are nonwhite, nonmale, or nonstraight, the wide-open conversations about power, nature, economies, and ecologies?

There are times when it seems as though not only the future but the present is dark: few recognize what a radically transformed world

Changing the Imagination of Change

A lot of activists seem to have a mechanistic view of change, or perhaps they expect what quack diet pills offer, "Quick and easy results guaranteed." They expect finality, definitiveness, straightforward cause-and-effect relationships, instant returns, and as a result they specialize in disappointment, which sinks in as bitterness, cynicism, defeatism, knowingness. They operate on the premise that for every action there is an equal and opposite and punctual reaction and regard the lack of one as failure. After all, we are often a reaction: Bush decides to invade Iraq; we create a global peace movement. Sometimes success looks instant: we go to Seattle and shut down the WTO, but getting to Seattle can be told as a story of months of organizing or decades of developing a movement smart enough and broad enough to understand the complex issues at hand and bring in the ten thousand who would blockade. History is made out of common dreams, groundswells, turning points, watersheds—it's a landscape more complicated than commensurate cause and effect, and that peace movement came out of causes with roots reaching far beyond and long before Bush.

Effects are not proportionate to causes—not only because huge causes sometimes seem to have little effect, but because tiny ones occasionally have huge consequences. Gandhi said, "First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win." But those stages unfold slowly. And as the law of unexpected activist consequences might lead you to expect, the abolition movement also sparked the first widespread women's rights movement, which took about the same amount of time to secure the right to vote for American women, has achieved far more in the subsequent eighty-four years, and is by no means done. Activism is not a journey to the corner store, it is a plunge into the unknown. The future is always dark.

Some years ago, scientists attempted to create a long-range weather forecasting program. It turned out that the most minute variations, even the undetectable things, the things they could perhaps not even yet imagine as data, could cause entirely different weather to emerge from almost identical initial conditions. This was famously summed up as the saying about the flap of a butterfly's wings on one continent that can change the weather on another. History is like weather, not like checkers. (And you, if you're lucky and seize the day, are like that butterfly.) Like weather in its complexity, in its shifts, in the way something triggers its opposite, just as a heat wave sucks the fog off the ocean and makes my town gray and clammy after a few days of baking, weather in its moods, in its slowness, in its suddenness.

A game of checkers ends. The weather never does. That's why you can't save anything. *Saving* is the wrong word, one invoked over and over again, for almost every cause. Jesus saves and so do banks: they set things aside from the flux of earthly change. We never did save the whales, though we might have prevented them from becoming extinct. We will have to continue to prevent that as long as they continue not to be extinct, unless we become extinct first. That might indeed save the whales, until the sun supernovas or the species evolves into something other than whales. *Saving* suggests a laying up where nei-

ther moth nor rust doth corrupt; it imagines an extraction from the dangerous, unstable, ever-changing process called life on earth. But life is never so tidy and final. Only death is. Environmentalists like to say that defeats are permanent, victories temporary. Extinction, like death, is forever, but protection needs to be maintained. But now, in a world where restoration ecology is becoming increasingly important, it turns out that even defeats aren't always permanent. Across the United States and Europe, dams have been removed, wetlands and rivers restored, once-vanished native species reintroduced, endangered species regenerated.

Americans are good at responding to a crisis and then going home to let another crisis brew both because we imagine that the finality of death can be achieved in life—it's called *happily ever after* in personal life, *saved* in politics and religion—and because we tend to think of political engagement as something for emergencies rather than, as people in many other countries (and Americans at other times) have imagined it, as a part and even a pleasure of everyday life. The problem seldom goes home. Most nations agree to a ban on hunting endangered species of whale, but their ocean habitat is compromised in other ways, such as fisheries depletion and contamination. DDT is banned in the United States but exported to the developing world, and its creator, the Monsanto corporation, moves on to the next experiment.

Going home seems to be a way to abandon victories when they're still delicate, still in need of protection and encouragement. Human babies are helpless at birth, and so perhaps are victories before they've been consolidated into the culture's sense of how things should be. I wonder sometimes what would happen if victory was imagined not just as the elimination of evil but the establishment of good—if, after American slavery had been abolished, Reconstruction's promises of economic justice had been enforced by the abolitionists, or if the end of apartheid had, similarly, been seen as meaning instituting economic justice as well (or, as some South Africans put it, ending economic apartheid).

It's always too soon to go home. Most of the great victories continue to unfold, unfinished in the sense that they are not yet fully realized, but also in the sense that they continue to spread influence. A phenomenon like the civil rights movement creates a vocabulary and a toolbox for social change used around the globe, so that its effects far outstrips its goals and specific achievements—and failures. Domestically, conservatives are still fighting and co-opting it, further evidence it's still potent. The left likes to lash itself for its reactive politics, but on many fronts—reproductive rights, affirmative action—it's the right that reacts, not always successfully.

How do you map the US Supreme Court's 2003 ruling that struck down the last of the laws criminalizing gay and lesbian sex? The conventional narrative would have it that the power rests in the hands of the nine robed ones; a more radical model would mention the gay Texas couple who chose to turn their lives inside out over many years to press the lawsuit; but a sort of cultural ecology would measure what made the nation rethink its homophobia, creating the societal change that the Supreme Court only assented to: they all count. It now looks likely that the Los Angeles River—that long concrete ditch through the city—will be restored over the next few dozen years, thanks to the stubborn visionaries who believe that even there a river could come back to life, and to the changing understanding of nature that has reached even administrators and engineers. We are not who we were not very long ago.

On the Indirectness of Direct Action

A friend, Jaime Cortez, tells me I should consider the difference between hope and faith. Hope, he says, can be based on the evidence, on the track record of what might be possible—and in this book I've been trying to shift what the track record might be. But faith endures even when there's no way to imagine winning in the foreseeable future; faith is more mystical. Jaime sees the American left as pretty devoid of faith and connects faith to what it takes to change things in the long term, beyond what you might live to see or benefit from. I argue that what was once the left is now so full of anomalies—of indigenous intellectuals and Catholic pacifists and the like—that maybe we have faith, some of us.

Activism isn't reliable. It isn't fast. It isn't direct either, most of the time, even though the term *direct action* is used for that confrontation in the streets, those encounters involving lawbreaking and civil disobedience. It may be because activists move like armies through the streets that people imagine effects as direct as armies, but an army assaults the physical world and takes physical possession of it; activists reclaim the streets and occasionally seize a Bastille or topple a Berlin

Wall, but the terrain of their action is usually immaterial, the realm of the symbolic, political discourse, collective imagination. They enter the conversation forcefully, but it remains a conversation. Every act is an act of faith, because you don't know what will happen. You just hope and employ whatever wisdom and experience seems most likely to get you there.

I believe all this because I've lived it, and I've lived it because I'm a writer. For twenty years I have sat alone at a desk tinkering with sentences and then sending them out, and for most of my literary life the difference between throwing something in the trash and publishing it was imperceptible, but in the past several years the work has started coming back to me, or the readers have. Musicians and dancers face their audience and visual artists can spy on them, but reading is mostly as private as writing. Writing is lonely, it's an intimate talk with the dead, with the unborn, with the absent, with strangers, with the readers who may never come to be and who even if they read you will do so weeks, years, decades later. An essay, a book, is one statement in a long conversation you could call culture or history; you are answering something or questioning something that may have fallen silent long ago, and the response to your words may come long after you're gone and never reach your ears, if anyone hears you in the first place.

After all, this is how it's been for so many books that count, books that didn't shake the world when they first appeared but blossomed later. This is a model for how indirect effect can be, how delayed, how invisible; no one is more hopeful than a writer, no one is a bigger gambler. Thoreau's 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience" finally found its readers in the twentieth century when it was put into practice as part of the movements that changed the world (Thoreau's voice was little heard in his time, but it echoed across the continent in the 1960s and has not left us since. Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Walter Benjamin, and Arthur Rimbaud, like Thoreau, achieved their greatest impact long

after their deaths, long after weeds had grown over the graves of most of the bestsellers of their lifetimes.)

You write your books. You scatter your seeds. Rats might eat them, or they might rot. In California, some seeds lie dormant for decades because they only germinate after fire, and sometimes the burned landscape blooms most lavishly. In her book *Faith*, Sharon Salzberg recounts how she put together a collection of teachings by the Buddhist monk U Pandita and consigned the project to the “minor-good-deed category.” Long afterward, she found out that while Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese democracy movement’s leader, was isolated under house arrest by that country’s dictators, the book and its instructions in meditation “became her main source of spiritual support during those intensely difficult years.” Thought becomes action becomes the order of things, but no straight road takes you there.

Nobody can know the full consequences of their actions, and history is full of small acts that changed the world in surprising ways. I was one of thousands of activists at the Nevada Test Site in the late 1980s, an important, forgotten history still unfolding out there where the United States and Great Britain have exploded more than a thousand nuclear bombs with disastrous effects on the environment and human health (and where the Bush administration would like to resume testing, thereby tearing up the last shreds of the unratified Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty). Some of the largest acts of civil disobedience in American history were committed when we would walk into the place to be arrested as trespassers, thousands in a day. There too, as in peace marches, just walking became a form of political speech, one whose directness was a delight after all the usual avenues of politicking: sitting in front of computers, going to meetings, making phone calls, dealing with money. Among the throng arrested were Quakers, Buddhists, Shoshone, Mormons, pagans, anarchists, veterans, and physicists. We would barely make the news in the United States. But we were visible on the other side of the world.

Our acts inspired the Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov on February 27, 1989, to read a manifesto instead of poetry on live Kazakh TV, a manifesto demanding a shutdown of the Soviet test site in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan, and to call a meeting. Five thousand Kazakhs gathered at the writers’ union the next day and formed a movement that shut down the nuclear test site. They named themselves the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement, and they acted in concert with us. *Us* by that time included the Western Shoshone who had come to endorse our actions and point out that we and the United States government were on their land; the Kazakhs identified with these indigenous people.

Anyway, the Soviet test site was shut down. The catalyst was Suleimenov, and though we in Nevada were his inspiration, what gave him his platform was his poetry in a country that loves poets. There’s a wonderful parable by Jorge Luis Borges. In the last years of the thirteenth century, God tells a leopard in a cage, “You live and will die in this prison so that a man I know of may see you a certain number of times and not forget you and place your figure and symbol in a poem which has its precise place in the scheme of the universe. You suffer captivity, but you will have given a word to the poem.” The poem is the *Divine Comedy*; the man who sees the leopard is Dante. Perhaps Suleimenov wrote all his poems so that one day he could stand up in front of a TV camera and deliver not a poem but a manifesto. And Arundhati Roy wrote a ravishing novel, *The God of Small Things*, that catapulted her to international stardom, perhaps so that when she stood up to oppose dams and corporations and corruption and the destruction of the local, people would notice.

Or perhaps they opposed the ravaging of the earth so that poetry too would survive in the world. A couple of years ago, a friend wrote me to urge me to focus on the lyrical end of my writing rather than activism and I wrote back, “What is the purpose of resisting corporate globalization if not to protect the obscure, the ineffable, the unmarketable, the

unmanageable, the local, the poetic, and the eccentric? So they need to be practiced, celebrated, and studied too, right now." I could have added that these acts themselves become forms of resistance; the two are not necessarily separate practices. All those years that I went to the Nevada Test Site to oppose nuclear testing, the experience was also about camping in the desert, about the beauty of the light and the grandeur of the space, about friendship and discovery. The place gave me far more than I could ever give it. Resistance is usually portrayed as a duty, but it can be a pleasure, an education, a revelation.

The year after the birth of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement, when some of its members were already with us at the peace camp next to the Nevada Test Site, I was the only one who attended a workshop there on Nevada and the military. The man giving it was visibly disappointed but gave it splendidly for me alone. As we sat in the rocks and dust and creosote bush of the deep desert on a sunny day, the great Nevada organizer Bob Fulkerson taught me that the atrocities of nuclear testing were not unique in that state with a fifth of all the military land in the country and invited me to travel into its remote reaches. He is still a cherished friend of mine and still the executive director of a coalition he founded a few years later, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN), the most potent statewide group of its kind, bringing together environmental, labor, and human rights groups.

What came of Bob's invitation changed my life and had much to do with my book *Savage Dreams*, the first half of which is about the Test Site and the strands of its history wrapped around the world, and before there was the book there was an essay version of what the Test Site and Bob taught me that appeared in a magazine with circulation of about half a million. A few years ago I went back to the Test Site for another spring action, and there I met several students from Evergreen College in Washington who had decided to come down because they had been reading *Savage Dreams* in class. If you're lucky, you carry

a torch into that dark of Virginia Woolf's, and if you're really lucky you'll sometimes see to whom you've passed it, as I did on that day (and if you're polite, you'll remember who handed it to you). I don't know if the Evergreen kids have become great activists or died in a car crash on the way home, but I know that for them I was a leopard prompting a word or two of the poem of their own lives, as Bob was for me. Borges's parable continues. On his deathbed, Dante is told by God what the secret purpose of his life and work was. "Dante, in wonderment, knew at last who and what he was and blessed the bitterness of his life."

One day in Auschwitz, the writer Primo Levi recited a canto of Dante's *Inferno* to a companion, and the poem about hell reached out from six hundred years before to roll back Levi's despair and his dehumanization. It was the canto about Ulysses, and though it ends tragically, it contains the lines "You were not made to live like animals/But to pursue virtue and know the world," which he recited and translated to the man walking with him. Levi lived, and wrote marvelous books of his own, poetry after Auschwitz in the most literal sense.

In 1940, in his last letter to a friend before his death, the incomparable, uncategorizable German-Jewish essayist and theorist Walter Benjamin wrote, "Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it—is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness."