

The Delray Democrat

How I Learned About Civil Disobedience. A Personal Story¹

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“No one is coming to save us. Mass civil disobedience is essential to force a political response.”

George Monbiot, columnist, *The Guardian*

I was struck by Monbiot’s provocative essay in *The Guardian* titled, “Only rebellion will prevent an ecological apocalypse.” Substitute America’s political apocalypse. We’re not going to save ourselves with traditional political weapons. Or with people believing “it can’t happen here.”

As Monbiot put it, “Underlying these excuses is a deep-rooted belief that if we really are in trouble, someone somewhere will come to our rescue: ‘they’ won’t let it happen. But there is no they, just us.”

Just us.

I was a teenager when the country was convulsing with outrage against an ignoble war, and with hatred for those opposing it. “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” “America, love it or leave it.”

Introduction to Civil Disobedience. I got my first teaching job near Litchfield County, CT, and bought a magnificent, converted barn built in the 1700s on five acres of meadows and trees. But I really didn’t know where I’d landed. I discovered the rich and famous lived in these secluded towns like Roxbury and Washington, in stately, old colonials. When I, rube-like, asked about a carpool to help get my eldest son to school in Kent, I was told to try Rebecca Miller, daughter of the famous playwright, who went to the same school. What had I done?

Chapter One. Fortunately, I met Tom and Candace Powers. Tom was an author and intelligence expert and a joy to talk to. He was working on a story about the Weather Underground, a militant sect of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) whose signature tactic was placing bombs in government buildings to protest America’s support of the invasion of Laos. On March 6, 1970, three members of the group were killed when the bomb they were assembling exploded, including Diana Oughton. She was 28.

Candace called to tell me Tom won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for his articles about Diana. With my still-inchoate worldview, I asked, does violence have any value? Is there a moral

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equivalence between the activists' bombs and the cluster bombs our military was dropping?

Chapter Two. Arthur Miller, of Roxbury, had written *The Crucible*, using the Salem witch trials as a metaphor for the Red Scare and the House Un-American Activities Committee. When HUAC subpoenaed him, Miller refused to disclose names of friends who were pro-communism. He was found guilty of contempt and sentenced to a \$500 fine or 30 days in jail. His conviction was later overturned.

William Styron, living not far down the road, wrote *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*, searing portraits of racism and bigotry and, along with other writers such as James Baldwin, signed a pledge not to pay taxes in opposition to the war. I wondered, did these forms of CD have any effect on the decision makers? There was no way to calculate.

Advanced Civil Disobedience Course. I moved, quit teaching to stay home with my newborn, filed theater reviews while he napped and took him along while I volunteered to work on a school busing project and to help resettle Jewish emigres from Russia. New friends and perspectives, unyielding beliefs that success comes when we must put ourselves in the game and the greater the problem, the greater the personal investment.

King's strategies worked. An organized group exponentially multiplies each individual's strength beyond the laws of mathematics. And critical mass needn't be a huge number. Harvard Kennedy Professor Erica Chenoweth says we need only 3.5 percent of the population to succeed, or about 11.5 million people. "Could you imagine if 11.5 million people — that's about three times the size of the 2017 Women's March — were doing something like mass noncooperation in a sustained way for nine to 18 months? Things would be totally different in this country."