

# EXCERPTS FROM *THE SOUL OF A CITIZEN: LIVING WITH CONVICTION IN A CYNICAL TIME*

By Paul Rogat Loeb

## INTRODUCTION

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?"—  
Rabbi Hillel

We can never predict the impact of our actions. When she was two months pregnant, Rebecca Hughes worried about how she'd find time to continue her work as a freelance science and health writer, and also be a good mother to her first child. On the spur of the moment, she approached a woman in the elevator of their large Boston apartment building. The other woman was about eight months pregnant. Although they'd never spoken, Rebecca introduced herself and blurted out, "I see you're pregnant. I am too. What if we exchanged baby-sitting?" Scrawling her phone number on a scrap of paper, she placed it in the other woman's hand.

The woman looked alarmed, but took the note and hurried off the elevator. Rebecca felt embarrassed, but a week later the woman called her. "I've been thinking about it," she said. "Would you like to start exchanging even before your baby is born?" Rebecca accepted the offer. She and her new friend invited several others they'd met in the neighborhood to participate, including a nun who took care of the baby of a single surgical intern. The group soon became a close-knit extended family, baby-sitting each other's children daily, holding a weekly play group, sharing emotional support, volunteering together at a local community help line, and exchanging tips on raising children, staying healthy, and managing crowded lives.

Two years later, twenty families were involved, and the co-op had become permanently woven into the fabric of their neighborhood. "It just seems like a more hopeful way to live," Rebecca recalls, "finding group solutions to individual problems. I felt a lot less alone."

In both intent and outcome, Rebecca's effort was modest. It resolved an everyday personal dilemma, while helping nurture an old-fashioned sense of community in an urban setting. Yet it also had a powerful emotional and spiritual impact on her life. It helped replace isolation with a sense of connection.

We can take the lesson of Rebecca's story—that our problems can often best be solved through common effort—and apply it on a larger stage as well, addressing the major issues of our time. When we open ourselves up to those around us, asking for and offering help and support, we discover strengths and passions we never knew we had. We begin to reconnect with our fellow human beings, with our wisest and most humane instincts, and with the core of who we are, which we call our soul.

## A MORE HOPEFUL WAY TO LIVE

In the personal realm, most Americans are thoughtful, caring, and generous. We try to do our best by family and friends. At times we'll even stop to help another driver stranded with a roadside breakdown, or to give some spare change to a stranger. But increasingly, a wall now separates each of us from the world outside, and from others who've likewise taken refuge in their own private sanctuaries. We've all but forgotten how much public participation is the very soul of democratic citizenship, and how much it can enrich our lives.

However, the reason for our wholesale retreat from social involvement is not, I don't believe, that most of us feel all is well with the world. I live in Seattle, amidst a seemingly unstoppable economy. Yet every time I go downtown I see men and women with signs saying, "I'll work for food," or "Homeless Vet. Please help." Their suffering demeans me as a human being. I also travel extensively, doing research and giving lectures throughout the country. Except in the wealthiest of enclaves, people everywhere say, "Things are hard here." America's economic boom has passed many of us by. We struggle to live on meager paychecks. We worry about lay-offs, random violence, the rising cost of health care, and the miseducation of our kids. Too stretched to save and uncertain about Social Security, many of us wonder just how we'll survive when we get old. We feel overwhelmed, we say, and helpless to change things.

Even those of us who are economically comfortable seem stressed. We spend hours commuting on crowded freeways, and hours more at jobs with demands that never end. We complain that we don't have enough time left for families and friends. We worry about the kind of world we'll pass on to our grandchildren. Then we also shrug and say there's nothing we can do.

To be sure, the issues we now face are complex—perhaps more so than in the past. How can we comprehend the moral implications of a world in which Nike pays Michael Jordan more to appear in its ads than it pays all the workers at its Indonesian shoe factories combined? Today the five hundred richest people on the planet control more wealth than the bottom three billion, half of the human population. Is it possible even to grasp the process that led to this most extraordinary imbalance. More important, how do we even begin to redress it?

Yet what leaves too many of us sitting on the sidelines is more than a lack of understanding of the complexities of our world. It's more than an absence of readily apparent ways to begin or resume public involvement. Certainly we need to decide for ourselves whether particular causes are wise or foolish—be they the politics of campaign finance reform, attempts to address the growing gaps between rich and poor, or efforts to safeguard water, air, and wilderness. We need to identify and connect with worthy groups that take on these issues, whether locally or globally. But first we need to believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile, that what we might do in the public sphere will not be in vain.

## CHAPTER ONE: MAKING OUR LIVES COUNT

We're often taught to view social involvement as a zero-sum game. With all our life pressures and the stress that comes with them, we barely have time for family and friends. How could we possibly take on some demanding cause?

Yet for all the perceived frustration, when we do get involved, we find that we get a lot back: new relationships, fresh skills, a sense of empowerment, and pride in accomplishment. "A rich life," writes philosopher and theologian Cornel West, is fundamentally a life of serving others, "trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. . . . This is true at the personal level. . . . [But there's also] a political version of this. It has to do with what you see when you get up in the morning and look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you are simply wasting time on the planet or spending time in an enriching manner."

Again and again, I've heard active citizens say that what motivates them the most is the desire to respect what they see in the mirror. The exercise isn't about vanity, but values, about taking stock of ourselves, and comparing the convictions we say we hold with the lives we actually lead. It's about seeing ourselves from the viewpoint of our communities, the earth, maybe even God. If eyes are windows to the soul and faces reflections of character, looking in the mirror lets us step back from the flux of our lives and hold ourselves accountable.

Sound a bit daunting? It can be. As the saying goes, not one among us is without fault or stain. But such self-examination also can be enormously rewarding. For it's equally true that not one among us lacks a heart, which is the wellspring of courage (the word is derived from *coeur*, French for heart). At the core of our being lay resources many of us never dream we possess, much less imagine we can draw upon.

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## CHAPTER TWO: WE DON'T HAVE TO BE SAINTS

I believe many of us feel uneasy about America's fragmentation and relentless self-interest—what Thomas Moore calls "a national persona of hype, ambition, narcissism and materialism." We would like to find ways to connect to each other and express our compassion, experiencing a sense of purpose that is impossible to attain through private pursuits alone. When we don't find ways to voice this larger self, our most generous impulses have nowhere to go.

Chief among the obstacles to acting on these impulses is the mistaken belief that anyone who takes a committed public stand, or at least an effective one, has to be a larger-than-life figure—someone with more time, energy, courage, vision, or knowledge than a normal person could ever possess. This belief pervades our society, in part because the media tends not to represent heroism as the work of ordinary human beings, which it almost always is. A few years ago, on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I was interviewed on CNN. So was Rosa Parks, by phone from Los Angeles. "We're very honored to have her," said the host. "Rosa Parks was the woman who wouldn't go to the back of the bus. She wouldn't get up and give her seat in the white section to a white person. That set in

motion the year-long bus boycott in Montgomery. It earned Rosa Parks the title of 'mother of the civil rights movement.'"

I was excited to hear Parks's voice and to be part of the same show. Then it occurred to me that the host's description—the story's standard rendition—stripped the Montgomery boycott of its context. Before refusing to give up her bus seat, Parks had spent 12 years helping lead the local NAACP chapter, along with union activist E.D. Nixon, from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, teachers from the local Negro college, and a variety of ordinary members of Montgomery's African American community. The summer before, Parks had attended a ten-day training session at Tennessee's labor and civil rights organizing school, the Highlander Center, where she'd met an older generation of civil rights activists and discussed the recent Supreme Court decision banning "separate-but-equal" schools. During this period of involvement and education, Parks had become familiar with previous challenges to segregation: Another Montgomery bus boycott, 50 years earlier, successfully eased some restrictions; a bus boycott in Baton Rouge won limited gains two years before Parks was arrested; and the previous spring, a young Montgomery woman had also refused to move to the back of the bus, causing the NAACP to consider a legal challenge until it turned out that she was unmarried and pregnant, and therefore a poor symbol for a campaign. In short, Parks didn't make a spur-of-the-moment decision. Rosa Parks didn't single-handedly give birth to the civil rights efforts, but she was part of an existing movement for change, at a time when success was far from certain. This in no way diminishes the power and historical importance of her refusal to give up her seat. But it does remind us that this tremendously consequential act might never have taken place without an immense amount of humble and frustrating work that she and others did earlier on.

For most of us, the past is a foreign country. The very stories that might remind us of our potential impact and strength are too often forgotten, caricatured, or ignored altogether. Apart from obvious times of armed conflict, or the legends of those few people we've elevated to the status of "hero," most of us know next to nothing of the many battles ordinary men and women fought to preserve freedom, expand the sphere of democracy, and create a more just society. Of the abolitionist and civil rights movements, we at best recall a few key leaders—and often don't know their actual stories, as with Rosa Parks. We know even less about the turn-of-the-century populists who challenged entrenched economic interests and fought for a "cooperative commonwealth." Who these days can describe the union movements that ended 80-hour work weeks at near-starvation wages? Who knows the origin of the social security system? How did the women's suffrage movement spread to hundreds of communities, and gather enough strength to prevail?

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### CHAPTER THREE: ONE STEP AT A TIME

When we think about the problems of the world, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and to become paralyzed. The way to avoid this, as Martin Luther King suggested, is to proceed at our own pace, step by step, breaking down our goals into manageable tasks and worrying less about the precise political impact of every choice we make. Nothing gets accomplished when we try to do everything at once. Given how easily our hopes for a better world can be extinguished, this approach lets us fight for what we believe with

reasonable expectations, patience, and a sense of balance. Borrowing from the classic Alcoholics Anonymous maxim, the best way to get involved in social change is "one day at a time."

This incremental process doesn't have to lead to dramatic public controversy. And it doesn't always produce immediately visible results. But invariably it alters those involved, in ways that can't be foreseen. As Gloria Steinem writes, "As for who we will be, the answer is: We don't know. . . . But we do know that growth comes from saying yes to the unknown."

French theologian Phillippe Vernier offers a similar perspective on conducting a life of spiritual purpose: "Do not wait for great strength before setting out," he cautions, "for immobility will weaken you further. Do not wait to see very clearly before starting: one has to walk toward the light. Have you strength enough to take this first step? You will be astonished to feel that the effort accomplished, instead of having exhausted your strength, has doubled it—and that you already see more clearly what you have to do next."

As Steinem and Vernier suggest, such journeys yield rich and complex personal experiences, but you probably won't learn that by watching the nightly news, reading the morning paper, or going to the movies. Increasingly our knowledge of the world comes from stories scripted by others, stories whose characters and plot lines are stripped of the most important questions we can ask. Social involvement, in contrast, forces us to create our own narratives as we join with others to build a community garden, challenge a toxic waste dump, organize our workplace, or encourage our neighbors to support a political candidate. There is no preordained plot, no characters free of contradiction and confusion, no tidy ending. As Alice Walker says, "It's a practice, like any other. You never get it completely." But since it's a story of your own making, you can start anywhere you wish.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: THE CYNICAL SMIRK

In a recent issue of Harper's Magazine, I came upon an ad for Microsoft's on-line magazine, *Slate*, edited by former Crossfire host and New Republic lead columnist Michael Kinsley. "It's what everyone is talking about," the ad proclaimed: "media, politics, technology, high and low culture . . . all with a certain insouciant smirk that thinking people find compelling."

Which insouciant smirk, and which thinking people? My dictionary describes insouciant as "carefree" or "blithely indifferent." Carefree seems fine, even if it conjures up endless parades of Laura Ashley maidens in flowered summer dresses. But is indifference a virtue? Does the ad mean to suggest that *Slate*'s editors and writers stand above it all, and nothing they say really matters?

Praising any smirk, especially a "certain" one, seems worse yet. People smirk when they're full of themselves, smiling arrogantly, "in a self-conscious, knowing or simpering manner." They know the score, you don't, and they're about to put you in your place. Multinational oil companies smirk. So do grade-school bullies and corporate raiders.

William F. Buckley and Donald Trump smirk. Marie Antoinette's famed phrase, "Let them eat cake," was an ill-timed smirk that cost her her head.

Yet *Slate*, or their ad people, has decided that an ethic of contempt boosts sales. They present it as something to be proud of. All of us, the ad suggests, should approach life with such hip detachment. Merely knowing the right people and being able to drop the right insouciantly clever names and phrases exempts us from any broader responsibility to our fellow human beings. We simply need to acknowledge that the world is inherently corrupt, bought and paid for, and that all talk of changing it is naive.

This cynicism pervades our culture. "Everybody lies," says a veteran newspaperman quoted in *Utne Reader*, "but it doesn't matter, because nobody listens." Imagine a man who tells his young son to jump from the stairs into his arms. The father catches the boy twice but the third time steps back and lets him fall. "That's to teach you never to trust anyone," he explains, "even your own father." More and more we expect such betrayal. "That's just how things are," we say, then shrug our shoulders and move on. We now take our cynicism as much for granted as the air we breathe, making it as great a barrier to hope and meaningful public action as all the other barriers combined.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: UNFORESEEN FRUITS

I once went for a run in Fort Worth, Texas, in a grassy park along a riverbank. I passed a man shaking a tree. At first, I kept my distance, but as I got closer, I figured it was safe to stop and ask, "What are you doing?"

"It's a pecan tree," he said. "If I shake it enough, the nuts will come down. I can't know exactly when they'll fall or how many. But the more I shake it, the more I'll get."

Looking back, this seems an apt metaphor for social involvement. Often our efforts may yield few clear or immediate results. Our victories will almost always be partial. But we need to draw enough strength from our initial steps to help us persevere. "You have to begin with small groups," said Modjesca Simkins, an 84-year-old African American activist from South Carolina. "But you reach the people who matter. They reach others. Like the Bible says, 'leaven in the lump, like yeast in the dough' . . . it rises somewhere else."

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## CHAPTER SIX: THE CALL OF STORIES

We work for justice, I've come to believe, when our hearts are stirred by specific lives and situations. San Antonio grandmother Virginia Ramirez challenged the ills of her community only after watching her elderly neighbor die needlessly. She wasn't motivated by an abstract statistical analysis, however scandalous, of local poverty, deteriorating housing stock, or unequal investment in different neighborhoods. She learned those numbers later. Instead, she responded to a particular human story, which spurred her to rethink her own life. Virginia displayed a quality that's critical to social engagement: the

capacity to feel empathy, to imagine ourselves as someone else. "Nearly all acts of altruism and self-sacrifice at any level are tied to this particular ability of the human imagination," says writer Carol Bly.

The story of a 14-year-old African American boy inspired businessman Chris Kim. The boy stole a pair of pants from the clothing store Chris ran in his mini-mall in a poor south Seattle neighborhood. Chris and another Korean store-owner grabbed him, called the police, and were ready to press charges. Then Chris thought about Christ's message of responding with forgiveness, not retribution. He decided to talk with the boy and his parents. "We always say we love our neighbors, but we never do it and risk something that belongs to us. He was a teenager, a young kid. It could have been anyone in a desperate situation, even one of my kids. I thought I should try and understand, not just turn him over to the police."

After Chris and the boy talked, the boy apologized, and said what he really wanted was a job. Chris hesitated briefly, then hired him as a clerk. The boy's mother sent Chris a note saying his compassion had changed her view both of Koreans and her son's life. Moved by the experience, Chris started working with local organizations that educate black youth. "Through my lifetime," Chris admitted, "I didn't have a good feeling about black people. It wasn't from direct experiences, but you hear so much in the media, about all the violence. So I tried to treat this kid as another human being, like myself, my family, my friends. I wanted to be part of solving the problems."

Chris's involvement was supported by an existing foundation of belief—in this case his Christian faith. But it took a direct connection with the boy and his world to induce him to put those beliefs into practice. It took a willingness to exercise his moral imagination, to expand his sphere of concern to include someone from a completely different background.

As a result of wrestling with his responsibility to the boy, Chris began questioning himself, especially his business practices. He consulted local neighborhood leaders, brought in new African American shops to his mini-mall, and sponsored an annual neighborhood festival. He tried to make the mall a place where people of all races and ages would feel welcome. It still felt strange staking his money and time to try to help people who, as he says, "aren't even my own race of Koreans. But I'd wanted to set an example for my children. Once you start to share with others, it gets easier. What I did wasn't anything fancy. But I felt such a priceless taste of love coming back. I got closer to some other human beings who I'd never have gotten to know. Once I've done something like that, I can't go back to what I was before."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN: VALUES, WORK, AND FAMILY

We often hesitate to get involved in our communities because we feel too pressured. We're too busy, we say. We have all we can handle raising our children, paying the bills, and holding on to our jobs. Given our day-to-day responsibilities, we're lucky if we can find a few spare hours each week for pursuits that revive us. It's hard to imagine how we might make room for public commitments.

The pressures are real, especially in our work lives, where we're dominated more and more by a politics of the whip. Whatever our jobs, most of us face a constant strain of working longer and harder, doing more in less time, and often with fewer resources, worrying continually about being downsized. This is true whether we're on a factory assembly line, writing code for a software company constantly behind on the latest release, or teaching the kids of the poor in an under-funded school. If we're going to have a decent future, and not become "losers" in an increasingly divided economy, we're told that we need to become the salesmen of our own lives, wheeling and dealing self-promoters who make career advancement the center of our existence.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT: VILLAGE POLITICS

In Florence, South Carolina, Baptist preacher Bill Cusak had never organized anything more controversial than a revival meeting. But in the mid-1980s he became concerned about whether the nuclear arms race would destroy his granddaughter's future. So he approached a biologist at a local community college, who'd written a letter on the issue to the morning paper. They began to meet with a few others. Together, they built a peace community from scratch, by speaking and showing a video on the arms race at every church, PTA association, and garden club that would have them. They enlisted a local Black pastor and evangelist to help bridge the community's racial divide. And they talked with younger members from some interested congregations, in the hope that they would then approach their friends.

One of the first groups Bill addressed was the local Rotary Club, where he was a longtime member. "They kind of treated me like I had the plague," he recalls later. But he felt he had to do it anyway. "Basically it takes like to reach like: youth to reach youth; blacks to reach blacks; Catholics to reach Catholics. And," he said with a sly smile, "I even think it takes Baptists to reach Baptists."

Although the responses weren't always encouraging, even at the Rotary Club, members began to ask Bill about war and peace issues that the local newspaper reported on, and generally stopped treating him like a pariah. Over a period of years, his and others' efforts slowly changed the town's culture, making it more hospitable to open discussions of difficult social problems.

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## CHAPTER NINE: WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Social involvement helps us enter new worlds. Even when we build on the foundation of our existing values and knowledge, we take on new priorities, gain new skills, meet new people, hear and heed new stories. Issues once at the margins of our vision become the focus of our lives. Distractions that once consumed our time become peripheral. Upon accepting the challenge of trying to shape a different future, we feel a sense of larger purpose. We become linked with others who share our vision.

If we're lucky, the activist communities we join or create can become places where we feel safe not only to talk about the issues at hand, but also to admit uncertainties and

vulnerabilities. As Richard Flacks points out, America's most powerful citizen movements have flourished when the communities they built not only achieved tangible victories but also helped participants nurture their self-development. By the same token, they've crumbled when participants felt like mere cannon fodder for the cause.

At their best, these communities enable us to act in concert, to pool our individual energies into a single common power. They help us sustain our enthusiasm and remind us that we're not alone, even when expressing our most urgent concerns. Engaged communities provide opportunities for us to build deep friendships and to learn from inspiring mentors. Providing a shared sense of purpose and company for the journey, they're essential if we're going to remain committed over the long haul.

Yet activist communities, like any communities, can easily become insular. It's tempting to share our visions only with those who already agree with us. But if M. Scott Peck is right, and I believe he is, that very impulse is counterproductive. "The great enemy of community is exclusivity," he says. "Groups that exclude others because they are poor or doubters or divorced or sinners or of some different race or nationality are not communities; they are cliques—actually defensive bastions against community." True communities "are always reaching to extend themselves."

The urge to retreat to isolated cliques is tempting when we're working to change society. Reaching out to people who don't share our assumptions is definitely a risk. They might reject us, or challenge our motives or arguments. We might feel unprepared and inadequate, unable to sway their minds. Our visibility might bring economic or social costs. It's safer to stay hunkered down with our fellow believers—whether environmentalists, homeless activists, or even militia members. After a while, we may regard ourselves as more noble, pure, and virtuous than those lesser souls who remain uninvolved. Why risk having our visions attacked?

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## CHAPTER TEN: COPING WITH BURNOUT

For years I've gone to my friend Ruth's New Year's Party. I think of the people in her circle as members of my tribe. They came of age opposing the Vietnam War and working for civil rights. Since then, they've challenged the nuclear arms race and U.S. support of Central American dictators and death squads. They've founded tenant's unions, low-income medical clinics, community development corporations, and major environmental projects. They've been involved in almost every significant cause I can imagine.

But a few years ago, I noticed that something had changed. The people at Ruth's party still viewed themselves as activists, even radicals. But only a fraction were still directly engaged. Those who had stayed involved often did so through their jobs, like the political director of the Washington state teacher's union, a community organizer turned county councilman, an ACLU staffer, gay activists involved in local community foundations, an energy conservation consultant, and a couple who made public-interest documentaries.

Except for modest local involvements, like being part of a block association or occasionally volunteering at the neighborhood school, most of the rest had withdrawn

into private life. They worked in emotionally draining human service jobs or the lucrative but soul-devouring software industry. They pursued hobbies like gardening, fixed up their homes, spent time with friends, and tried to save a few dollars after years of living on the edge. A few had all they could handle with young children, but for most, their children were older, or they never had kids to begin with, so their family responsibilities were light. Yet by and large this once tremendously active group was doing little to shape the political culture of their time—even as a Republican wrecking ball steadily demolished 60 years of social programs. Instead, they'd become political spectators, mournfully watching from the sidelines of public life.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN: PIECES OF A VISION

Which issues should we take on, in this complex and demanding time? The answer will vary according to our different perspectives and backgrounds, of course. Some of us may be just beginning to wrestle with these questions, unsure of how to get involved in our communities. Others may have dealt with them for years, but feel disoriented and estranged, following the collapse of grand paradigms of social change that once helped guide our commitments. Still others may continue to take important and challenging stands, yet long for a stronger sense of purpose. Whatever our situation, however, it would be easier to act if we had a compass to steer by.

Of what would this compass be comprised? How would it be constructed? That's what I'd like to explore now. Even if there's no magnetic north, no blueprint for the ideal society, there are, I believe, some overall goals worth working toward, as well as others that should be avoided.

It's useful at this point to remind ourselves again that the issues and actions that appeal to us are inevitably personal. We each heal from physical illness in our own way, Rachel Naomi Remen explains: "Some people heal because they have work to do. Others heal because they have been released from their work and the pressures and expectations that others place on them. Some people need music, others need silence, some need people around them, and others heal alone." Similarly, we each have our own approaches toward healing the world. We find particular ways to make our voices heard, and follow paths appropriate to our distinct unique character, as well as to our circumstances. Ideally, we'll link seemingly disparate causes in service of a larger vision. But we can begin almost anywhere, and act in a way that matters.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE: THE FULLNESS OF TIME

However we promote social change, we do so in time: We link past, present, and future in our attempts to create a better world. Some historical eras, however, seem more pregnant with possibility than others. A few years ago, I saw a British art exhibit about Sergei Eisenstein, the great Soviet director, who in the 1920s and 1930s made films like *Battleship Potemkin* and *Alexander Nevsky*. The exhibit surveyed his work, his times, the history he helped shape. It conveyed the atmosphere of a period when everything

seemed to be breaking loose—politically, technologically, and artistically. In one of the rooms, the exhibit had recreated Eisenstein's office, spilling over with artifacts given to him by such friends as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braques, Fernand Leger, the muralist Jose Clemente Orozco, and the photographer Edward Weston. There was a bust of the composer Prokofiev (Eisenstein's frequent collaborator), and signed photos of James Joyce, Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, and Harpo Marx—as well as one of Lenin. The exhibit was a metaphor for a time of dramatic promise, when people believed they could reinvent the world. Whatever their illusions, they rode an exhilarating wave of hope.

The sixties were marked by a similar sense of urgency and creative ferment. Ordinary people worldwide challenged entrenched institutions and policies. They talked of realizing a more humane and generous future. Their movements then collapsed due to powerful opposition, the exhaustion of their participants, and some dangerous moments of arrogance. But for a time, participants unleashed powerful dreams.

Our lives today are hardly stagnant. We have access to a world of food, music, sights, sounds, and healing traditions. We can log onto Web sites from Bangkok and Reykjavik to Nairobi and Calcutta. As technology changes in leaps and bounds, it alters our lives and the earth at an almost incomprehensible pace, as does a relentless global economy. Change happens so fast we can barely keep up.

But politically, we often feel powerless, incapable of moving forward. We may have witnessed citizens fight for democracy in the streets of Prague, Berlin, and Moscow, Tiananmen Square and Soweto, Manila and Jakarta. But we watched from a distance. As we watched on TV, people risked their lives to have a say in their common future, but the lessons seemed remote from our world. They didn't apply to us. Not here and certainly not now.

It's tempting to gaze back longingly toward the most dramatic periods of history, while disdaining our own era as un-heroic and meaningless. "People seem so stuck these days," says Ginny Nicarthy, who helped launch the battered women's movement 20 years ago. "But things looked pretty grim in the late fifties too, when I first got involved. A dozen of us would picket the bomb shelters or stores that were racist in their hiring, and people would yell at us, tell us to 'go back to Russia,' 'go back to your kitchen, where you belong.' There were no clear reasons to believe that we could change things, but somehow we did. We leaped forward, started the ball rolling, and built enough political mass that it kept going. Maybe we need to do that again."

Seeding the ground for the next round of highly visible social progress will take work. Yet major gains for human dignity are possible, even in seemingly resistant times. Indeed, our efforts may be even more critical now than in periods when the whole world seems to be watching.

For more of Paul Rogat Loeb's writings, go to <http://www.paulloeb.org/index.htm>.