

# YES! Magazine Winter 2003: What Would Democracy Look Like?

## Put Some Heart Into It

by Linda Stout

**What will it take to energize our work for change? Linda Stout, who spent years organizing poor people in the rural South, polled fellow organizers around the US and has this to say about what it will take to win. Many powerful movements for justice have brought us to where we are today: the women's, labor, peace, civil rights, environmental, and other movements. All have had a major impact. All of our lives have been changed because of them.**

Many powerful movements for justice have brought us to where we are today: the women's, labor, peace, civil rights, environmental, and other movements. All have had a major impact. All of our lives have been changed because of them.

But we are in a different time today. Our movements have become more fragmented and, despite all our victories, it sometimes feels that things are getting worse. Looking at the state of the world today can create a sense of despair. Some of us have gotten tired, and some have left the movement. Others keep doing the work, even though we may be filled with a sense of hopelessness.

In Cornell West's new book, *Restoring Hope*, he makes a passionate argument that hope—not to be confused with optimism—is essential for social change: “Only a new wave of vision, courage, and hope can keep us sane and preserve the decency and dignity requisite to revitalize our energy for the work to be done.”

So what will it take to give us the hope to re-energize our work for social change?

I have been on a journey for several years—a journey I will probably continue for the rest of my life—to discover answers to building a winning movement for transformational social change. The journey took me from my home and organizing work in rural North Carolina to a small progressive foundation called the Peace Development Fund. While there, we conducted a national survey called the Listening Project. We asked activists, “What do we need to do to build a winning movement for change? What's missing now?”

Out of the Listening Project findings, information gathered from other research reports, and structured conversations with activists, I was moved to start Spirit in Action, a movement-building organization focused on positive vision, connecting spirit to social justice, healing divisions, and taking action for individual, collective, and social transformation.

Here are the three key themes I heard consistently from activists working for social change across many issues and many constituencies:

- We must create a vision of what we are trying to build. People will not join us if all they see us talk about is what we are against, not what we are for.
- We need to learn new ways to communicate and connect with each other. We often re-create the competitive and distrustful environments that we are trying to work against. Racism, classism, and other oppressions affect how we work together, and we often look at each other with the most critical eye, rather than paying attention to each other's best gifts.
- The third thing folks talked about was what I call “spirit” or heart connection—a connection to something greater than ourselves, a connection to each other, to the Earth, to the ancestors, and to our deepest self. Many activists talked of being drawn to social justice work from deeply held heart-values or spiritual beliefs. Yet there is little time for paying attention to spirit in our political work, and many people feel this lack especially when they need something to sustain them through difficult times. People also felt this lack kept us from connecting with each other as deeply as we should.

So how do those of us in the movements for social change go about addressing these issues?

We at Spirit in Action believe activists need to create a collective vision of what kind of world we want to live in—not a utopian fantasy, but a vision based on what we know is possible. What kind of government do we want and how could we make it truly representative? What kind of educational system? What kind of economic system? Justice system? In all of these areas there are examples of what is possible, but if we focus too much on the problems we can't see the possibilities.

We must develop and move toward positive visions of the future. To do that we have to create compelling images that

will draw us toward them. And we must act as if the world we are trying to create already exists. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." We must create experiences and models so people can feel and understand what it is we want to build.

When I visited Nicaragua in the 1980s, I saw how things looked, sounded, and tasted when poor people lead a movement to transform society. It was the first time that I, as a young woman raised in poverty, began to understand the power poor people had when we don't work from a place of shame. It transformed my life.

### **Taking time for community**

We have to learn better ways to work together. We need to build a new culture among us and learn to function as a community. We often think we lack the time to build community because the issues we're struggling for take priority. But the truth is if we don't take the time, we will not be successful in achieving our goals.

Over the past three years, Spirit in Action organized three gatherings of media activists in which we spent at least a third of the time on building trust and community. Initially, some members were concerned that we spent too much time on this instead of getting to the work at hand. But at the end of gatherings, participants expressed delight and surprise at how much we were able to accomplish.

The more time we put into creating community—listening to each other, celebrating together, and really understanding one another—the more successful our work will be. There are no short cuts to this. It requires time and courage, and it makes some people in our change movements uncomfortable. But it is the only thing that will allow us to be successful.

We also need to look at ways we get separated by systemic issues such as classism, racism, sexism, ageism, and so on. We need to learn to deal with oppression in ways that do not make people go to a defensive or shame-filled place. Where I've seen the most profound understanding and change has been when people talk and listen to each other, understand what happens to others when they are oppressed, and learn how to be allies.

### **Sustained by spirit**

The third thing we need to do is bring spirit into our work for change. My own connection to spirit has sustained me in the face of impossible odds. When I first began organizing, my background as a Quaker led me repeatedly to a passage in a Quaker guidebook that said social change has always happened because one person or a few people had a vision and set about to make it happen. It was my spiritual path that gave me the courage to start working for change, even when I didn't believe I could. It was what helped me find my own voice and overcome all the messages that said I wasn't smart enough or good enough to make a difference. And it's what allows me to walk continually into unknown territory and take risks.

But as we all know, bringing in spirituality or religion can be very complicated. Religion has long been a source of inspiration and unification but it has also been a source of division and repression. How do we bring in spirit in a way that honors all people's beliefs and practices? In our Circles of Change program, which brings together diverse groups of activists in small groups across the country, we open our gatherings by asking each person to call on spirit in the way they understand it. One person prays to God, another to the ancestors, one speaks to the spirit of the Earth, one calls for a moment of silence, and another leads us in song. Everyone's way of connecting is brought forward without any one way taking priority.

Singing, celebrating, and doing ceremony together are all powerful ways to bring spirit forward. Inspired by her experiences in Circles of Change, one public school counselor simply lit a candle at the beginning of meetings and asked students and parents to reflect on their vision of what they wanted to accomplish and how they wanted to be with each other in the process.

We must begin to lead with our hearts and have the courage to break out of old ways of doing things for real transformation to happen

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