

LABOR DAY 2007
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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BY MICK MORTLOCK

It was 1967, and I was in the US Air Force getting ready for deployment. I was visiting with Tom Hutchinson, my best friend in high school, in his dorm room at the University of Oregon. We were talking with his friends about how we could stay out of the Vietnam War when I saw it on the wall: this picture of Jesus. It was this image of Jesus that created a watershed moment in my conversion to social activism. It was a reward poster by Art Young—I'm sure some of you have seen it.

Jesus Christ
Wanted for Sedition—
Criminal Anarchy—
Vagrancy, and
Conspiring to Overthrow the Established Government
Dressed Poorly,
Said to be a Carpenter by trade,
Ill-Nourished, has visionary ideas,
Associates with Common working people,
the Unemployed and Bums,
Alien
Believed to be a Jew
Alias: 'Prince of Peace,
Son of Man'--
'Light of the World' Et cetera Et cetera
Professional Agitator
Red Beard,
Marks on Hands and Feet the Result of Injuries Inflicted by an angry mob led by
respectable Citizens and legal authorities.

I loved this poster, Tom gave it to me, and I took it to my military assignment in Peshawar, Pakistan. When I had settled in, I posted Jesus on the wall of my barracks. I was standing in front of it when the base commander came into my room and demanded that I take it down. My protestations about "freedom of speech" bounced off him and at that moment, I decided that a system that denied me the constitutional rights I had sworn to uphold was fundamentally flawed.

A few years later and almost thirty years ago, I was out of the military and had gone through the required stages of hippie, anarchist, and communist. I stood in a maximum security courtroom

slightly smaller than our sanctuary and waited for the judge and jury to announce their verdict. The jury had deliberated for only twenty minutes and Donald Grieg my friend, college roommate, and lawyer whispered—“when they come back this quickly, it usually means innocent.”

Now rewind to 1953. I come from a working class family. My father Roy was a member of the Electrical Wiremen and Linemen's Union stringing and slinging cable in what was then the sleepy town of Bend, Oregon. I was five, when he accidentally brushed against a charged electrical wire that killed him.

After a year or so, my Mom Joyce married Eddie, a member of the Railroad Brakemen's Union and we moved across town. We lived in a small house a couple blocks from the railroad tracks where occasionally after their shift, workers would gather to banter, discuss and share their view of the world. To me, these conversations seem mindless and endless except when it was time for labor negotiations when they took on an angry tone. Whoever was US President got some of the venom. He would unfailingly order the workers back to work under the provisions of a “thirty-day cooling off period.”

Eddie would sometimes take my younger brother Alan and I aside and talk to us about the importance of unions, working class solidarity—and the importance of not crossing picket lines. He also told us Franklin Delano Roosevelt stories. FDR he argued had saved the country. He saved it from the capitalists, and from the depression.”

This 1950s world formed the fabric of who I became. I embraced much of it and rejected some. Now fast forwarding to 1981, My 1950s outlook gave me the strength to laugh at what was happening to me in Vancouver, Washington as I waited for the gavel to fall. Now imagine, if you can, that we are in that courtroom. Along the back wall and about one-third of the way along each side are uniformed, fully-armed officers.

My life as an activist consisted of marches, demonstrations, meetings, picket lines, and forums. The anarchists considered me a sellout, to the communists I was a revisionist, the pacifists branded me dangerous, and the unionists thought I was just too much of a leftist. Aside from my lawyer, there were no supporters in the courtroom. I wish I had thought of asking Conrad Belkin

For years, I spent one or two mornings a week at the Longshoremen's Hall, now McMenamin's Mission Theatre, in Northwest Portland. Here I talked with the men who load and unload the cargo in Portland's harbor. I spoke with Connie Belkin almost every week. An outgoing guy in his early 40s, he would tell me in clear language—some of it unrepeatable here where he was coming from. Most of the time he agreed with me, some of the time he'd tell me I was full of hoot.

Connie considered his union, the International Longshoremen's Association of the AFL-CIO, to be one of the best. Even still he described his life as a living hell. In the early 1970s before the era of containerized cargo, Connie spent his time on a forklift loading and unloading cargo. Working with a team of workers, they maneuvered their equipment up and down the holds of ships.

Loss of life, broken arms, and separated shoulders were frequent and there was continual harassment to move quickly. Once injured the frustration of workers' compensation laws came into

play. If Connie fell into the water, he received compensation under the federal maritime act and qualified for a maximum benefit of \$72 a week. However, if he fell onto land, under state law, he would be left high and dry with no benefits.

While boats were docked they were not making any money, so then, as now, the big push was unloading, and reloading as fast as possible. Contract provisions were often ignored because the process of filing grievances was convoluted, and it was sometimes easier to go along than to fight the harassment.

In the early 1970s the Union Hall was a gathering place where conversation happened, and it had been since the 1892. Unfortunately, the Longshoremen were in for a dramatic change. Shippers discovered they could turn ships around faster if they had cargo containers filled and unfilled at the customers' location.

Longshoremen who had spent their lives in the holds of ships began using cranes and such to move huge already filled boxes. Their jobs had been largely negotiation, conversation and banter—now on the job they were much more isolated. This was a big change in the social life of the longshoremen, and it accompanied a similar move in society toward less social involvement.

So what was I charged with? Why would they move my trial to a high security courtroom, why would they bring in all these deputies, sheriffs and all to cover my trial. I wondered that myself—all I had been doing was handing out flyers in support of the Metal Workers.

I was officially charged with was obstructing traffic. The state defined obstructing traffic as “No person shall park any vehicle upon a street, other than an alley, in such a manner or under such conditions as to have available less than twelve feet of the width of the roadway for free movement of vehicular traffic.” The state in this case wanted to show its power—and for my obstructing traffic charge they brought in the fully armed power of the state. All I had done was hand out flyers at the gates of the ALCOA aluminum plant in Vancouver, a so called crime that for years, I characterized as Felony Leafletting.

The years of my early activism were the years that many American's disengaged from the political process. Robert Putnam describes it this way in his seminal book Bowling Alone: “By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education--the best individual-level predictor of political participation--have risen sharply throughout this period. Every year over the last decade or two, millions more have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities.”

The ability of workers to organize has been greatly impacted by the social disintegration and disengagement described by Robert Putnam. As he points out when explaining the title of Bowling Alone, more people than ever are bowling but fewer and fewer people are in bowling leagues.

Meg Wheatley, a social change leader that I admire, asks: “How can we become people we respect, people who are generous, loving, curious, open, energetic? How can we ensure that at the end of our lives, we'll feel that we have done meaningful work, created something that endured, helped other people, raised healthy children?”

I am a founder of Democracy Talking, a non-profit group that received its seed funding from Atkinson Church members Scott and Cay Bordin. When I asked Scott and Cay why they were putting a small fortune into something that had not been done before, they answered: "It's for the children. Someday they are going to ask us what we did to make the world a better place. Democracy Talking is our answer." They basically echoed Meg Wheatley, not just with their words, but with their practice. For the last three years we have worked together to turn the power of conversation into the power to make change.

A year ago in a summer service, Cay, Scott and I talked to this congregation about why we formed Democracy Talking—to solve this problem of disengagement. Since then somewhere between 30 and 50 of you have helped us as volunteers—and Unitarian Universalists have become our biggest source of support and in some ways this church has become our home.

In the past year, Democracy Talking has become a partner organization with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. We have developed a version of our Political Malaise course just for Unitarian Universalists and we have made significant progress on a third seminar on Defending Civil Liberties. The Political Malaise course will be offered for Atkinson members this year.

Why do I bring this up on Labor Day? Because it *is* the solution to the dilemma for labor. Something like Democracy Circles are needed to turn around the labor movement, because the labor movement must turn around the problem of disengagement in its own ranks. It is in engagement that many of us find hope and spiritual strength.

What can we do beginning today to restore hope to the future?

Let me talk about how Democracy Circles or covenant groups work. They are simple. A question is presented and everyone is encouraged to answer. While one of us are answering, everyone else is encouraged to listen. This simple process remains simple and gets simpler the more we practice it.

Is there a more powerful way to cause change than to start a conversation—indeed can change happen without it? When a group of people discover they share a concern, change begins. Again, according to Meg Wheatley, **"There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about."**

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How many times have we heard about a small group responding to an unsafe dangerous street crossing, or increased incidents of cancer. A couple people noticing each others' concern can change the world. Their first conversation spreads to others. Friends talk to each other. Because they care about each other they pay attention to what is being said, then they talk to others and it grows.

The power of people getting together is what ALCOA Corporation and the City of Vancouver, Washington feared when they arrested me for felony leafleting. The message from my police-state guilty verdict was "look at us—we have the power of the law, guns and intimidation and we won't hesitate to use them. Don't dare organize—we'll crush you."

Well, here we are in our millions—still standing. Unitarian Universalists, Union Members, anti-war activists, Students, Gays, Democrats, Republicans, Lesbians, Transgenders, people who care, people who love each other. In our conversation is the power to make change. Please join me—let's give each other the hope and spiritual strength to keep fighting for a better life.