

Chapter 1

DEMOCRACY 101

IN RESPONSE TO MANY REQUESTS FROM small volunteer groups across Canada, over ten years ago I started holding activist training workshops for Sierra Club of Canada. I have held workshops in church halls, community centres, and hotel rooms from coast to coast to coast. I have tried to help stay-at-home moms frustrated that they cannot get city hall to create safe play areas; teachers who cannot stand new provincial curriculum rules and want to know how to change them; fishermen trying to get the federal bureaucrats at Fisheries and Oceans to recognize that the level of catch they have approved is too high to ensure a sustainable fishery. On the surface, these folks have little in common. They do have one essential common denominator: they are citizens in a democracy.

People want the tools to protect a favourite forest from logging or to keep a hospital or school from closing. The tools of democracy are equally effective for many causes and movements. I've seen "sos" work as a slogan for "Save Our Seas" as well as "Stop Overseas Sales" (of nuclear reactors) and "Save Our Schools." Issues whether large or small, municipal or international, all require a dedicated group of strategic and committed activists in order to succeed and shift a pending decision.

There is really no mystery to "fighting city hall." Left, right, or centre, organizing for change is about putting a case together, getting the word out, persuading the public that your cause has merit and finding ways to translate that public support into pressure on governments.

Unfortunately, these are not skills taught in school. Increasingly, even the basic civics 101 of how legislation is passed and the fundamentals of how government works, are omitted from core education. Too few people can easily name their municipal councilor, congressmen in the U.S. or member of the provincial and federal Parliaments in Canada.

Fewer people vote in elections. More assume that one person cannot really do much.

THE REALITY

The reality is far different. One person can change the world. We know the names of the heroes—Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Rachel Carson, Chico Mendez, Nelson Mandela, Dianne Fossey. To be a hero in that company requires a moral courage few of us possess. An alarming number of them were martyred for their beliefs. But there were others. Rosa Parks did not sit down in the “whites only” section of a bus in Alabama in a random act of exhaustion. She had been trained as an activist at the Highlander Center in North Carolina. She and many, many others had learned the principles of non-violent civil disobedience.

There is a catalyst. There is a spark. And then there are the thousands of unsung heroes who make change happen.

Would apartheid have ended, would Nelson Mandela have been freed from his jail cell on Robson Island to be the president of a free South Africa, if not for the mundane organizing of countless thousands of supporters globally? Churches, human rights groups, average, everyday folks hounded corporations to divest themselves of investments in brutal, racist South Africa. Would apartheid have ended if thousands of Canadians had not cared enough, if Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, a fellow Tory and ideological twin to Maggie Thatcher, had not thwarted her to lead the charge for a Commonwealth denunciation of the government of P.W. Botha? Would Nelson Mandela have ever been free if not for the letter of the one hundred thousandth person to the right target at the right time?

Who changed the world: Nelson Mandela, or you?

MY MOTHER STOPPED GLOBAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS TESTING

Maybe you thought it was President John F. Kennedy who stopped the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. Reality is, it was my mother.

In the late 1950s the famous “Ban the Bomb” movement started. The now ubiquitous peace sign was not mere graphic art, but a clear representation, using the nautical symbols, to indicate the letters: N. D. The peace sign is actually a semaphore sending the message “Nuclear Disarmament.”

Mushroom clouds were routine when I was a toddler. We didn't see them in Connecticut where I grew up. They were in Los Alamos, New Mexico—a long, long way away. We had to test nuclear bombs in the atmosphere because it was the Cold War. You were better “dead than red.” If the cost was a bit of radiation . . . well, only a commie would complain about that. But still the strontium 90 from the nuclear blasts, ionizing radiation with a mind-numbingly long half-life, fell back down to those amber waves of grain. The cows ate the strontium 90 in the grass. The cows' milk had radioactive nuclides. So the U.S. government's Atomic Energy Commission dutifully tested the milk from cows on the way to market. They reported the radioactive materials on the side of the milk carton as “Sunshine Units.” The sun, after all, radiates energy. It's good for you. How much better then to have your own little suns radiating from within?

I was a baby when my mom read something (goodness knows where) that said that some scientists were worried that nuclear testing and the atmospheric radioactive fallout would result in an increase in childhood leukemia. In those days, childhood leukemia was quite rare.

My mother started worrying. At first, she didn't think about trying to stop nuclear weapons testing. At first she wanted advice about how to protect her baby from the radiation. She started calling scientists at the university. One told her not to buy fresh milk. Buy powdered milk instead, as it has had more time for the radiation to dissipate. One told her that he wasn't really sure it worked, but he was grinding up calcium tablets and adding them to anything he could get his kids to eat: ice cream, powdered milk, cakes. Since strontium 90 mimics calcium in the human body, it gets routed to bones and teeth, where leukemia can start in the bone marrow. His theory was that by maxing out the absorptive calcium capacity of his children's bones, there would be no room for the poisonous calcium look-alikes. I still remember the chalky taste of ice cream loaded with real calcium to ward off the radioactive fallout.

One day my mom decided that grinding calcium tablets was not enough. She kept grinding them up, but she decided to do more. She and my dad formed the Connecticut Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. My dad had just started as a young accountant at Aetna Life and Casualty

in Hartford. He was the committee's treasurer and secretary. My mom was chair. There were no other members.

The committee started with a petition campaign. The petition put forward the elements of the issue, key facts, well-cited by unassailable authority. It appealed to a moral objection to poisoning the land and killing innocents without the permission of any one, least of all the innocents.

How can two people, a young couple in a new town, generate thousands of names on petitions? My mom started by opening the Yellow Pages of the Hartford phone book. She let her fingers do the walking to the Clergy section. From Abruzza to Zezo, she phoned ministers, priests, and rabbis. All day long she worked the old rotary phone. She repeated her prepared statement over and over again, until she thought she must be speaking gibberish.

"Hello, (Minister Cunningham, Rabbi Kessler, Father O'Hara), I am a volunteer working with the Connecticut Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and I wonder if you would be willing to circulate our petition in your [church, synagogue]?"

Two years old, I worked with my play phone, "I want to speak to ministers, priests and rabbis. I have a 'tition."

She was a member of the Junior League. She was a lovely hostess at cocktail parties. She volunteered for local charities. She started every letter to the editor, "As a housewife, a mother, and a Christian..." She didn't just write to local papers. When she wrote a letter, she sent it everywhere: the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Charleston News and Courier*, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the Houston and Dallas dailies. Pretty soon we started getting mail. Hate mail especially came from Texas. And then we started getting crank calls late at night, "Your house is surrounded. Come out with your hands up." My mom started taking the phone off the hook after 10 PM.

Other people called to volunteer. Petitions filled up. The Connecticut Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy had volunteers, and meetings with a larger executive. One day my mom thought, "It must be illegal to kill people without their permission. It must be murder."

She decided that the brilliant editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Norman Cousins, with his incisive editorials for world peace, might be interested in her theory. She phoned the magazine in New York and was amazed to be granted an audience.

She met with the surprisingly young Cousins. He heard her out and suggested he knew of a few other people who had a similar notion. Perhaps he could let them know of her interest?

Once back home, a few weeks later, she received a letter from a lawyer representing an international law suit against the governments of the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. It asked if she would be willing to join seventeen other plaintiffs. By now, my mother had developed a much cherished, if local, reputation. She wrote that she would need to know something about the other seventeen plaintiffs as she had to protect her credibility and that of the Connecticut Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. A very polite letter came by return post listing the other plaintiffs. They were all Nobel laureates. The lawyer closed, “By the way, none of the other plaintiffs have inquired about you.”

And so it came to pass that my mother entered a new phase—mass media. Her fifteen minutes of fame¹ came with the tag line “seventeen Nobel Prize winners and a Connecticut housewife.”

I moved from playing with the toy phone to media prop status. Sitting on my mother’s lap at the Washington, D.C., press launch of the suit to end nuclear weapons testing, I represented all the poisoned innocents of the world. At nursery school, I warned the other children not to eat the snow because it contained strontium 90. They didn’t listen. They had only been warned not to eat yellow snow. I marched and picketed the White House, secretly hoping that Caroline Kennedy would come out to play.

By the time President Kennedy signed the Treaty Banning Nuclear Weapons Tests in the Atmosphere, my mother had built a movement in Connecticut, which joined a national organization. There were, in fact, hundreds, if not thousands of other worried American mothers.² The new national organization was called the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and later, just SANE.

My mother sat on the SANE board with Norman Cousins, Dr. Benjamin Spock, Norman Thomas, Homer Jack, and others. My little brother and I grew up knowing these leaders. Cousins became “Uncle Norman” and Thomas—multiple candidate for president and likely the only socialist to hold his own in U.S. politics—was dubbed by my little brother, “Normous Thomas.” Geoffrey, at four years old, was sure that that must be the man’s name, for enormous he was. (Geoffrey used to do

an imitation of “Normous Thomas” in the bath—a sight which he had once beheld in awe—featuring knees to the chin, a frugal use of water, and a methodical use of soap.)

Before I turned eight, nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere had been banned. I had watched as my mother spoke to one hundred thousand people from the plinth of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square at the closing rally of the Aldermaston March; as she went on a six-day hunger strike in front of the Soviet Mission to the U.N. in Manhattan to protest Soviet bomb tests; and came to know the famous, great and infamous. She loved Connecticut’s liberal Republican senator, Prescott Bush (George W.’s grandfather from a much deeper end of the gene pool), had been the subject of Vice-President Nixon’s flirtatious charm (she used to swear that he was very charming if you like that “what’s a pretty girl like you worrying your head about nuclear weapons? Let me take you lovely ladies out for a drink” sort of line), and came to be friends of the likes of Bertrand Russell, Linus Pauling, and Hubert Humphrey (who held me on his lap through much of that press conference), as well as hundreds of other average, everyday folks who banded together with the goal of changing the world.

And they did.

LESSONS LEARNED AT MY MOTHER’S KNEE:

1. My grandmother always said, “Thought without constructive action is demoralizing.”
2. You can accomplish anything you want if you don’t care who gets the credit.
3. There is no one so famous or important that you cannot pick up the phone and talk to them. Even famous people need baths.
4. Media coverage is fickle.
5. Sometimes governments lie.
6. No one is powerless without their own permission.
7. Be polite.
8. Thank people for helping.
9. Changing the world is only a matter of time (if you have enough people on your side. Getting them on your side is what takes time!).
10. My mommy changed the world. So can I.