

Sometimes it is sitting in the middle of a room with 200 other people. The name of the meeting or committee doesn't matter. You light a cigarette. That doesn't help. You take notes or raise your hand. That doesn't help. The problem is not a procedural point of order or the particular identity of the leader. Everybody's on best behavior: politely taking turns, preparing to vote or write letters. The problem is the yearning courtesies, the underlying patience, the honcho upfront and the followers who face him, or her.

Most likely the reason people came together was because something wrong, something rather extraordinary fell into their lives. Everybody in the room has been smashed by the same ax, and look at the gathering. Look at the meaning of the manners of the scene!

It reminds me of instant TV coverage when there's a disaster: A baby has been burned to death. The TV reporter approaches the surviving parents as they stand, dumfounded by horror, on the street.

"How do you feel about the loss of your little girl?" the reporter asks, moving the microphone close to the mouth of the father. The young man, confronted by a microphone and cameras, struggles to recall what etiquette requires of him.

"Well," he manages to reply. "Of course we're in a state of shock. (Pause.) This is a terrible night in our lives. (Pause.)"

But the reporter does not remove the microphone. Instead, there's a second question.

"What will you and your wife do now?"

The young man puts his arm around his wife and says, politely, "I don't know. We don't know."

In the context of tragedy, all polite behavior is a form of self-denial. I can remember being eight years old and there was my mother warning me to watch *the tone of my voice* in the middle of a violent fight between my father and myself. The purpose of polite behavior is never virtuous. Deceit, surrender, and concealment: these are not virtues. The goal of the mannerly is comfort, *per se*. I can remember my father leaving me alone, finally, when there was no longer space for consideration of my tone: When I pulled a knife from under my pillow and asked him, "What do you want?" it was then that he changed his mind: What he wanted, then, was somebody else to beat up.

Nevertheless, people lose their jobs or their lives and still the reaction is cooperative. We try to speak clearly and to spare the feelings of the listener. We shave and shower and put on a clean shirt for the meeting. We volunteer to make phone calls, or coffee, or submit to the outcome of a vote about what shall I do. I have been raped: Who will speak for me? What are the bylaws?

The courtesies of order, of ruly forms pursued from a heart of rage or terror or grief defame the truth of every human crisis. And that, indeed, is the plan: To defuse and to deform the motivating truth of critical human response to pain.

In his essay "The Pleasures of Hating," William Hazlitt earned himself the reputation of an irascible, outrageous crank by passionate lament for earlier and multiple occasions when he had permitted himself only a diluted/inadequate expression of his anger and hurt and thorough disgust. In my teens, I was shocked, awake, by that panegyric to the forbidden emotion. And I was haunted by the devious, the plaintive love so clearly protected by his reverence for the truth of things, especially the hateful truth of things.

But the lobby for polite behavior is fairly inescapable. Most often, the people who can least afford to further efface and deny the truth of what they experience, the people whose very existence is most endangered and, therefore, most in need of vigil-

lantly truthful affirmation, these are the people—the poor and the children—who are punished most severely for departures from the civilities that grease oppression.

If you make and keep my life horrible then, when I can tell the truth, it will be a horrible truth; it will not sound good or look good or, God willing, feel good to you, either. There is nothing good about the evils of a life forced into useless and impotent drift and privation. There is very little that is attractive or soothing about being strangled to death, whether it is the literal death of the body or the actual death of the soul that lying, that the humiliation and the evil of self-denial, guarantees.

Extremity demands, and justifies, extreme response. Violation invites, and teaches, violence. Less than that, less than a scream or a fist, less than the absolute cessation of normal events in the lock of abnormal duress is a lie and, worse than that, it is blasphemous ridicule of the self.

Nonetheless, I am a liar. I am frequently polite. I go to meetings and sit, properly, in one chair. I write letters to Washington. It's been a long while since I actually hit anybody at all.

One of my friends is Frances Fox Piven. We became friends by fighting each other in the realm of tactics, during the early sixties. Frances was advocating rehabilitation of the ghetto. I was advocating that she, a white intellectual, mind her own damn business. And I was advocating a push for integration because I thought that, otherwise, you might achieve better housing for Black families but you would still lack supporting community services such as reliable garbage collection, police protection, and ambulance response. We did not change each other's minds but we did come to respect the sincerity of our differences. And then we became close friends.

At this time Frances was living in Harlem with her daughter, Sara, who was just a few years older and a few inches taller than my son, Christopher. Each of us was raising one child and also pursuing a complicated professional and political life.

You could accurately describe Frances as a brilliant and radical humanitarian; her commitment to poor people and to Black people cannot, anywhere, be easily matched.

But there are things that we never talk about, or never talk

about, twice. Until a few months ago, as a matter of fact, the silent areas between us led me to let the friendship atrophy, for almost two years.

We'd met for lunch in the Village. She was very angry about my piece in *Seven Days*, the one about the Hassidim and Victor Rhodes. On the street, as we walked to the restaurant, I asked her about the impending referendum in California, the one that would mean, if it passed, that a teacher who expressed the opinion that sexual preference was not the business of the state could then be fired. "Oh, Gay Rights," she said. "No," I said, "Civil Rights."

Well, about this we disagreed, and seriously. Of course, that had been an area of silence between us for many years: "Gay Rights," or my loving a woman, these were subjects excluded from the compass of her radical humanitarian concern. Compared to unemployment or shrunken Welfare moneys or hunger, Frances viewed such "deviant behavior" as frivolous distraction from these other, unarguably gut issues.

At lunch, our argument became a furious exchange. Frances felt that my identification of the Lubavitch Hassidim assailants of Victor Rhodes, and that my emphatic focus upon Victor and the Black community amounted to an act of anti-Semitism.

It would be hard to say which one of us was more outraged.

I remember thinking that the cafe table where we sat was really as large as the whole country and that now we had taken irreconcilable, opposite sides. It was the survival of her people, as we saw it, poised against the survival of my people.

What about all of our discussions and all of our trust and what about the truth, for God's sake? What about that? The truth, Frances retorted, was not merely that one "incident." The truth had to include the entire history of the Jews so that, for instance, a reader could appreciate the background for instinctive expectations of persecution. I said I didn't think we really should get into a comparison of histories; that seemed inherently otiose to me and no amount of arguing would dissuade either of us from the conviction that our people were suffering long and too long.

I said my concern, at the moment, was not the history of

the Jews or an understanding as to why Hassidic Jews might happen to murder a Black child. My concern was that a Black child had been beaten and that he lay, critical and in a coma, even as we sat in that restaurant, and that somebody Hassidic was responsible and that whoever that might be should be duly prosecuted by the law, and that unless somebody insisted on the facts, in mass media print, the odds against such due process were pretty fucking high.

I said that, to my knowledge, the history of Black people in white America was not a factor in regular press coverage of alleged Black crime: That it was ridiculous to expect more generosity of me than I, than my people, had ever received.

When we parted, Frances gave me a copy of *The Last of the Just*, asking me to read it, in a rather somber voice. I took it home and was bitterly dismayed to find that it is a novel tracing the relentlessly vicious and evil persecution of the Jews through several centuries. This did seem to mean that my friend seriously believed me to be an anti-Semite. I was stunned.

We had finally had a fight beyond tactics. It seemed to me that my silence on these issues and my continuing self-denial around the "issue" of my bisexuality was what had kept the friendship alive. Without my collaboration, without my self-censorship, the disagreements between us seemed irreconcilable.

Whether it was about Zionism or Palestine or my own, evidently, inadmissible feelings, I had chosen to keep silent and to politely slide by, or omit, references to these explosive spaces between us. But now that such silence was broken, and after our fight, I felt I had to make a choice I had never expected to make. And so I did. I chose complete silence. I could no longer participate in an exchange requiring acrobatics of self-denial even for the sake of those real and enormous areas of mutual agreement where I respected Frances as my comrade.

And then the good news of Miami burst upon America. It was such good news. A whole lot of silence had ended, at last! Misbegotten courtesies of behavior were put aside. There were no leaders. There was no organization and no spokesman. There was no agenda. There were no meetings, no negotiations. A violated people reacted with violence. An extremity of want,

an extremity of neglect, and extremity of racist oppression had been met, at last, with an appropriate, extreme reaction: an outcry and a reaching for vengeance, a wreaking of havoc in return for wrecked lives, a mutilation of passers-by in return for generations mutilated by contempt and by the immutable mutilations of poverty. Miami was completely impolite.

There was no deceit, no surrender, no concealment.

And why should victims cover for their executioners? Why should the victims cooperate and agree to discuss or write letters about what is as blatant and as deadly as Nagasaki, as horrendous as Hiroshima?

But this has been the code, overwhelmingly, for the oppressed: That you keep cool and calm down and explore proper channels and above all, that you remain law-abiding and orderly precisely because it is the order of the day that you will beg and bleed, precisely because it is the power of the law of the terrorist state arrayed against you to force you to beg and bleed without acceptable recourse except for dumb endurance or mute perishing.

And while the terrorist State, the Bureaus of Welfare, of Unemployment and Education, the Police and the State Troopers and the Army immediately mass, respectively, to confuse or mollify or punish and extirpate the always short-lived incivility of the afflicted, who will punish the violent State?

And how else can you successfully act to punish the State (i.e., *the manner of standing* that is the general condition in which you find yourself) except to eliminate the aping of the manners that were devised to secure your own wretched status, and except by acting so that what stands must fall?

Miami is not without precedent. Past confrontations between striking workers and state violence deployed by management have several times risen to those levels of retaliation, for example. But within the history of Black and white confrontations in America, it has seldom if ever occurred before that the violated Black citizens reached beyond internalized rage and beyond self-destructive symbols to the enemy, himself: to his own courtroom beyond the boundaries of the Black community, and to his own white body.

Various press-appointed and self-acclaimed Black leaders hastened to Miami, hoping "to keep the lid on" and "to cool things down." While a few mumbled one or two words about the justice of protest, all were quick to "condemn and deplore" the "violence and the brutality" of the protest. Not one of those leaders deplored "the violence and the brutality" of the obscenely engendering situation in which the Black people of Florida have been barely living. Not one of them condemned that act of State violence that took away the life of Arthur MacDuffie.

In the massive Black peoples' uprising of Miami, 1980, however, there was no tolerance left for airplane leadership—the leaders who get a call from the White House and then free tickets to fly into and out of a revolution. Nobody listened to these models of professional leadership. In fact, the President himself could not utter a complete lie before he was shouted and pelted away.

Miami was a peoples' uprising, and not an organized demonstration. It was extraordinary; an authentic spontaneous combustion resulting from conflict between life and the degradation of life. It was on site. This was not about making Hong Kong or the Philippines safe for democracy. When this house caught on fire, everybody was home.

I waited and watched to see what would happen next. I looked for the emergence of spokesmen. I listened for news of negotiations urgently begun between city hall and the community. I asked around for the name of a group, a committee: some/any formal and comprehensible and orderly "Miami Rights Coalition" stepping forward with a list of logically enumerated demands, and an eloquent defense of these demands.

None of this happened; Miami was news.

It was anarchy in the best sense: it was pure. By the time the very mention of Miami could bring about shudderings and panic throughout America, the explosion of protest was over; it had not been instigated or conceived as a tactic toward 40 more jobs or five cents more an hour. It was an unadulterated, absolute response to the terrors of a merciless oppression. And it was more: It was an ending of self-hatred. The expression

of hatred for your enemies is sometimes the only way to end self-hatred. Where there is conflict, conscious termination of self-hatred is the only means to rational possibilities for love. Miami was an act of love: love for Arthur MacDuffie and love for every jeopardized Black life.

When Miami happened, I had been thinking about leadership, per se. Again and again after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., social commentators "deplored" the lack of Black leadership. But I had been thinking, maybe it's a good thing. Certainly, I couldn't see any white leadership around that left me envious. The concept of leadership itself seemed to me dangerous and tired.

How could you consciously commit yourself to the worldwide movement into self-determination, and then turn around and say where is my leader/who is speaking for me?

My immediate, personal reasons for reconsidering the value of leadership had been exacerbated some six months earlier. At the 1979 organized, nonviolent demonstration to protest the police murder of Luis Baez, and during the police riot that followed, my overwhelming sensation was that of suicidal rerun in the suicidal Black tradition of mass nonviolence:

- A multitude of followers faced a stage from which certain leaders presumed to tell us why we were there and what we felt and how we should march together out of the park. ("Peacefully," and "Four abreast, arms linked.")
- The multitude then followed the leaders into the night whereupon the leaders became invisible and inaudible to most of us, marching behind them. Certainly it was not possible to hear or ascertain what, if anything, the leaders had planned for our safety and for our effective, continuing protest. *Perforce*, we were following, blindly.
- When the police attacked, suddenly it was no longer about following the leadership or leadership responsibility: There were no leaders, only more than one thousand unarmed demonstrators, trapped.

A small group of Black artists and writers who had been trapped by the police attack met at my house to brainstorm and to compile an eyewitness account. Between the night of the

Baez demonstration and the night when our account, accompanied by recommendations for community response, was to be presented at an open People's Tribunal, a Black woman, Elizabeth Magnum, was murdered by the Brooklyn police.

At the People's Tribunal, the spokesperson for our group, Alexis DeVeaux, began her presentation. When she reached the section of the statement that addressed the police murder of Elizabeth Magnum, the honcho in charge of the proceedings came to the microphone and attempted to halt her testimony. Alexis was able to complete it, nonetheless, only because the hundred or so community people seated in the audience roared their approval and support.

After Alexis sat down, the honcho came to the mike and harangued the audience: this is not the place for speeches, he said. This is not the place for anything but the people, the community, and for testimony about police violence!

We left the Tribunal, dazed. When our lives lay at risk on the Brooklyn streets, that particular turkey was nowhere in sight. Now he was playing the leader and presuming to choose who are and who are not "the people." He was presuming to decide, furthermore, what the people can and cannot say! It also occurred to me that I could not recall, North or South, an organized demonstration ever called to protest the death of any Black woman, let alone the murder of Elizabeth Magnum.

And so it came to me that I was sick of professional leaders and that I would never again agree to be cannon fodder for a nonviolent demonstration. I resolved that I was unwilling to be killed, unarmed, and physically allergic to meetings, in general.

It came to me that self-determination has to mean that the leader is your individual gut, and heart, and mind or we're talking about power, again, and its rather well-known impurities. Who is really going to care whether you live or die and who is going to know the most intimate motivation for your laughter and your tears is the only person to be trusted to speak for you and to decide what you will or will not do.

The only leadership I can respect is one that enables every man and woman to be his and her own leader: to abandon victim perspective and to faithfully rely upon the truth of the

feeling that is his or hers and then to act on that, without apology.

Neither race nor gender provides the final definitions of jeopardy or refuge. The final risk or final safety lies within each one of us attuned to the messy and intricate and unending challenge of self-determination. I believe the ultimate power of all the people rests upon the individual ability to trust and to respect the authority of the truth of whatever it is that each of us feels, each of us means. On what basis should *what* authority exceed the authority of *this* truth?

And what should we fear? No movement, not the Republican, nor the Black nor the women's nor the environmental movement can exist without you and me. Likewise for leaders. And although Nestle's corporation may circumnavigate the globe and fire its factory workers in Massachusetts and subjugate its workers in the Philippines into peonage and poison the babies in Africa, it is not, finally, impregnable. Nestle's and every other multinational corporation, finally, needs that troublesome, maverick component: the people—you and me.

We are not powerless. We are indispensable despite all atrocities of state and corporate policy to the contrary.

At a minimum we have the power to stop cooperating with our enemies. We have the power to stop the courtesies and to let the feelings be real. We have the power not to vote, and not to register for the draft, and not to applaud, and not to attend, and not to buy, and not to pay taxes or rent or utilities. At the very least, if we cannot control things we certainly can mess them up.

Arthur MacDuffie died because three cops beat him to death because he went through a red light and he was Black. Where is the feeling about that, outside Miami?

Are the cops that murdered him still walking around? Still cops? Still alive?

My son called me from Cambridge, the Sunday of the Miami uprising. I told him some of my ideas. He said, "Have you read Frances' book?" He meant *Poor Peoples' Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, by Frances Piven and Richard Cloward. No, I hadn't. "Read it," he said. "You have to."

Actually, what I had to do first was to consider the silence between us. And I did. And I decided to let it stand: to let the failures of the friendship stand and to reach out, instead, to Frances in areas of mutual, urgent concern, to engage once again in talk about tactics of struggle.

I read *Poor Peoples' Movements*, sometimes without stopping to sleep. Here it was: Documented historical proof that we are not powerless, that no one is powerless. With meticulous research and the most scrupulous open analysis of four movements—the unemployed workers' movement, the workers' movement of the Depression, the Civil Rights movement, and then the Welfare Rights movement—Frances Piven and Richard Cloward present a working model for protest in America: for effective, peoples' protest movements. Examining the factors of failure and of victory, they arrive at a paradigmatic construct for radical change in this country: change minus the distortions of leaders on a first-name basis with the enemy. You could look at this book and deeply take heart: That more than once those who have the least defenses against the violence of the powerful have dared to defy that power, dared to confront that violence, with their own. And, more than once, those with the most meager resources to resist oppression have won something important, as the result of that confrontation. And in every instance, it has never been *who is the leader* but rather *who are the people*. It has never been *what is the organization* but *what is the crisis*.

I had some questions to discuss with Frances: If the essence of a peoples' movement is its spontaneity, then how can you sustain it?

But I hesitated. I thought again about all the other things that we would not talk about and all the arguments that would persist between us, and my feeling was, "What the hell; friendship is not a tragedy; we can be polite."

And so I called her up, to talk.

PERMISSIONS (CONTINUED)

with a commentary by Philip Lopate, New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1979; "On Listening: A Good Way to Hear," which originally appeared as "Spokesman for the Blacks" in *The Nation*, December 4, 1967; "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," which originally appeared in the *Evergreen Review*, October 1969; "White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation," which originally appeared as two articles: "White English: The Politics of Language" in *Black World*, August 1973, copyright © 1973 by *Black World Magazine*, reprinted by permission of Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., and "Towards a Politics of Language" in *Publishers Weekly*, published by R. R. Bowker Company, a Xerox company, copyright © by Xerox Corporation; "Whose Burden?," which originally appeared in *The New Republic*, May 18, 1974, copyright © 1974 The New Republic, Inc., reprinted by permission of *The New Republic*; Excerpts from Marga Holness' introduction to *Sacred Hope* by Agostinho Neto and three poems, "Kinaxixi," "Create," and "Western civilization," from *Sacred Hope* by Agostinho Neto, copyright © 1974 by Agostinho Neto, reprinted by permission of Tanzania Publishing House; "Letter from a contract worker" by Antonio Jacinto from *When Bullets Begin to Flower*, edited by Margaret Dickinson, copyright © 1972 by Margaret Dickinson, reprinted by permission of East African Publishing House, Inc.; "Declaration of an Independence I Would Just as Soon Not Have," which originally appeared as "Second Thoughts of a Black Feminist" in *Ms.*, February 1977; "My Little Dreams" (one stanza) and "The Heart of a Woman" by Georgia Douglas Johnson from *Caroling Dusk*, edited by Countee Cullen, copyright © 1927 by Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., renewed 1955 by Ida M. Cullen, reprinted by permission of the publisher; "Black History as Myth," which originally appeared as "To Be Black and Female" in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 18, 1979, copyright © 1979 by The New York Times Company, reprinted by permission.