

Roots & Wings speech given by Marcy Westerling at the Rural Organizing Project's Roots & Wings Celebration, December 4th, 2010

I always knew that I wanted to 'organize' other people towards a more just society. It made sense to me. It actually felt like a clear obligation – non-negotiable. While my family was devoutly apolitical, the family lore was not. My father grew up with Jews in hiding in occupied Holland. My grandfather was incarcerated under the Nazis. Their stories of leadership and resistance inspired my sense of duty. But I often wondered what if the Resistance had started earlier. Could the need to pick up guns have been avoided? I still find it a fundamental question and relevant today.

My childhood holidays included relatives who arrived in this country as refugees from the Russian and Nazi pogroms. Their stories were whispered in snippets when they left the room. The take home message to my generation was "hear this and stay out of trouble." Our family followed the news, voted but did little more.

I did want to stay out of trouble. I was a very good girl. But the family lore kept me puzzling out my role in this world. I knew that I did not have the courage for war, my poor tolerance for snow ball fights seemed an early indicator. But I was sneaky enough to see a role for me in building a resistance movement well in advance of any violent crisis. In the early days of the ROP myself and an activist nun from Cornelius were on a radio show where she easily declared the human dignity groups a resistance movement. "Ha", I thought.

As a schoolgirl during the years of heated east coast integration, I started to notice a disconnect between liberal talk (we are all equal, be nice to everyone) and liberal action. I was pulled from the public school when the violence escalated. At my new private school a few vetted blacks studied with privileged whites. That was the type of liberal action I wondered about. Integration was good, in theory.

With Harriet the Spy as my mentor, I observed the world. Without the language of 'isms', I got that being 'nice to everyone' was very different from being fair. I got the caste system. It seemed that equality meant little unless you shared the wealth and that was definitely not happening.

Maybe I would have forgotten my personal commitment to organizing but my junior year in college I got a big knock on my head - living on another continent, kidnapped & raped, then denied access to medical care, police or the courts....that is until an amazing thing happened.

The women of this town found me. These women lived amid an epidemic of rape where reporting just made their woes worse. But they had developed a strategy. When I spoke up, a naïve 19 year old trained by tv movies-of-the-week featuring 'what to do if raped' that so saturated US 70's culture, well, they were waiting for just such a public incident. With only a vague newspaper description of me, they divided up the town and went door to door until I was found. They needed me and they knew that I needed them.

Nine months later they organized a huge court watch that resulted in a landmark verdict in my case. I learned the importance of having a strategy. These women weren't multi-tasking from event to event. Their community had a serious problem and they were committed to addressing it in a long term way. Women bravely overflowed that courtroom because they knew the repressive culture demanded that enough women show up to make each individual less at risk. Here was the grassroots building power through their numbers. I learned the importance of numbers.

And I learned to see this community takeover of one trial as a critical part of a larger strategy to expose and eliminate the abuse of women. That landmark trial did have immediate resonance for this town (despite a gag order barring the papers from covering the verdict). 15 years later that country's national legislature

passed a law that said that no woman could be raped if she was wearing jeans. Huh. That law was overturned but justice for women stays a journey that no one trial could resolve. This is a critical point to be reminded of for our fast paced society is used to instant gratification no wonder so many are crushed by Obama's questionable performance. In our current reality, how could winning the presidency be anything more than a short-term victory.

Why share all this? First, I come from the powerful feminist tradition of your story being a political act. I became political because of stories. I stay political because of stories. (And not the cued up version heard in politicians' speeches.) In addition, as Cara and the ROP design their wings for these times, I, as part of the root system, want to remind us of why ROP has prioritized long view organizing for change. Why growing a base that we are in active relationship with is how we measure progress. We have never had significant faith in short term policy success.

Suzanne Pharr once observed that ROP was built on three notions:

- Every person matters no matter where you live;
- All issues are connected; and that
- Only through organizing that is transformational can we expect to change the rules of this world.

The latter point is reflected in ROP's commitment to be grassroots not just in our base but in how we function. A small budget requires less distracting administration and better yet, requires a genuine reliance on a volunteer culture. To own your organization, to struggle with each new issue as it gets connected in, to truly share our stories transforms us and then we can better transform the world.

In these times where 'civic participation' is seen as so critical to progressive success, I think it is of value to study movements of resistance. Sometimes you participate and sometimes you resist. When ROP started in the early nineties it was in resistance to the right being the sole out loud voice in our communities. It was also in resistance to an urban-based progressive infrastructure that saw little value in rural America. We set out to change those two realities by building up our own infrastructure – what we called human dignity groups. By resisting first, we built the infrastructure we needed in order to participate. As I look at the political landscape of 2010, I wonder what there is to participate in at times. But that is a larger conversation than tonight's celebration.

I haven't organized since late March. I define my organizing, the work that makes me occasionally seem smart and wise, as needing to include consistent 'cold' contact with unknown people to see if they are 'warm' or 'hot' and then to build a relationship accordingly. (All, of course, with a database.) ROP decides who is warm or hot not by where they drink their coffee or how they look but by the spark in their eyes when we approach divisive (and often manufactured) issues of the day with common sense.

Two immediate projects were impacted as I headed to cancer land vs the road last April. One was a meeting that had been in the works since the Tea Party town hall the prior summer. The town hall in St. Helens was a carnival of poor behavior. The heated atmosphere had the fire department deputized to maintain calm. It was the type of crowd I could easily imagine attacking each other with pitchforks in another era. A long time head of the hard religious right approached me. We talked for over an hour troubled by the jeers of both sides - health care being the excuse. Joe and I didn't agree on health care either but we were able to refocus and say wouldn't it be cool to have a sane discussion on how this one community might make sure that everyone had health care. Not surprisingly, we both agreed that access to medical care was important. And so I took the lead role in bringing together good thinkers that would maintain their core values but not be falsely partisan in problem solving real issues. Our first meeting was finally going to happen. I was sad to miss seeing what a conversation focused on building a resilient

community could mean to our community. (I was especially interested because of another organizing premise that came from my family. While my grandfather had been a true hero who saved many lives while risking his own, he was just a decent man w.backbone. He was a man of his times and that meant not very evolved in his relationship with Jews as his equal. It seems critical to organize decent people regardless of where they are but presuming the best and providing political education throughout.)

The other dropped project was a road trip through the most conservative and isolated counties of rural Nebraska. Unlike my work in rural Washington, Idaho and Oregon, there was little familiar in rural Nebraska. I was deeply challenged to find a starter few sentences that would keep a prospect on the phone. Constructing this road trip refreshed memories of how ROP started – the endless hours of cold calling to find people that would talk to me. In 2010 I was again starting from scratch. What were the effective opening, middle and closing lines that would connect me to these unknown people I was calling? I was asking them to stay on the phone with me, to consider hosting a gathering for my visit as well as to find a home to lodge me. I was trolling for innovative thinkers and leaders - who was sparking in community banking, what about the safety net programs, the Rotary or the Chamber of Commerce? It was a daunting process to fill a 5-day journey with morning, afternoon and evening stops let alone find the community housing so core to deeper relationships. But it happened. Unknown prospects became hosts, empty days became too full and my time in rural Nebraska promised quite the adventure.

When I contacted them to cancel, these barely known people dotting hundreds of miles between them, set up prayer circles while pushing for a rescheduled time. The regret was palpable. One Director of a small town Chamber of Commerce said she had never had the opportunity to be part of something so exciting. She hoped I could reschedule soon. There is a hunger out there. It is a hunger that ROP is designed to feed.

In both of the above instances it was values that created a bridge.

What do I wish for the wings? ...that the roots give them the stability to use their creativity, fresh eyes and fresher dispositions to say “hmmm, what do these times need?” And then to follow those instincts boldly. I would wish more but the truth is this team has its wings. They have soared this past year. They have my heart, they have my volunteer hours, and they truly have my respect. Cara Shufelt is who I wish I was. I see myself in her but she has a genuine comfort with herself that gives her a whole lot more time to focus on the needs of the world. She is gift to all of us. Thank you, Brenda for raising such a person.

I haven't seen many of you since the Rural Caucus & Strategy Session when I was mid-diagnosis fearing lung cancer. Well, the good news is that I don't have lung cancer, the bad news is that I do have metastasized cancer in my lungs. Damn. Statistically, I am doomed but there are exceptions and being amid strong community and being fit do mean a lot. But I have been handed my pink slip from this world. The thing is Mike and I are doing just fine. It is hard. But we are very happy, and very hopeful. Early on I wrote a little test obituary. It said....

Marcy Westerling: A kickass community organizer dedicated to the notion that small town Americana is filled with justice seeking souls that deserve support as well as have the power to bridge the false cultural divides of our times. Derailed by Stage IV Ovarian Cancer in Spring of 2010. I trust others to continue moving rural inclusive progressive organizing forwards.

The only thing I would change is inserting a ‘momentarily’ before derailed. There is a lot to be done on this journey called life and this journey towards justice...count me in.