

Another Open Letter to Cindy Sheehan

Daniel Horowitz de Garcia

June 8, 2007

This was written by a member of Bring the Ruckus in response to Good Riddance Attention Whore by Cindy Sheehan.

Dear Cindy,

This is a response to your May 28, 2007 letter, "Good Riddance Attention Whore," although I think it's weird of me to write you about it. I'm not in the "peace movement" and have no intention of joining. There are a few reasons, but the main one is that I don't think it exists. Yes, there are many people doing a lot of work around getting the US out of Iraq and Afghanistan, but I don't think that means there's a peace movement. I'm not a sociologist or national spokesperson or anything, but I am a college dropout with more than 17 years' organizing experience. With that and the first amendment, I guess I'm as qualified as anyone else to comment.

Your letter reminded me of many letters I've read in almost two decades of activist and organizing work. It was a burnout letter. There's no judgment on my part when I say that. Burnout happens, especially to people thrust into the spotlight. Your letter sounded tired, disillusioned, and especially hurt. Wanting to focus on healing is a natural response, one that most people don't recognize. I burned out myself in the mid-1990's because I was also tired, disillusioned, and especially hurt. It also came after involvement in the "peace movement." I had volunteered and then worked for a peace & justice coalition in Florida for about three years, half that time on salary (if you can call \$14,000 a salary). Officially, the group was a coalition of individuals and organizations dedicated to non-violence and anti-militarism. Actually, it was one man's ego with funding. I was in my early 20's and just excited to be part of something that seemed so big. By the end, emotionally beaten down, I was ready to lock myself in my room for the rest of my life. It's amazing how violent pacifists can be when put in a group stripped of accountability.

There's an old joke: what's the difference between the Left and cannibalism? Cannibals only eat their enemies. It's a lot easier to identify cannibalism than the Left though. Your letter also reminded me of that. Are supporters of the Democratic Party really on the Left? Here I'm talking about websites like Democratic Underground and Daily Kos. Liberals? Unapologetically so. Lefties? To be a leftist is to have a critique of capitalism and these sites don't. Democratic Underground and Daily Kos are Democrats. They are independent players of varying levels of

influence, but they've all set up shop on the Dems turf. They're going to be really pissed at observations that the Democratic Party is no ideologically different from the Republicans. Of course, there's no excuse for smear words and personal attacks. Yet it's naïve to expect different. True political comrades don't attack each other, they push forward ideas, but the number of people who want to push forward and not shit on something they disagree with is small right now. Burnout is one result of this poisonous atmosphere. Intellectually we may know how political enemies behave (and believe that the Democratic Party is a political enemy), but it's still a rough emotional ride. One day folks you consider your friends are lavishing you with praise. The next they descend on you as with knives. No matter what one may understand intellectually, that just feels icky. It's one thing to know cannibals eat people; it's another to feel the bite.

It's not just the attacks that feel icky either. Putting someone up on a pedestal is also a form of abuse. One of the comments to your letter on the Daily Kos says, "You walk with Thoreau, Gandhi, King." I don't know you personally at all, but I'm willing to go on a limb and say you don't really walk with Thoreau, Gandhi, or King. Thoreau, Gandhi, and King were not saints. All of these men did something principled, just like you. All of these men have been sainted and distorted, just like you. The lesson here is that it's hard to live up to the bullshit, whether it's pro or con.

I don't think having a decent power analysis is enough to prevent burnout. It probably helps in preventing disillusionment, but it doesn't work by itself. One needs to be grounded, to be centered, to know oneself. There's this paragraph in your letter that doesn't sound grounded to me. You wrote:

The most devastating conclusion that I reached this morning, however, was that Casey did indeed die for nothing. His precious lifeblood drained out in a country far away from his family who loves him, killed by his own country which is beholden to and run by a war machine that even controls what we think. I have tried every since he died to make his sacrifice meaningful. Casey died for a country which cares more about who will be the next American Idol than how many people will be killed in the next few months while Democrats and Republicans play politics with human lives. It is so painful to me to know that I bought into this system for so many years and Casey paid the price for that allegiance. I failed my boy and that hurts the most.

That's a serious paragraph and an arrogant one. The US empire has been expanding for about 300 years. It has killed millions of people and devastated scores of countries. How long did you work to stop it? Five years? You haven't won and therefore the sacrifices are in vain? Your son fought to maintain an empire, although I don't think he believed he was. Was his death the catalyst that helped you realize that truth? If so, can you really say that was for nothing? You now have a better idea of what is going on. That's a pretty amazing thing. Anyone and everyone that helped you get there gave you a gift. You're tired and need to rest, fine. But don't say the gift is meaningless. It hasn't gone away, and it never will.

Eventually I did come back after my burnout. It took about two years, but I wouldn't use that as a benchmark. I'm a depressive so it takes me a bit longer to bounce back. I didn't come back to the "peace movement" though. As I said before, I don't think there's a "peace movement." There are folks doing a lot of work to stop war (or maybe just a specific war), but that doesn't make it a movement like when I think about labor in the 1930's or the freedom struggles in the 1960's.

Movements are pretty rare and amazing things. The word should refer to something rare and amazing, not just activity one wants to give importance too. When I came to this conclusion, I decided to come back to the work.

Specifically, I decided to work at building a base. I set out to find the people who are looking for people like me. People who know that something isn't right and really want to talk to someone about it. Someone who won't think they are sick, bad, crazy, or stupid. Not everyone I talk to, not even most, fits this description, but there are many people out there. There are more than enough people to insure a lifetime of interesting conversations.

It's going to take a lifetime to get that movement people keep talking about. I'm convinced it's going to happen, but I've spent too much time relying on buses to believe in timetables. If you think of a movement like a wave, energy traveling in a specific direction, I think it makes sense. You can sit on the beach and try to time the waves, but I guarantee you're going to be blindsided a bunch of times. Waves do have a pattern, except when they don't.

Myles Horton said a movement is rooted in organizations building momentum. I believe that. I think a movement is more than a bunch of people doing things. Individuals building community, building power, and changing their lives form a movement. Growing the base is about building those organizations and showing people they have the power to change their lives; that they already know how to move. Build enough momentum and suddenly people not affiliated with any organization start believing they can move. When the time comes the people will want to go somewhere, and they will look to organizations in their neighborhood they can trust. In most places around the country, people will probably have to build things from scratch. I think it would be a mistake to see that process as a failure of organizers. To paraphrase a colleague, organizers don't create movements anymore than surfers create waves. We try to time our work right, we paddle a lot, and we get blindsided a bunch of times. We keep this up in the hope we can catch the right wave at the right time. Fortunately, we only have to be right once.

What we do as organizers matters, but it pays to keep it real. This next statement is made with that in mind. You saying the US public has a paradigm "carved in immovable, unbendable, and rigidly mendacious marble," that the country can no longer be what you want it to be, and that it's up to others now is blaming the people. Cesar Chavez said don't blame the people, if something in the campaign didn't pan out right the responsibility lies with the organizers. Blaming the people for not being involved in the campaign is a classic cop out; one coming from a deep place of privilege. Privilege refers to those options that should belong to everyone but are reserved for a few. It's a weapon. I've used it, and I've known many people who've used it. I've been tired and beaten, and all I wanted was to rest somewhere quiet. Yet I've felt guilty about asking for rest, so I've justified it by blaming the folks I wanted to organize. They didn't get involved, something is wrong with them. Fuck 'em, I'm going to the beach. I understand. I don't excuse, but I understand.

From my read of history, real change is created by those who either struggle or die. Folks who can't walk away, because wherever they go they face the same battle. Where could a Black person in 1950 go and not face some kind of Jim Crow? Saying the US public won't change so you're done with it all, that's saying you can go somewhere where you won't face the same battle. As a white, middle class (in the sociological sense) woman living in the US, someone with a lot of privilege, you probably can find that place. That doesn't mean you should feel bad for resigning as the "face of the movement" or feel like you can't come back into the struggle. I think

it means it was politically unsound for you to be the “face of the movement” to begin with. It’s that pedestal thing again.

I don’t think your choosing to be a mother to your surviving children as well as maintain and repair your relationships is walking away. That’s being a whole person. What are we struggling for if not the right to be whole?

I hope you enjoy your rest. I’m sure it’s a lot more enjoyable to be in arguments with your family than with anyone on Fox “news.”

Seremos libre,

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