

# Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee:

## *A political ecology of change*

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Don't fight the riptide. It'll wear you down. A riptide occurs when water at high tide gets pooled behind reefs or sand bars so when the sea goes out again, the trapped water has to find a channel through which to escape the pool. It empties through that opening with such force that it can sweep a swimmer out to sea. Our instinct is to start swimming toward shore as hard as we can. The better strategy is to swim parallel to the coast until you are out of the riptide, then ride the regular waves to shore. Left activists know the feeling of being caught in a riptide without knowing the way out. When the political tide runs against us it takes all our effort just to stay in place. Our standards slide until a "victory" just means that we didn't get screwed as badly as we could have been. Our gains are swept away the moment we turn away.

When conservative activists faced this problem, back in the mid-1960s, they tried something different. Instead of swimming faster they looked into what it would take to turn the tide around. They pulled it off. With the tide behind you, you can achieve all kinds of success even with less than brilliant leadership. It's a lot easier to slash local school budgets when half the population already believes that government is incompetent, teachers are lazy, taxes are evil and the private sector can do it better. That's the tide.

One swimmer swims against the rip tide and is steadily pushed out to sea. Another heads out of the current and floats in on the surf. They both faced the same challenge. The difference is what was in their heads. This essay is about what's in our heads and how it can transform the terms of struggle and therefore the course of history. It is also about butterflies.

When butterflies migrate they don't just start flapping their wings in the right direction. They don't want to work that hard and get blown in to bushes and buildings by every gust of wind. They go straight up, sometimes up to twelve thousand feet high, find a current headed their way and ride it for a thousand miles. Their light, fragile wings--a liability among the treacherous ground winds--are now their great asset.

The visible world is defined and determined by an invisible one. A glance at the landscape won't tell you the likelihood of earthquakes. You have to know that invisible pressures accumulate along subterranean fault lines formed in the distant past. The butterfly and the organizer must be attuned to currents that are not apparent unless you look for them. The activists who launched the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 knew that undercurrents of anger at racist indignities were reaching critical levels and were searching for a way to turn them into a force with which to challenge segregation. The conservative activists who gathered in the wreckage of the Goldwater presidential campaign nine years later sought to harness fears stirred up by the civil rights struggle, the spread of consumerist immorality and the erosion of religious certainty and give them ideological and organizational expression.

In the USA we don't like to overthink things. We prefer action. We run off to parties without grabbing the address. If we feel a current we swim against it. We fight oppressive conditions without asking what holds them in place. We swing between wishful thinking and hopelessness without seeing that they both reflect a disconnect between the strategies we repeat and the successes that elude us. But it is not just harsh conditions that confound us. All seeds start in the dark, after all. It's how we interpret and respond to them. Among Malcolm X's many abilities, his most remarkable gift was his oratory. He used the magic of language to help traumatized people uncover a new story about themselves. This change in

perspective revealed new avenues for action and turned what had been dreams into possibilities. The rest is history.

Strategic vision is the precondition for effective strategies. It is the rain that spurs the strategies to growth just as strategies in turn give seed to tactics. A strategic vision encapsulates our perspective on the landscape we are challenged to cross and our understandings of who we are and what we dream of becoming. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how strategic vision is the pivot which can turn our defensive struggles into political initiative, unite isolated reform efforts into a movement for change and open up new possibilities for effective action in every field of struggle.

### **The lay of the land**

The transformative promise of the Obama Presidency was not, in the end, derailed by Republicans or sabotaged by conservative Democrats or even betrayed by Obama himself. It never existed. The illusion that it did and the collapse of that illusion both result from a structural dilemma which defines both dominant political parties but particularly bedevils the Democrats.

The Republicans are a coalition between the corporate elite and an array of conservative movements and institutions comprised of the Christian right, nativist, gun rights, white supremacist and anti-choice groups, small government Tea Partiers, corporate front groups and others. This conservative base delivers votes, campaign workers, foot soldiers for corporate front groups and an ideological message which galvanizes popular support. In return they get to advance their patriarchal and racist moral agenda and receive ample funding for their cultural warfare apparatus. The reactionary opinion molders (the “perceptioneers”) on talk radio, cable TV, blogs and in legislative offices translate the agenda of the corporate elite (anti-labor, pro-deregulation, privatization, interventionist and anti-democratic) into a populist narrative of personal liberty that resonates with the conservative base. The result is that the demands of the conservative social base are closely aligned with (or at least do not impinge upon) the agenda of the corporate sector.

The Democrats are a coalition between the same corporate elite and a constellation of non-profits, unions, communities of color and environmental and social reform movements. Their demands revolve around basic needs such as access to food, education, livable wages, healthy workplaces and communities, affordable housing, quality education and an end to discrimination. In other words the satisfaction of the aspirations of the Democratic grassroots would require a massive transfer of resources to the base of the social pyramid and consequently would tilt the balance of power toward labor and organized communities. The Democratic leaders have to implement policies that their corporate sponsors require and which hurt their constituents in every respect. To the base they can offer little more than placebos, small measures that don’t cost much or symbolic gestures such as White House dinners, Presidential declarations and seats on advisory panels. They can promise but they can’t deliver.

The presence of a corporate elite that pursues its own collective interests is the invisible planet of our political system. One can discover the existence of an unknown planet by observing its gravitational tug on the orbits of its neighbors. The discovery of such a body decodes the motion of the rest of the system.

The policies that guide our government are researched and outlined within a network of brain trusts housed in political institutes, policy think tanks, academic institutions, corporate departments, business associations, intelligence agencies, specialized publications and private strategy centers. Their role is to define policy goals, develop the “framing” with which to secure public support and develop candidates

to fill top and mid-level government jobs. These broad policy outlines become the parameters of the “accepted wisdom” in the corporate media.

Henry Kissinger’s career provides a window into this world and its operation. His trajectory carried through many top corporate and quasi-governmental institutes including The Psychological Strategy Board, the Harvard Center for International Affairs, the Operations Coordinating Board of the National Security Council, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rand Corporation and the Trilateral Commission. He was a protégé of oil magnates David and Nelson Rockefeller whose patronage landed him in the inner circles of government. (Many of Obama’s first and second tier appointees are drawn from these groups.)

By 1974, as Secretary of State, Kissinger had concluded that US allies were a greater threat to its world dominance than were its enemies. The growing clout of Europe and East Asia marked their emergence as worrisome rivals. Kissinger’s doctrine called for establishing undisputed dominance of the world oil and gas supplies on which these economies would depend for growth. This policy became integrated into the elite consensus and remains in place today. This fact makes sense of US policies toward West Asia and the Middle East. It explains its behavior in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq: each time Iraq sought to appease US demands the United States declared that the effort was too little, too late, increased its demands and insisted on escalated international reprisals. The Kissinger policy framework of seeking direct control of the oil fields could not be consummated with a diplomatic resolution. The Obama administration is reading from the same script in relation to Iran. Inevitably we will see a ratcheting up of efforts to bring the vast oil and gas reserves of Venezuela and Bolivia back into the corporate fold. The groundwork is being laid with the construction of a half dozen US bases in Colombia.

Attention to the invisible world does more than illuminate the workings of the power elite: it reveals sources of popular power as well. In 1969 the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party established an alliance with the Puerto Rican Young Lords Organization and the white Young Patriots. They called it the “Rainbow Coalition,” a name later appropriated by Jesse Jackson for his 1984 presidential campaign. The Patriots were the kids of recent immigrants from southern, mostly Appalachian, states. They wore confederate flags on their jackets and had family members back home in the Klan. Bringing them into alliance with communities of color around common class issues required deliberate and persistent courtship on the part of the Panthers. It meant attending their court hearings, shooting pool in their bars, sleeping on their couches and talking late into the night about police harassment and substandard housing. In the end, as Panther organizer Bobby Lee put it, they would have “stopped a bullet for me.”

Had the Panthers followed today’s practices and looked just at the surface evidence, they’d have written the Patriots off as hopeless racists. Instead they asked why these folks were hurting: was their racism based on vested interest or had they been fooled into it. They concluded that in the big picture they all had more to gain as allies than enemies.

This approach has nothing in common, by the way, with the Democratic strategy of courting white, suburban swing voters by catering to their prejudices. The Panthers came to the table with an organized political base united around an alternative program. What they offered the Young Patriots and their community was a more promising vision.

Offering an alternative vision, so central to history’s most successful movements, is foreign to today’s left-liberal non-profits whose operating principle is “fight for what’s winnable.” This in a nutshell summarizes the contrast with the right: we fight for winnable “gains” while they fight for power. We go as far as we can without brushing up against the barbed wire. They decide when to move the wire closer, steadily limiting the “winnable” possibilities.

The battle over health care reform lays bare how this plays out. Corporate lobbyists were invited to the White House to draft legislation that would regulate their industry, thus guaranteeing that their core interests would be protected whatever the outcome. They then backed a campaign to defeat it, resulting in the steady removal of what little nutrition was in the package. Desperate to pass a law, the White House continually watered it down in successive attempts to win Republican approval. When finally introduced, the bill came under heavy Republican fire and was compromised further. The President suddenly found his populist voice, touring the land, blasting the evils of corporate greed. This galvanized the unions and non-profits to pull out all the stops to pass what by now was a giant, brightly colored placebo. The final bill incorporated some “gains” that progressive spokespeople could point to even as it entrenched the position of the insurance and pharmaceutical corporations at the heart of the “reformed” system. These corporations not only gained an expanded captive market but are in a comfortable position from which to deploy their vast army of lobbyists and bottomless campaign chests to undermine and erode any progressive gains that irritate them. We measure our progress in “gains,” they measure theirs in power. At the end of the day power it’s power that counts.

Watch as this formula is replayed with financial, immigration and oil-exploration “reforms.”

In the martial art of Tai Chi, the practitioner enlists the force and direction of motion of her opponent to achieve victory. A similar sensibility can be applied to political struggle. I like to adopt the outlook that our enemies exist for the purpose helping us defeat them. Our job is to make it as easy as possible for them to do so. The first thing they will do for us is tell us where they are vulnerable. The ways they deploy their resources is a map to their perceived weaknesses. The fact that I wear a helmet when I bike to work tells you where I think I need extra protection.

Let’s apply this on a larger scale. Let’s step back from our daily struggles to encompass the entire political landscape in our field of vision and notice the defensive posture of the empire. One of its most striking features is the exponentially expanding penal system. Communities of color are subjected to a punitive social management regime that has little apparent connection real crime. This system has quickly emerged to fill the space of the segregationist Black Laws, fashioned to keep the African American populace vulnerable and off balance under the guise of being color-neutral. A tremendous immigrant workforce is likewise regulated through a quasi-military system of intimidation and mass punishment. This should tell us that these are powerful constituencies whose hands are being tied precisely because—by their demographics, location and traditions-- they represent a potential threat to the operation of the system. Freeing them from their legal straightjackets is therefore strategically vital if we hope to loosen the grip of corporate rule.

Republican strategist Karl Rove has taught us that what an opponent assumes to be a major advantage can be transformed into a strategic weakness. The “swift boat” offensive against Democrat John Kerry, for example was directed at his military service, a credential he assumed to be unassailable. The strategic heart of right wing power resides in its unparalleled ideological warfare apparatus. It is able to transform the agendas of corporate managers into the battle cries of the angry masses. Any opposition can be quickly declared to be communistic, fascist or terrorist.

### **The Power of Strategic Vision**

The left abandoned any pretense of posing a real alternative in the wake of COINTELPRO repression and the Red Scare that preceded it. Understandable, but it has put us in the awkward position of seeking winnable improvements for specific groups while our opponents proclaim a grand moral mission. What would it look like if we had the audacity to challenge the moral vision of the right with one of our own? What if we placed the New World that we say is possible on the public menu of choices in clearly

understandable terms? Much would depend on how well that vision resonates with people's dreams. To take this notion for a test drive I humbly submit a partial list of core values that reflect the world I am fighting for, translated into language that a second grader can understand.

- 1) *No one gets seconds until everyone has had firsts.*
- 2) *You don't make a mess you can't clean up.*
- 3) *Food is for feeding people.*
- 4) *Share.*
- 5) *Don't take stuff that isn't yours.*
- 6) *The Earth is a home shared by all who lives here.*
- 7) *Everyone gets access to clean water, air, food and shelter.*
- 8) *People should get to make decisions about their lives and share decisions that also affect others.*
- 9) *Human habitat can be healthy only if natural habitat is healthy.*
- 10) *No group of people is inherently better or more deserving than other groups of people.*
- 11) *The wellbeing of all children is the responsibility of everyone.*
- 13) *No one is disposable.*

These are not alien values to most people. If you asked people you know about running our society along the lines of these principles, the most common response would probably be that it would be nice if it were possible but it's just not realistic. In other words if we were to organize explicitly around such a core vision statement we could expect opposition from two sectors: those with a vested interest in defeating these values and those who wish they could embrace them but don't believe it is possible. That is not a bad starting position in an ideological struggle.

Let's bring this back to the perceptioneers, the Glenn Becks and Rush Limbaughs and others who provide the intellectual soundtrack for the right wing movements. A major part of their effort is devoted to protecting their followers against contagion by such values. More specifically, they want to make it clear that only a deserving few are worthy of such respectful treatment. Outside that small circle of wagons is a big world of jealous, hostile enemies whose very souls cry out to destroy us. A big part of the perceptioneer's job is to define and police those borders, continually explaining why Muslims, immigrants, dark people and GLBT folk are a threat to all that is civilized and decent. It is worth noting that they are actively engaged in keeping their own base from drifting toward values that no voice in the public square is even advocating for. Can anybody say "vulnerability"?

When an animal senses danger, its "fight or flight" response is triggered. Its heart rate and blood pressure rise, blood rushes to its motor muscles and bodily systems not relevant to crisis management—digestion, energy storage, reproduction, normal immune function and construction of bone and tissue—shut down or go into low gear. It's a good emergency reflex but comes with a cost if left activated too long. The right wing sound machine is a perpetual panic generator, continually stimulating the fight or flight response in their followers. Fear makes every shadow into a potential enemy and makes people easier to manipulate. It also meshes with a carefully cultivated narrative of white victimhood in which US history is remembered as a series of unprovoked ambushes by ruthless enemies. In this sanitized narrative, all that remains of the genocidal conquest of the continent is Custer's last stand at the Little Big Horn. The annexation of Texas becomes the siege of the Alamo. The seizure of Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines is the sinking of the battleship Maine. Pearl Harbor summarizes the war in the Pacific and the war against Viet Nam is about MIA/POWs. The struggle for racial equality is merely a backdrop for "reverse discrimination." The attacks of 9/11 are just the latest evidence that our bright city on the hill is under perpetual siege...

This sense of victimhood is put to work by the perceptioneers in the interests of capital. Restrictions on tobacco sales, pollution limits, assertion of worker's rights, regulation of food additives, social services for the poor and, in fact, any limits on corporate power, are proclaimed to be assaults on personal liberty. Little 9/11s.

The ideological offensive of the right seeks to fill the space vacated by the collapsing legitimacy of the system. The derivatives meltdown and subsequent economic crisis; the rewarding of the culprits; the slow-motion military defeats overseas; the deterioration of basic life support systems such as health care and food; the decimation of the public sector; lack of policy in the face of a growing climate crisis; the devastation from the BP disaster and the inability of government to address the pain caused by all of these has undermined the legitimacy of the status quo to a degree not seen for at least half a century. Obama's promise to transform that system is what swept him into office, but all of the candidates in the last election had to run against the status quo to have credibility.

The progressive reforms we won in past eras were granted against a background of labor militancy, mass protest movements and ideological competition with the soviet bloc. No such pressures exist today and so the top 1% has little incentive to be generous toward poor folk. In fact they are hell bent on eliminating public expenditures and are cutting back on support to the non-profits. The integration of the corporate sector and the state has emboldened the corporados to the point that they have little fear of consequences for even the most brazenly criminal behavior. All this is creating pressure along a fault line that runs through the heart of the non-profit sector.

A public health lens can best illuminate the nature of this tension. Let's compare two basic approaches in public health to guarding against disease outbreaks in a population. One strategy is to pursue what is known as vertical immunity: identify the pathogen for the disease in question and develop a vaccine or anti-biotic that is designed to defeat it. Precise but narrow. The other is to confer horizontal immunity: support the overall health of the population so that it is better able to resist whatever harmful organisms or other insults it is exposed to. Horizontal immunity is less specific in its response but promises a level of general security by making the human population a less friendly environment for infection.

There's no great mystery in how to confer horizontal immunity and healthy resilience in a population. It is not very capitalist-friendly, however. *It consists of providing what bodies need and removing what causes them harm.* Take nutrition: healthy food is as fresh as possible with minimal processing and the absence of pesticides, preservatives and hormones and other junk. It is safest when provided by agriculture on a scale that does not leave us vulnerable to national disease outbreaks from huge processing centers. Other contributing factors include exercise, supportive social networks, safe housing and self-determination (feeling in control of one's life). Effective care emphasizes supporting the body's natural healing capacity with minimal intervention. All these measures could be within reach of people without the need for any corporations in the process.

Capitalism hates horizontal immunity because it undermines the market in significant ways. Profitability in the food market is to be found in over-processed foods, centralized mass production and massive chemical inputs to improve shelf-life, yield and visual appeal. If sales for Burger King, snickers bars or Coca Cola show a decline, the corporate response is not to exult in people's healthier choices but to ramp up advertising.

Secondly, the capitalist market depends on people experiencing a myriad of particular, clearly identifiable dissatisfactions that lend themselves to specialized products. It is far better to market a

thousand skin and hair products to address a thousand conditions than to face a population of healthy eaters whose skin takes care of itself.

Finally, raising the overall health of a population entails raising the social wage, the combination of social benefits that support the collective quality of life. When people have enough resources in their lives and under their control they are able to make healthier decisions for themselves and their communities. An increased social wage would naturally address a constellation of social problems associated with inequality, lack of control and poverty. It would significantly reduce homelessness, prostitution, chemical abuse, street crime and hunger for example. A greater social wage also leads to greater security among the broad population and therefore undermines the ability of corporations to dictate the conditions of work, environmental protection and land use. Public health surveys indicate that communities place a high value on preventing contamination of their environment, the workplace and the food supply and would protect them if they could.

Governments that are seen to “divert” too many resources to the horizontal immunity of their people are labeled “anti-western” and become targets for destabilization and overthrow by the former colonial powers that host the corporate headquarters. Investment flows naturally to places where labor, environmental and human rights advocates are kept in line by repressive regimes. The capitalist market, with its quiver of vertically oriented solutions, is not compatible with the horizontal improvement of social conditions that people everywhere favor when they get the chance to make the decisions for themselves.

Tens of millions of people are engaged in activities which they hope contribute to improving people’s lives. Whatever their specific venue, they experience the frustration of having to implement vertical solutions for problems that require horizontal strategies. Teachers, for example, have long complained that they are in an uphill struggle to teach children who come to school suffering from poor nutrition, inadequate health care, toxic exposure, unsafe housing, and violence at home or in the street and have few prospects for employment. Progress in any area of social concern is quickly undermined by the persistence of vast inequality in all other areas. The solution to any of these problems is out of reach absent the solution to all the others. Whenever a problem appears to resist efforts to solve it, the solution can be found by stepping back and asking a bigger question. The non-profits are prevented by their structures and funders from asking such questions because the inevitable answers would bring them into conflict with market imperatives. The role of the non-profits is to continually address but never solve the destructive social impacts of corporate power.

### **The Cats in Suits**

As organisms we all live in our own worlds even when we share a common space. A bacterium in your mouth, for example, might as well be on another planet. It weighs so little that it can float in any direction, indifferent to the force of gravity that governs your every move. At the same time it is buffeted by miniscule bursts of energy, heat and chemicals which you have no awareness of whatsoever. You share one universe—if the sun goes cold you will both freeze—but the ways in which you behave are based on completely different sets of considerations.

A corporation is not an organism (however confused the US Supreme Court may be on this point). It is, however, a self-perpetuating entity that transforms its environment as a byproduct of its existence. It is functionally and legally structured around the goal of generating profit for its owners. It makes sense of the world by processing incoming information through twin organs known as the balance sheet and the profit/loss statement. Anything that does not appear in the window created by those two instruments is not part of the corporation’s functional environment and therefore, as far as it is concerned, does not exist.

A corporation that scrapes the ocean floor for shrimp, for example, will “see” the shrimp as it is harvested and therefore appears as an asset on the balance sheet. The thousands of square miles of destroyed habitat, displaced species, crippled ecological resilience and the cascade of downstream impacts do not appear as costs or liabilities however. These unrecorded costs include the elimination of entire ecosystems and the dumping of millions of tons of “by-catch”, the fish, sea turtles, marine mammals, coral reefs and plant life that are killed in the process (an estimated third of the annual global catch) and ejected back into the water. In short, the marketable wealth of the ocean system is extracted and transformed into profit while the costs of doing business are “externalized.”

These costs do not go away. They are absorbed by the inhabitants, human and otherwise, of the natural world. The term “regulation,” which we hear so often in the news, simply refers to attempts by civil society to force some of these costs onto the balance sheets of the corporations that generate them. The cost of environmental destruction or of keeping their workforce alive (labor costs) are burdens that corporations go to great lengths to avoid.

This is the dirty little secret of capitalism: it’s based on bad math. *If the real costs of doing business had to be accounted for on the balance sheet the capitalist enterprise as a whole would not be profitable.* Exxon Mobil, Chiquita, Coca Cola, Massey Energy, Intel and the rest of their specie are quite right when they claim that too much regulation would kill them. They have to get those costs off the ledger by forcing them down the throats of millions of people—Guatemalan banana workers, Somali fishing villagers and Mexican maquila workers-- who do not share in the profits. There is an unlimited supply of bayonets, battleships and unmanned drones to make sure that they swallow. Only in this way can the system reward its “owners” with unlimited riches.

Try convincing your cat to stop hunting birds. It would certainly be in her interest to leave enough birds to reproduce so that there will be birds in the future. You have identified a problem—the decimation of the bird population—which you assume your cat will have an interest in. The cat can immediately see the problem but defines it differently: it’s that you’re bugging her. The solution is obvious to her: she must get you to go away so she can get back to killing birds. In a similar way the destruction of biodiversity, melting of glaciers and increasing infant mortality do not register on the corporate radar because they are not relevant to next quarter’s profit statement. There is no mechanism to account for them. What does register, however, is that people are upset and that could lead to. Chronic hunger only registered as a “crisis” in 2008 when it found expression in riots and demonstrations, a development that threatens the stability most corporate planners value. Once the unrest was brought under control it disappeared as a “crisis” even though the hunger persisted. The corporate response, therefore, is to do what is necessary to address the threat (the threat being that people are making a fuss). They can increase campaign contributions, deploy lobbyists, manipulate public perception, sponsor amenable scientists, offer funding to environmental groups and paint their corporate jets green.

Corporate decision makers are not driven by a desire to cause harm. It’s just that the world outside of the market—the forests of the Niger Delta, the dreams of coal miners or the nesting grounds of pelicans--is not visible to them. Undeveloped regions of the earth are seen by them to be wasted resources crying out to be fulfilled through transformation into farmland, resorts or strip mines. The flows of capital, on the other hand, the sudden hot spots of investment, the jostling of exchange rates and shimmering investment instruments made out of thin air and audacity, and ultimately those sweet, sweet cascades of profit, these define the real world to them. It’s a dynamic world. A beautiful world. They will defend their world as fiercely as we defend ours.

*There is another world.* In the marshes of Louisiana, the rain forests of Indonesia and the crevasses of the Mariana Trench there are teeming, interconnected communities of organisms who pursue their own causal paths without concern for spikes in the currency markets. Contrary to the pop caricature of Darwinian evolution as a brutal war for dominance, the drama of life consists of millions of species creating themselves in relationship with and dependence on, each other. The undersides of leaves are micro-environments for insects that in turn play host to microorganisms. Cells take in nutrients and excrete waste that serves as the nourishment for other life forms. Multiple ecosystems exist with varying degrees of separation and integration. This is no idyllic state of balance but rather a dynamic one of continual change in which living beings, by the act of living, alter their surroundings in ways which produce multiple pathways of change and feedback. Many non-capitalist cultures view humans as just one society among many in that natural world. In Indigenous South America, preserving the integrity of that world is seen as a responsibility which comes with utilizing it. The forests are cultivated as a natural garden which must be maintained as viable habitat for the plants and animals on which people depend. In this approach, natural biodiversity is preserved within a natural community instead of isolating particular species for accelerated production on farms constructed on cleared land. From the corporate window the elements of nature are seen as separate components. The disappearance of a variety of owl or a small fish is not something to get all bent out of shape about because there will be plenty of other birds and fish when they are gone.

The traits that allow an organism to prosper can also spell its downfall. A parasite that reproduces prolifically can quickly spread throughout its host's body. If it spreads too quickly, however, it can kill the host before it has had a chance to pass the infection on to others of its species. The parasite can, in its very moment of triumph, destroy the possibility for its own survival. This is the closest analogy to the insertion of capitalism into the natural world. With an insatiable drive to turn everything in its path into profit, it quickly destroys habitats and depletes the resources it consumes. It demonstrates remarkable versatility: having destroyed one natural community it can quickly adjust its appetites and move on to a very different one. If shrimp become scarce, investment can be rapidly redirected to retail, advertising or private prisons. When biofuel promised a higher rate of return than food, the nature of agriculture changed in a flash. In fact no rate of profit is ever sufficient if there is a way to get a higher one. Every system has limits beyond which it cannot stretch. A corporation exists as an expression of its demand for profit. Its flexibility lies in its ability to adapt to changing circumstances enough to preserve its essential nature. Like a lizard after a rain, if the market around it turns green, it will change its color in order to appear in synch. One way in which it has altered its own environment is through a thorough interpenetration with the organs of the state. You will observe that as the crisis engendered by the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico unfolds, it is the resilience of capitalism, not of aquatic and shoreline ecosystems, to which the US government will show unshakeable commitment. How well we understand the essential nature of corporations will condition our ability to maneuver in an environment which they dominate. That means understanding the extent and the limits to their flexibility. A hunting bird can catch small rodents, birds and fish to eat. If these become scarce it may expand its diet to include house pets and very young farm animals. But it must eat. If it is unable to do so it will rapidly lose function and will soon disintegrate as an entity. A corporation may extract profit from dietary aids, from industrial adhesives or small arms sales, but it must extract profit. If that central imperative is compromised its component parts will collapse or attach themselves to healthier corporations. It will then disintegrate.

This lets us know what we can expect from the corporate sector. They will fund us to "address" social problems as long as the integrity of their world is not affected. No matter how many organic community gardens we plant on the deck of the Titanic, however, it will not change the ship's direction. That power is the hands of entities that cannot permit such a change. We are kept from seeing that by the fact that they are funding the gardens!

The left-progressive leadership, disoriented by the corporatist loyalties of the Obama government, continues to cling to the dream that more elected Democrats will eventually add up to fundamental change or at least save us from fascism. In effect they are advocating an alliance with a supposedly enlightened wing of the corporate class as a defense against the rising right. They reveal a profound misunderstanding of both. Corporate efforts to crush us and offers to fund us are pursued with the same intent: to keep us from threatening their profit-making racket. We must fight that by directly confronting and de-legitimizing their power. The right (which is also corporate-funded) is best undermined by our taking the lead in anti-corporate struggles and offering an appealing alternative to their message of anti-solidarity.

The internal logic of the capitalist and natural systems propels them down paths that we can no longer pretend are compatible. The unfolding BP disaster will provide a very public stage on which the corporations, the non-profits and the government will all play their parts. The non-profits will urgently insist that this is a tremendous opportunity to shake our fossil fuel addiction. The government will make angry noises about accountability, corporate greed and a sustainable future. At the end of the day the power of the oil and coal companies to get what they want and set policy will remain intact, unthreatened by the theatrics of a mere government. The Titanic will not change course unless the wheelhouse is controlled by people who want it to. The recycling sign on the cabin door may make us feel good, but it's those invisible levers of structured power that set the course.

### **Fighting for honey**

The emergence of a political current that places human and ecological interests, instead of profit, at the heart of social life would be both shocking and exhilarating. Such voices are gaining strength on the world stage but remain weak and compromised in the US. Advocates for the rights of children, for example, must resort to describing them as "an investment in the future" or "a natural resource" in order to make them visible to corporate politicians. Community activists fight to have "input" into development projects where they are excluded from real power. There are increasingly restless sectors of the population that would respond with relief (as they did to Obama, the campaigner) to the establishment of a credible alternative project. Crystals in a solution will form around whatever poles are present in the solution. If the only poles are the far right, medium right and soft right, we should not be surprised that the people will choose from among them. *If you don't build it they won't come.*

Applying an ecological perspective to movement organizing challenges the ways in which we understand our friends, our opponents and the tendencies of motion of our political environment. Let's tease out some of the implicit assumptions in this view and then see how they could translate to the street.

- 1) *People naturally gravitate toward the most hopeful option they can see.* Left and right wing movements have in their ranks people who started out on the opposing side. They do not generally switch sides due to a change in their fundamental values but rather they change their minds about what political current can best fulfill those values. They share such basic aspirations as providing safety for our children, being rewarded for our efforts, experiencing pride in our identity and looking toward a future brighter than the past. Political movements provide differing narratives as to who will help us reach that future and who stands in the way. Our task is not to change who people are but to offer a vision large enough to include them.
- 2) *How we frame our struggle determines the size of our circle of solidarity is.* I was privileged to work in the 1980s with a Midwestern farmers' movement that was protesting a high voltage power line being built, without their consent, across their fields. This movement became the nucleus of a three-cornered regional alliance with urban environmentalists and the American Indian Movement. That happened because they defined their struggle as one of national

energy policy rather than local property rights. That meant that federal attempts to exploit uranium on Native land, the shift of coal mining from the unionized east to the non-union west and the erosion of democracy in rural electric coops all became part of their world. White farmers who had shown little sympathy during the civil rights movement were now studying its tactics, blocking roads and driving long distances to support Native American political prisoners.

The trajectory of Malcolm X's thinking, from a street paradigm of "each-for himself" to one of Black self-sufficiency to one of broad solidarity might seem to have been a meandering route through mutually contradictory visions but actually represented a continually expanding view of what is possible, each opening on a larger circle of solidarity.

- 3) *What we are fighting for is more important than what we are fighting against.* Bees don't go flying around the countryside looking for animals to sting. They will, however, sting whoever messes with their home hive. The hive is a complex society within which bees fulfill a range of jobs including defense of the village. Enemies come and go but the work of making honey goes on. We must be clear that the honey we are fighting for is more than just a dream in our minds. It encompasses the heroic efforts people make every day to experience solidarity in their personal lives and secure the necessities of life for loved ones. It encompasses respect for the needs of other species--known and unknown to us—to pursue their existence in a natural world not under constant threat of demolition. We struggle so that people can make the honey that they are already trying to create.
- 4) *It's about power.* The last election exposed our hunger for symbolic victories. If they dangle those in front of us, we could be kept entertained for decades arguing about whose turn it is next to run the empire. Maybe they'd allow a lesbian the ticket next time. Or who could resist the profound symbolism of a Cherokee in a US Presidential race!? We are better off learning from the Chicago Panthers. It's always about power, not appearance.
- 5) *We are poised at a moment in our human story when audacity is called for and timidity is deadly.* We are on a chunk of coastal ice that has broken off from the shore and is drifting away. If we stay put we will float out to sea until the ice melts beneath us. It feels as though leaping across the gap would be the big risk because we could fall into the cold water. If we stay put and float out to sea we will get all kinds of praise for being responsible and level headed. The longer we hesitate, the wider the gap we'll need to leap. What makes sense to do?

In translation this means that the capitalist feeding frenzy is running up against the limits of a planet that can't sustain it, but it will not let anyone interfere with the feast. Only a complete social transformation can alter this trajectory. The national and international mechanisms that are supposed to protect us have been corrupted and are now used to distract and divert us. Cats kill birds. That's what they do. Wishful thinking doesn't change that.

What that is called for is for a renewed radical opposition built around the explicit objective of ending corporate rule. That's how you leap off moving ice. History does not support the idea that radicalism in the US is marginal or irrelevant. At least twice each century it has swept across the country in great waves, imposing new conditions and leaving an indelible imprint in our peoples' consciousness.

- 6) *We must step into a political vacuum which only the right is attempting to fill.* The polarization which now exists is between right and left versions of how corporate rule should be

normalized. The right calls for the abolition of all regulation while white, left populists want to “take America back,” presumably to a time when their constituents had a better deal. (They may not have noticed that those times were not so good in other neighborhoods!) They dream that those days can return. We live in the time of an empire’s decline, however, when the only thing certain is that the future will not look like anything like the past. A time when people are angry but are aware that they don’t know what to do next. In such a time the operative strategy is to “name your dream and fight for it,” not to beg to get the old rules back again. They are gone forever.

- 7) *The most powerful arena of struggle is in our people’s heads.* The right has long known that every campaign is a story and every story leads back to your core message. Even if you lose a battle, you can still come out ahead if you have further reinforced your story.

Whenever we are faced with a challenge that seems insurmountable, the answer can be found by stepping back and asking a larger question. If we wished to reshape the national narrative on immigration, for example, we would not just ask how we respond to right wing attacks but rather how do we tell a different story. Suppose we deployed a floating barricade to prevent passage of barges carrying GMO corn to Mexico to displace Mexican agricultural production.

This would place small farmers, food advocates, immigrant workers and labor unions on the same side of a struggle that has been redefined –through action--to be about neo-liberal trade policies and corporate control. This can be applied to every struggle.

The fabric of a new world can be found around us in the form of political movements, social support programs, alternative institutions and reform efforts to improve conditions or protect against abuse, open borders, connect divided constituencies, sustain the marginalized, constrain the military, expand Native sovereignty, protect the natural environment and increase the social wage. A core social vision is the needle to stitch them together.

How do we apply it? Remember what we said earlier about promoting public health? *“Provide what bodies need and remove what causes them harm.”* Think about applying this to the community, national or global levels. Whatever naturally aligns with this basic principle we support, amplify and defend. It is the legitimate right of society to disrupt, prevent and reverse those practices which violate it.

This provides a context for blocking toxic waste shipments through poor neighborhoods, defending against anti-immigrant raids, distributing foreclosed housing and appropriating unused plots for urban farming. It doesn’t mean we randomly challenge all bad things, but it gives us a common language with which to unite and to strengthen the struggles that do emerge. It’s how we serve notice that there is now a political center of gravity that is serious about a world in which people matter. We are prepared to protect it as it emerges from the disintegration of the old world.

Down the road it may be beneficial to seek formal endorsement of our vision from tribal governments, city councils, school boards, student and professional associations. It would make for some interesting campaigns, anyway.

The South African freedom charter was seen to be the nucleus of a future South African constitution. To play a similarly galvanizing role, our core vision (whatever we might choose to call it) would need to emerge out of a broadly participatory process that places the most marginalized and targeted sectors at its center. That process itself would be a rich unity-building experience. Converging around core human values would bring us into communion with growing numbers of mobilized people around the world.

The Cochabamba climate convergence was a powerful, recent reminder of the appeal of visionary audacity.

### **Concluding observations**

If we are to win we must turn many old assumptions on their head. If our ability to act powerfully is rooted in our ability to see powerfully, then it should not surprise us that our enemies are very interested in limiting our vision. Our most debilitating assumption—that we are powerless and our foes are all-powerful—leads us to make choices that only weaken us. I have suggested other ways to evaluate the challenges and prospects for breaking out of the mesmerizing rip-tide in which we are trapped. It is worth reviewing some of these assertions before we come to a close.

A unifying strategic vision represents the voice of the future toward which we must navigate. The dominant political ideologies are in decline. If we remain under their wing we will be rejected with them. The alternatives that are stepping forward to fill the void are dysfunctional and reactionary and are tied to the corporate sector. There has rarely been a richer moment to offer a visionary alternative.

The struggle for horizontal social wellbeing is an organic one that emerges naturally from people's daily experience. It need only be given voice and validation to become a political force. It's not an alien idea. Greed-as-central-organizing-principle-for-the-world? Hasn't worked out so well. Democratic-decision-making-with-the-big-picture-in-mind? Worth a try.

In order to create powerful movements we must be able to see how power flows in our political surroundings. This will reveal strengths and weaknesses (on all sides) that will enrich our choices.

The social forces around us behave in accordance with their own internal architecture, logic and imperatives. This understanding frees us from false illusions and dead ends.

The distinction between vested enemies and circumstantial ones is of strategic importance. How large we frame our questions will determine who we can bring with us and who will oppose us. To ally with the corporate sector as protection against the fascist right is foolhardy. We must confront power of the corporate state and compete with the vision of the right.

You can't change a destructive global paradigm by nibbling at its edges; you have to announce its replacement. Doing so will make possible new alliances and new opportunities to seize the initiative.

The emergence of a new political center of gravity causes shifts in the entire political landscape. There are many organizations, struggles and communities that would benefit from a New World political current if it took shape but who are not capable of initiating it.

A strategic vision creates a context for effective strategies to emerge. It is the key to turning the tide. The survival of the world hinges on a war of perception. The actions that are required can only be implemented if people embrace them and powerful interests are committed to preventing that. The Earth's water and carbon metabolism could be dramatically shifted by the immediate transformation of agricultural land use, for example. For that to happen, the corporations must be removed from the picture. We might not know this, but they do.

We are coming out of a forty year cycle of employing strategies and tactics without vision. It doesn't work. There are understandable reasons why we did that. Fine. It still doesn't work.

Before the arrival of trading ships, Hawaii did not have amphibians, reptiles or small mammals that preyed on insects. Birds were the predators they had to worry about. The island insects developed the strategy of dropping to the ground at the first sign of danger instead of taking to the air as they do in other places. Conditions have changed and today the ground crawls with fauna eager to feast on bugs. The insects continue to do what worked for them in the past. They drop to the ground for safety. They are eaten in large numbers. They can't bring back the past no matter how much act as though it's still here. Whether they'll survive depends on whether they can adapt to a world that has changed.

One more thing. It turns out that the darkest hour isn't the one just before dawn. It's the one just before we remove the blindfold.