The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century By Grace Lee Boggs with Scott Kurashige

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A PERSONAL OPEN LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century

By Molly Lawrence, Western Washington University

“A human being is part of a whole, called by us the Universe.”
- Albert Einstein

As I recently delved into Grace Lee Boggs’ new book The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the 21st Century, I found myself shaken to the core by a much needed inspiration and clarity of conviction. Like the faint beams of Pacific Northwest sunlight pouring through the clouds after days of gray and darkness, Boggs’ work helped to shatter my own feelings of hopelessness and despair. Her words and stories, helped to ground me in a conviction that had been taking form over a lifetime and, especially, over the course of the terrifying, transformative, and exquisitely alive past year of my life. Her words led to an unshakable hope—the kind of hope I paraphrase that was spoken by Julia Butterfly Hill in Fierce Light: Where Spirit Meets Action (Ripper, 2008): Hope is not a belief in a better future; hope is our ability to take responsibility for how we bring ourselves to each moment we live. So, as long as one person is alive, hope is alive.

This book review, then, is written as a letter of gratitude to Grace Lee Boggs. I write it as a woman committed to connecting head, heart, body and soul; committed to new forms of education that increase connection, personal power, freedom, and love; committed to speaking truth, co-creating and learning with others, and living in alignment in each moment and every context. I write it with a belief in the value of human and planetary diversity, while living on the edge of courage and fear, clarity and confusion.

I believe the powerful, transformative principles and commitments in Grace Lee Boggs’ work will lead us into the future, helping us live and breathe a different sort of education—a different way of being in the world. And, in so doing, they will transform the world. I intend for this letter to be the beginning of a dialogue about the potential and possibilities—of the education our children deserve and of our own capacity to live the social transformation of this century. All are invited to continue the conversation—to deepen our collective understanding, evolution, and transformation.

“I am only one, but I am one.”
Occupy Wall Street–Occupy Your Heart–Occupy Love.

Dearest Grace,

I would like to share my deepest gratitude for your commitment to humanity and the planet. I found your stories and insights in The Next American Revolution powerful and inspiring. In particular, I resonated with your conviction that our traditional methods of working for change are no longer transformative enough for the space and place in which we find ourselves at this moment in history. I agree that the time has come to relate differently to the world on all levels, including our own processes of working to transform it. These words from The Next American Revolution, in particular, struck me:

It becomes clearer every day that organizing or joining massive protests and demanding new policies fail to sufficiently address the crisis we face. They may demonstrate that we are on the right side politically, but they are not transformative enough. (p. 36)

Normally it would take decades for a people to transform themselves from the hyperindividualist, hypermaterialist, damaged human beings that Americans in all walks of life are today to the loving, caring people we need in the deepening crises. But these are not normal times. That is why linking Love and Revolution, is an idea whose time has come. (p. 47)

In the last year, I have become increasingly convinced that embodying love in all we do is the key to the transformation you speak of: Grounding your work in the nonviolent traditions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Mahatma Gandhi lends perspective to what this revolution of love requires of each of us. No small feat! Paired with your emphasis on changing the world by changing ourselves, this is radically transformative and could lead to a rapid shift in our collective evolution and consciousness. These words of yours penetrated to the core. They invited me to step more fully into my power, integrity, and authenticity:

We urgently need to stop thinking of ourselves as victims and to recognize that we must each become part of the solution because we are each a part of the problem. By recognizing our own culpability instead of putting all the blame on and demonizing others, we can discover the power within each of us to change the world by changing ourselves. (p. 29)

These are the times that try our souls. Each of us needs to undergo a tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation. Each of us needs to be awakened to a personal and compassionate recognition of the inseparable interconnection between our minds, hearts, and bodies; between our physical and psychical well-being; and between our selves and all the other selves in our country and in the world . . . Each of us needs to make a leap that is both practical and philosophical, beyond determinism to self-determination. Each of us has to be true to and enhance our own humanity by embracing and practicing the conviction that as human beings we have Free Will. (p. 33)

As I re-read these words, I feel some anxiety and fear alongside a renewed commitment to continue the transformation process you describe. I am fully committed to showing up authentically, openly, and fully present in every interaction and have seen example after example of the power of this sort of presence in my work with others—even when sitting at a meeting in which I say very little. I am learning that it is not necessarily what we do, but how we do it that makes all the difference. So in those meetings, I might find myself doing and asking myself the following: Breathe. What’s really going on here? How can I bear witness to what is alive here and stay present and open rather than being driven by a change agenda? How can I see and value what is being contributed and draw out what else might be contributed? How do I make space for all to bring the fullness of their resources? Regardless of the context in which I find myself, I am in agreement that staying connected and present helps transform the greater universal fabric. This is change. The words of Margaret Wheatley.
‘Acting locally allows us to be inside the movement and flow of the system, participating in all those complex events occurring simultaneously. We are more likely to be sensitive to the dynamics of this system, and thus more effective. However, changes in small places also affect the global system, not through incrementalism, but because every small system participates in an unbroken wholeness...Because of these unseen connections, there is potential value in working anywhere in the system. We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness.’
In what Wheatley calls ‘this exquisitely connected world,’ the real engine of change is never ‘critical mass’; dramatic and systemic change always begins with ‘critical connections.’ (p. 50)

I celebrate the vision of leadership that stems from the interconnected vision you, Margaret Wheatley, and many others share and live. It invites us to move beyond a managerial, mechanistic view that has limited our visions of leadership to top-down, hierarchical, and somewhat static structures. Your view of leadership brings us one step closer to engaging with one another in life-giving ways that increase our humanity, make it easier to connect head and heart, to rebuild a life together—from a place of love. It would have been very easy to fear the youth of Detroit rather than looking underneath their actions and making space for them to become a critical part of the rebuilding process. I wonder how this community found the spiritual fortitude to approach rebuilding from this place? I wonder how I will find the same fortitude in my own work with colleagues in a crumbling and outdated education system?[1] I struggle to answer this question and find art helps me persevere: Here is a piece I created that supports me in the ongoing challenge of staying engaged and committed.

**Art Image #1: Dancing a Life**
Ironically, recognition that we may destroy the planet seems to help me in this vein. Humanity may not survive. I feel afraid to admit that I find this strangely grounding and freeing. It feels ironic that in loosening my attachment to a particular outcome like human survival, I actually engage in more empowered, connected, and loving ways. Is our capacity to let go of what we hold most dear really the key to living the love you describe in all we do? Might this letting go transform the universal fabric from one in which our very humanity is feared to one in which we begin anew from a place of love for this very humanity? And how might starting from this perspective change our capacity to co-create together amidst some of the most daunting challenges humanity has ever faced?

I found that the stories in your book provided a radical and empowered starting place for our work together as citizens of the 21st century. My heart is filled with gratitude for the clarity of conviction and grounded vision you embody through your life’s work and writing. I look forward to continuing on this journey together with you, and others, working to change the world because we love it. And I wonder what we will create in the process of this collective transformation and evolution.

The time has come. We have everything we need.

I close with the words of Nelson Mandela:

*Freedom is indivisible* [emphasis added]; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me . . . I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity . . . to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning . . . I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. (1994, pp. 624-625)

With deep gratitude, respect and much love,

Molly Lawrence

P.S. I have attached two images that are a series of words and phrases that represent worldviews and belief systems. Images 1 and 2 show, respectively, what I believe we are moving towards and placing less emphasis on. Both are constructed using words and phrases from your work as well as those of others whose work has helped to inspire this letter.\(^2\)
References


Appendix
Works That Inspired This Letter


Notes

[1] The Art Image #1 – *Dancing a Life* is one way that I work to find the necessary spiritual fortitude in my life and work. I especially appreciate the phrase, “Keep showing up” that Elizabeth Gilbert (2009) shared in a recent TED Talk.

[2] These sources are included in the Appendix under *Works that Inspired This Letter*. 