

ACTIVISM

# Communalizing the Neighborhood

Peter Gabel

One of our biggest challenges in building a new radical spiritual politics (“radical” meaning opposition to the totality of the inertia of the System) is distinguishing what we call the politics of meaning from normal liberal/progressive politics. One way that I’ve tried to express this is to take a liberal/progressive issue that we support, like universal health care, and restate the meaning of the issue in PoM terms. For example, to say that we support universal health care means we support caring about each other’s health rather than insuring each other’s bodies. It is the subjective element, or the intersubjective element, that is central to the politics of meaning, whereas in normal liberal/progressive discourse, the subjective element is only implicit—a love that dare not speak its name.

I accidentally threw myself into the middle of a neighborhood struggle to save a local bookstore in a way that illustrates this difference. Cover to Cover is a twenty-odd-year-old independent bookseller in Noe Valley, one of San Francisco’s most progressive neighborhoods. Once a working class village just south of the Castro district, Noe Valley became a bubbling haven for 60s radicals until the early 80s, when its main drag, 24th Street, gave way to what became known as “the street of babies.” This outpouring of children, eventually including my own (Sam, in 1995), reflected a kind of transfer of hope to the next generation in the face of the rise of Ronald Reagan and the collective flight—or perhaps I should say the reciprocal ebbing away—of what we then called the Left, as we began to doubt en masse that the genie of passion and love that had been let out of the bottle could lead us to the Promised Land. That period was partly succeeded by the rise of nearby Silicon Valley, the upsurge of yahoologan capitalism that had a distinctly liberal flavor, mixing memory and desire in a mysterious new concoction ushered in by the computer that some call dot communism. Today’s Noe Valley is an ongoing melange of all of the

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TIKKUN Associate Editor Peter Gabel (right) organizes local kids to save Cover to Cover bookstore in San Francisco.

above—and still a fundamentally hopeful enclave, though pocked with a Starbucks and a Tully’s and nineteen nail parlors and expensive dress shops. The communitarian spirit still haunts this decidedly mixed landscape, but at the time of Cover to Cover’s collapse, no one could have known exactly how much.

On June 10th, I walked into Cover to Cover only to see Tracy Wynne, one of two beloved booksellers who run the store, slumped over the cash register crying. It was no surprise to me that she and her cohort, Mark Ezarik, had finally decided to close their landmark-of-our-common-past store. The shelves had become barer by the week in the prior months; special orders for books were slow to come in; the store’s famous children’s section had become quieter and quieter as the giggles of our kids crawling through the book hut had ebbed away—a sign to all of us that the life-force was leaving yet another Noe Valley landmark (a local and loved small grocery, Mikeytom, had just lost its lease—perhaps to be replaced, as Cover to Cover might also be, by that mean Dr. Seuss character, The Gap, or perhaps by the book version, the ominous Borders, when it’s no borders that we long for).

I said to Tracy, “How much do you need?” She said “\$200,000.” For some reason—perhaps my sense that the spirit of community remained silently stronger all around us than the spirit of resignation—I said, “I think we can raise that.”

Thus began my politics of meaning “Campaign to Save Cover to Cover.” One could have looked at the store’s situation, cursed the spread of chain stores and Amazon on-line

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIM KOMENICH / SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

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discount “houses,” and cried out for legislation to constrain the market’s destruction of the local, and global, neighborhood. But that approach tends to abstract the issue about which we “liberal/progressives” are upset (personally, I eschew the liberal/progressive label, preferring the old and uncompromising “radical” but with a spiritual and loving topspin). Within this framework, we imagine that some abstract “we” should go to “the State” to do something to regulate the systematic destruction of independent bookstores by more “efficient” chains and discount sellers from Amazon to Costco. While I have no objection to the liberal/progressive impulse or even its explicit demand—I’m all for government regulation of the market as one moment of making manifest the Unity of all Being—I would emphasize that this way of thinking cannot actually reform society unless there is a “we” to make such reform possible. All the hand-wringing and cries of “Why?” in the world will not stop monoculture from destroying the cultures of the world until and unless a real “we” emerges to overwhelm the legacy of mutual fear that the competitive market institutionalizes. If everyone’s out for themselves, “they” are going to pay less and buy from Amazon, and “we,” who don’t exist yet, won’t be able to stop them. The market is just a mechanism of collective flight, the means by which we flee each other and pop Zoloft in the solitude of our constitutionally unsearchable houses—until we address the subjective element, the intersubjective longing for social connection, common meaning, and purpose. Spiritual politics is always and only a subjective politics aimed at imbuing so-called objective reality with transcendent and loving human meaning and energy.

So I went home, little me all by myself, and started a list-serv on yahoogroups.com called savecovertocover. By the time you read this, the store will have been saved (I know I’m giving away the ending, but please don’t stop reading until I get through what was “politics of meaning” about the campaign); but you can probably still subscribe if you wish by emailing to [savecovertocover-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:savecovertocover-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). I then drafted my initial letter to what I hoped was the community in waiting, laying out the contours of the Campaign to Save Cover to Cover. Not for a second did I think, “Now what would a politics of meaning approach to this look like?” I just tried to tap into my own subjective longing for the bookstore to survive, for the neighborhood to battle for its redemption and resist the spread of the collective illness that was taking the life of Cover to Cover, and to express that longing in a more or less spontaneous and fun strategy.

This “strategy” had two key elements: one was to find forty people in Noe Valley who would agree to loan \$5,000

in exchange not for interest, but for a permanent 25 percent discount on all Cover to Cover books. That would raise the \$200,000 needed to pay off the store’s accumulated debt (roughly half the problem) and to restock the store’s inventory with sufficient book volume to resuscitate and elevate book sales. I decided to call this group “The Magnificent 40,” purposely recalling Yul Brynner’s *Magnificent 7*, the Western in which, as I vaguely recalled, seven roughriders overwhelmed odds of some sort to win a glorious victory. The second element was to try to get 1000 neighbors who

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could not afford or did not wish to join the Magnificent 40 to pledge to buy one book per month (meaning one hardcover, or \$25 worth). In the letter (remember I had no one to send it to yet), I emphasized how this effort might well help transform our neighborhood into a community, as well as the justified esteem that folks who joined either of these groups could and would receive for their respective parts in saving the store. I

then spoke to Tracy and Mark about giving the Magnificent 40 some non-legal advisory role in Cover to Cover’s ongoing operation, which they agreed to, and suggested that we gather together on special occasions to take pleasure in the store’s resurrection and success, adding that some of us might fall in love or at least become friends.

When I finished a draft, I took a version that could fit on one page to Mark and Tracy, who had the brilliant idea of going to Kinko’s and blowing it up into a gigantic poster that could go in the store window, right next to their very sad gigantic letter about having reluctantly decided to close the operation. I say this idea was brilliant because the blown-up version of the letter caused passersby to stop and create a spontaneous public rustle on the street. Soon I was getting calls or e-mails from people saying they wanted to help, and two personal friends agreed right away to join me as the first Magnificent 40 members. The next day, I put up an ironing board on 24th Street in front of the local Bell Market with scrawled “Save Cover to Cover” signs and pledge sheets for the one-book-per-month plan. Within about two hours, I had my first fifty signatures.

### *The Fear of Hope*

The minute I started to succeed, even a little bit, I started to get anxious, and Tracy in particular began to feel extremely unsettled. Having just resigned herself to the tragedy of the store’s closing after having spent so long scrambling to prevent it, Tracy was scared of daring to hope that this Campaign could conceivably succeed. My anxiety was that I suddenly felt I *had* to succeed—my spirited whim, based on a spiritual belief that the community was out there

and might want to emerge if given the opportunity, was turning into a responsibility not to fail. The fear of hope is, in my view, the single greatest social-psychological barrier to transforming the world and accounts for the prevalence of cynicism as our society's main collective defense mechanism. Hope requires the opening up of desire and vulnerability. As long as we are closed up in our isolated routines, we may be dissatisfied, but we are not in danger of the rejection and pain that haunts our memory, which is in truth the memory of a long intergenerational legacy of rejection and hurt that each of us lives out in our respective unique and personal ways.

I decided to deal with my own fear of hope by treating the campaign as a "light" venture, analogous in my mind to the process of leavening bread. Instead of thinking, "Okay, now I've got to accomplish these five really heavy and even impossible seeming goals (raise \$200,000?!)," I decided to try to maximize the spontaneity and fun of the whole project and see if the "we" wanted to emerge, while allowing for it not to succeed if the bread just didn't want to rise, or if I/we didn't come up with the alchemy needed for it to do so. Alchemy is important, even central, to spiritual politics—by finding one's own sense of playful hope and casting it out toward others, we give the hope and longing already pooled up in the community a chance to emerge. This collective hope then transforms into a collective confidence that we can in fact do something that taken all at once as a heavy "goal" can seem daunting or even impossible.

Both metaphor and innocence play a role in this process. The truth is that although no one can imagine quickly raising \$200,000 with the only economic return being a book discount, it was equally clear that there were at least 40 folks in the neighborhood who could afford a long-term (six-year, in our plan) \$5,000 loan in exchange for overcoming isolation, community, and saving something linked to knowledge, hope, learning, and the development of the next generation. In this sense, the bookstore is not a business in the marketplace so much as an innocent metaphor of the world we want to live in. By calling these prospective donor-lenders the Magnificent 40, I allowed us (I'm one of us) to gain a bit of recognition for which we are all starved in an anonymous society, but in a playful way—and to do so for being generous and idealistic rather than self-interested. The use of the ironing board in front of Bell at the very center of 24th Street, personned each weekend by parents and often their kids, has innocent associations to traditional, communal neighborhood campaigns of all kinds, and has made it inviting for neighbors to sign up for the book-per-month pledge.

Although finding 1,000 people to make a \$25-per-month commitment might at first seem daunting, by turning the

effort to find these 1,000 heroes and heroines into an effort to give people a way to be valued for becoming part of something larger than themselves, and through an ingenuous method of making contact with them, the effort itself has become a pleasure. It's fun to stop people on the street and to watch your child explain how buying a book a month will save the local bookstore; the joy is infectious; the passerby can see the partial list of signatures on the page you're currently filling; everybody wants to read a hardcover-per-month anyway. Still another touch of both metaphor and

innocence was inspired by the local newspaper story that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about our campaign. While the photographer for the story was taking the picture, I tried to think of something that would make the kids genuinely smile so I began "organizing" them during the photograph to hold a lemonade sale for the store; the caption in the paper under the photograph showed me addressing the kids and explained that I was organizing a lemonade sale. So

of course we had to actually do it: thus, Lemon-Aid was born, a conscious metaphorical association to Willie Nelson's Farm-Aid that got some of the children out earning \$30.86 for the store one Sunday afternoon (at a garage sale of used books held by The Phoenix, the other local bookstore and supposedly Cover-to-Cover's main competitor, with Phoenix owner Kate Kanaley serving as mistress of ceremonies and proving that markets can be cooperative and loving rather than individualistic, competitive, and driven by self-interest ... and incidentally, Kate has joined the Magnificent 40).

What is important about metaphor and innocence is that they allow people's hope for idealistic connection and community to be spoken to spontaneously, non-rationally, and by indirection. I don't think anyone who has been part of this campaign has felt that they were being organized and hustled or guilt-tripped by rational arguments that are always suspect to the extent that they do not touch the listener's heart: the core truth of the post-modern critique of the idea of totality and "seriousness" is that reason divorced from the spirit is indeterminate and that the Devil can and will always cite Scripture for his or her purpose. The "goal of this campaign" has been to see if the bread will rise, if the energy will spread, if we can make Lemon-Aid out of \$200,000 of debt. To succeed, a politics of meaning must gently pluck the invisible string linking self and other to help our waiting loving energy resonate from heart to heart in a way that allows a "we" to emerge. Sometimes, as in the case of the Sixties, this resonance can overwhelm the denial of desire that separates us and keeps us locked in our spiritually impoverished cubicles; this resonance from heart to

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heart is what *moves* in a movement and can at certain creative historical moments sweep across the entire globe.

### *Fear Strikes Back?*

As of today, July 21st, we have 42 of the 40 Magnificent pledges needed, and 688 of the 1000 book-per-monthers. But we always made fulfillment of the pledges contingent upon the Magnificent 40's approval of a new and plausible business plan. That plan has now been drafted by Paula Foley, the new business partner who emerged from the process of the campaign to help strengthen the bookstore's financial management, marketing, and business acumen. Paula's emergence has itself been a beautiful expression of the campaign, as she is a woman with some business expertise who had "lost" some money in the store out of past devotion and has now, in the transfigured environment of the campaign, converted that lost sum into an equity position as the new business partner in the new Cover to Cover. And her talents are genuinely needed to supplement/complement Mark and Tracy's historical role and legendary talents as book buyers and sellers. As of today, the plan is being reviewed by the Magnificent 40, and of course it has had to address why the new store will succeed when the old one failed. This is, so to speak, the capitalist moment.

My experience has been that in spiritual/political efforts, big face-to-face meetings, unsoftened by food and music, inevitably pose a challenge to the hope that unites the group. In the context of this capitalist moment, this means that lawyers, accountants, and people with business experience may "ask the hard questions"—meaning technical/legal/business/accuracy-of-ratio-of-sales-to-inventory type questions that presuppose not the utopian momentum of our supportive movement, but the harsh realities of the alienated market taken as inevitable future. These questions may suddenly introduce an element of terror into the hearts of the innocent majority of Magnificent 40 members who have thrown themselves into the venture as a loan of love, instinctively trusting that the momentum giving rise to the store's salvation will carry over to the store's future cultural and economic success. We still live in a world in which people are taught to suspect their generous impulses, to feel that going with hope may well be foolish, and my concern is that the lawyers, accountants, and businesspeople will accidentally fuse their reasonable concerns—which we all agree must be addressed (the post-resurrection reality will at least in part reflect conventional capitalist market patterns)—with the group's own doubt about itself, its fear of success, its fear that going with the hopeful, generous impulse will lead to disappointment, rejection, and loss (of money, of commu-

nity). I'm just a little worried (scared to death) that the well-meaning, rational minority will inadvertently scare away the majority who are ready to—who actively want to and even can't wait to—place their \$5000 wager on hope alone.

To minimize the likelihood of this happening, we *will* have wine and cheese, and I may get up the courage to play the Dixie Chicks' "The Promise of Love" on the guitar while people are milling around beforehand. But I've also sent the business plan in advance to each of the 40 by e-mail, individually, with one copy available at the store for the community

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*Spiritual politics aims to generate connection and foster an opening of the heart. The longing for community that exists in each of us exists in all of us.*

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as a whole to be able to review. My hope is that this will allow the airing of all rational concerns, critiques, questions about the legality of the offering ("is this a 'public debt offering' requiring extensive risk warnings under the State Corporations Code?") to be processed and responded to in a non-threatening way. And this way all of the good ideas can be incorporated into a revision before the group gets together in a single face-to-face meeting at the store's new, better (more street traffic), and less expensive location a week from next Thursday. We will have a serious discussion at this event, but with the first

round of questioning having been completed and incorporated into a revised plan, it's more likely that the event will be celebratory and exciting, a moment to declare victory, write checks, and fall in love (or at least take one more step toward believing that we are really a We).

This is really the point of the whole venture. The distinctive aspect of spiritual politics is that every action, objective, local initiative, or legislative reform must generate connection and reflect an intuitive strategy or way of thinking that fosters the opening up of the heart and the realization of the soul's ideals by taking into account the precise degree of fear shaping the background conditions. This requires having confidence in your knowledge of something invisible—call it the intersubjective energy field, or just reality's pulse—that inevitably in this world carries within it the conflict between hope and fear that is what we are seeking in each instance to transcend. Against us is the inherited mistrust of the Other that is the hallmark not just of today's capitalist culture but of the accumulated pain of prior generations that we ourselves are predestined to internalize and, in part, live out. In our favor is the simple, deep truth that the longing for community that exists in each of us exists in all of us, however cautious we each are about revealing it. The politics of meaning means remembering to employ everything that can help remind us of that simple spiritual truth—like making sure that parents like me in the Magnificent 40 remember to bring their beautiful kids to be part of the meeting/gathering, so that our dynamic is more likely to express the loving impulse that we so want them to learn. □