

THE BASEMENT AND THE ATTIC: A NATIONAL CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL

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In May of 2018, I traveled to Riverside Church to meet up with the New York City contingent of *The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call For Moral Revival (PPC:NCMR)* to take part in the *40 Days of Moral Action*. Every Monday protests were held in 35 state capitals for 5 weeks. Thousands of people presented themselves for civil disobedience arrest each week. Each week highlighted one of the campaign's demands. The week I joined the New York City contingent, was focused on the war economy and our moral rebuttal of wars. About 50 of us entered the state capital and held a memorial for the victims of the countless wars the United States was actively engaged in. We also held the memorial for all the communities in our state that were impacted by our highly militarized police forces fueled by war. That week was the first week that I was arrested for civil disobedience. I didn't tell my parents, my friends or my family. I didn't even fully decide that I was going to participate in that way until the moment I did. If it wasn't for a new found friend I probably would not have gone along with it. The the strong calm conviction of a fellow activist — and leader — inspired me to exercise my voice. Since then this activist and have found leadership roles within the PPC:NCMR. Perhaps my friend knew, but I certainly didn't, that her and I would be in this campaign for the long haul. The campaign would become a part of my life to the point where I *was* the PPC:NCMR.

If you had asked me two years ago what leadership meant I would have repeated all the old tropes. A leader was the smartest in the room, the most charismatic, the most popular, the most experienced, most vocal, a truly singular kind of being. The concept that the role of a leader is to bring people in, wasn't even in the periphery. If I was a house, the room of my leadership — the type of leader I now aim to be now and could not perceive then — was blocked off, barricaded, and dormant. Power was inherently bad. Anyone who sought power was either bad or

on the flip side divinely good to the point of martyrdom. Only the divinely good could hold the reigns of power. *I* was neither bad nor divinely good so I didn't consider myself a leader, and I was proud about *not* being one. I knew my place. That was my perceived power.

Co-created power to an ex-musical theater performer was not possible. I was trained for 8 years in conservatories that constantly reminded me, “take the note.” Do not challenge the director. They are the only ones that can see the entire puzzle. Know your place. Say your lines. Sing your notes. Be present on stage. Do your job. Be your room in the house of the show. It was antithetical for this actress to consider herself a co-architect of an *entire* building. I was merely a room with a very special design. I needed a leader to hone my craft, to hold me accountable, is I could tell my part of the story. As I look back now, no wonder why I left the theater. How long can you hide and barricade a piece of yourself? How long can you manage feeling like you need others to give you an opportunity — which includes the opportunity of being broken down personally piece by piece?

As it turns out, not very long. Your inner contradictions will take you elsewhere, and some places the inner conflict takes you are not so great and not so healthy if you can only perceive of your room and not your house. As Smucker (2017) suggests, “we begin to swim in our own marginalization. We begin to act out the story of the righteous few.” This statement sums up what life was like for me as a professional childhood actress. Anyone that challenged my position and my role, challenged my entire identity. I became an isolated being stuck in a room not knowing there was an entire house to explore.

POPULAR EDUCATION AND NEW MEANING

May 2018, was a turning point for me. It introduced me to a new community, with a new set of values, who found ways to light up different rooms and floors within my house. The process was relational. The community work enabled me to walk out of rooms filled with broken dishes, resentments, and dreams into living rooms filled with soft places to contemplate, think, and heal. All of a sudden I began to notice a entire house I never saw before. By setting my personal experience into a broader context — by setting my personal story into relation to larger economic, political, and structural systems — I was able to create new meaning and a new home (Finn, 2016). This is the power of organizing and popular education. By increasing my capacity to look at events with a multitude of perspectives, by keeping me in relation to my community, I slowly developed the agency to act. The broken plates of dreams deferred, the countless stolen opportunities of my own realization, were all of a sudden not personal failures, they were political failures. I began to notice the conditions within which I and my class was living, and I began to gain the desire and will to build something new.

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Leaders of the PPC:NCMR met me where I was at — a frustrated singer/songwriter, debt swamped preschool music teacher — and through popular education led me somewhere new — a cultural organizer changing the conditions within which my class lives by shifting the inner and outer narratives that surround us (Horton, 1998). This work, this new way of being, is completely opposite from how I thought things operated. All of a sudden I realized that I had a choice. I didn’t have to stay in one room, I could move throughout the entire house and discover new floors. I now had a community to walk through the halls with, a community that would help me

go into the basement where I hid all of my trauma, and the attic where I told my childhood hope to go. I no longer had to live in an individualist competitive way and claim dominion over my isolation, instead I could fling open all the doors and let all the broken bits meet each other.

There is one thing The Divine King¹ and the dispossessed have in common, isolation. This is what makes how we develop and perceive of leadership to be such powerful and trepidatious acts and practices. We have to be careful so we do not replicate the systems of power we are seeking to alter (Burghardt, 2014). We know this to be true, we can not become leaders in isolation and we can not allow the archetype of the all-knowing-king to inform our theory of leadership. The PPC:NCMR actively fights this ideology. We are a movement of many leaders and many narratives. We are not only shifting the narrative we are shifting the narrators. We are also shifting how we narrate by creating spaces for identities and voices that have been left out of leadership roles. In our spaces the quiet contemplative leader shares and wields power with those of us that are more vocal in our delivery. Everyone has a place to plug in.

We also hold a different definition of leader. In our campaign leadership is defined as someone who brings people into the movement, which is the exact opposite of the all-knowing-

¹ The Divine King comes from the imperialist ideology of the Divine Right Of Kings, that one leader has the God given right to rule, and if he is prevented from realizing his rule, we the people are all doomed. This construct is embedded in capitalism. We find it in Adam Smith's theory of The Invisible Hand, which Smith declared, "will move the markets" (Graeber, 2011). This Invisible Hand theory is particularly dangerous because it uncoupled the Divine King and His Right from a singular name. Meaning, we the people have to go deeper in our analysis and recognize that those in power that manipulate our markets are indeed, our King.

divine-leader who leads by creating walls and boundaries. This idea is revolutionary. The next step for leaders like myself² and my friend mentioned at the beginning of this story? To canvass and find more leaders. As my mentor in the movement reminds me time after time, our job is to make ourselves replaceable. What a concept! In heightened individualism this means death, but in collective work this means the exact opposite. The universe is always expanding, may we remember nature, her principles, and follow suite (Brown, 2017). In other words, have you discovered all the rooms in your house? You have a choice. Expand your ideas of you and all that is in relation. Let the movement welcome you home.

² It is still extremely difficult to openly declare myself as a “leader,” even after all the internal and external analysis. Imperialist ideology is pervasive, as is the capitalism that upholds it every second of the day. Perhaps the term “student leader” fits better. After all, if I maintain that I am in a-school-for-the-struggle and in-process, my internalized all-knowing-king can quiet its voice and transform into someone different who is not singular by nature nor isolated.

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