

THE POWER WITHIN US TO CREATE THE WORLD ANEW:



A Discussion with Grace Lee Boggs

Stevie Peace | **Team Colors Collective**

Out of an incredible movement history, bound up with individuals like C.L.R. James and Malcolm X as well as organizations from the Black Panthers to Detroit Summer, Grace Lee Boggs has emerged as one of the foremost political thinkers and philosophers in the United States. Now 94 years old and still committed to activism and new conversations in Detroit, her home of over fifty years, Grace shares in this interview some of the most important insights she has gleaned throughout her life. She discusses the tangible connections between her personal and political experiences, expounding on the importance of theory in movement building, the recognition of our constantly changing reality, and the historical examples of sea changes in the struggle, as new questions and divisions have challenged us to not only think differently, but to also understand how we know. Grace suggests that the present moment can be a tremendous opportunity for evolving our humanity—a task that requires a full assessment of the damage done by oppressive forces, a commitment towards healing and “growing our souls,” and an imagination stemming from new stories and new relations that we create.

This interview was conducted and transcribed by Stevie Peace of Team Colors Collective on December 11, 2009. Additionally, Grace participated in the editing process and provided important footnotes and citations. Both participants also

benefited from the assistance and guidance of Matthew Birkhold, a New York-based theorist and educator/writer.

Stevie Peace: *Grace, what kind of introduction did you have to politics growing up?*

Grace Lee Boggs: My introduction to politics has been very personal. I emphasize and acknowledge that because most radicals tend to deny that their personal histories have anything to do with their political views. They like to believe that their views are universal, true for everybody, and for all time. I used to believe that.

But over the years, I have learned how much my politics has been influenced by my being born female; to a mother who never learned how to read and write because there were no schools for women in her little Chinese village; who didn't know her father and as a child stole food from the ancestors' graves. I think a lot of that had to do with my politics as they have developed.

Understanding how much the personal and the political are inseparable has been one of the most important philosophical contributions of the women's movement.

SP: *How have the political leaps that you have made throughout your life been related to your personal leaps, if they have at all?*

GLB: I have a *lot* of examples. After I got my PhD in philosophy in 1940, there was no chance of my getting a university job as a philosophy professor. In those days, even department stores would come right out and say, "We don't hire Orientals." And so I went to Chicago, where George Herbert Mead, the man on whom I had done my dissertation, had taught, and got a part-time job in the University of Chicago Philosophy Library for ten dollars a week. That wasn't very much money even though in those days, a lot of people weren't making much more than \$500 or \$1000 dollars a year. So I was very lucky to find a woman down the street from the university who was willing to let me live in her basement, rent-free. The only drawback was that in order to get into the basement, I had to face down rats in the alley.

That made me very rodent-conscious. So I found a tenants' group in the city which was fighting rat- and mice-infested housing and joined the group.

That is how I got in touch with the black community and came into contact with the March on Washington (MOW) movement, which A. Philip Randolph had organized in 1941 to demand jobs for blacks in the defense industries. Without even actually marching on Washington, the MOW movement aroused so much interest and support in the black community that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was forced to issue Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination in defense industry hiring. I was so inspired by the power of the movement that I decided to become a movement activist.

That is how my personal problems brought me to politics. I think that's true of a whole lot of us, much more than we are ready to acknowledge.

SP: *It sounds like you are talking about this notion that, instead of people arriving at a politics that is 'out there' to be involved in, more often people arrive at it from their own personal position.*

GLB: The important thing is acknowledging the connection between the personal and the political because it is acknowledging how much subject and object are interconnected. It's

a very female epistemology or way of knowing, as contrasted to the more masculine claim that what you're saying or thinking has universal validity.

SP: *You wrote and published your autobiography in 1998. How did writing your autobiography influence your emphasis on reflection, and how did reflecting on your personal life changes provide insight into how your politics has changed over time?*

GLB: How I came to write my autobiography is interesting in itself. I didn't really understand this until a linguist—whom I had never met, but who had decided to study my rhetoric—came to me recently and asked, “How and when did your rhetoric begin to change?” It was only then, in conversation with her, that I realized that how I wrote and spoke began to change after Jimmy died in 1993. Jimmy and I had been married for forty years, and during that time, I depended a lot on his ideas, both because he was black and I was not and because those forty years were a period during which black struggles were really at the center of the country's struggles.¹

After Jimmy died in 1993, I found myself on my own but still thinking about Jimmy's role in the movement more than mine. So I wrote to a publisher I knew, and I asked if she would like to publish the biography of Jimmy that someone wanted to write. To my surprise, she replied that she would prefer to publish an autobiography by *me*. I hadn't believed that I had anything to contribute! But as I started writing *Living for Change*,² and as I went back and reflected on my own personal development, I realized that, like everybody else, I had arrived at where I was because *I had come from some place*. I had thought that my personal struggles were just part of my own life; I didn't realize they were social/political struggles.

SP: *How had you thought previously about where people come from and how important that is in the development of one's politics?*

GLB: I was very much more theoretical and objective in my thinking. I thought that being political demanded—*required*—that you not be too introspective or personal. And I think a lot of people, and especially men, still believe that.

I emphasize this because I believe that epistemology—how we know—is extremely important and has been ignored for too long in radical politics. My study of Hegel³ and my reflections on the movement over these years have helped me to understand that it's not only reality that is changing all the time, but that “how we think” must be constantly changing. In the radical movement, the main emphasis has been on *practice*. Marx's point in his *Theses on Feuerbach*—“Philosophers only contemplate reality; our task is to change it”⁴—has become so fixed in the minds of radicals, and in the practice of radicals, that they *look down* on thinking. But we have to be constantly on guard against getting stuck in old notions.

SP: *Has that been a recent development, or has that been the situation for radicals for a long time?*

GLB: It has been my experience since I became part of the radical movement in the early 1940s, and it's still my experience when I talk to people who are proudly ‘leftist.’ They don't like to examine their own thinking. Maybe because most of them come to the movement as intellectuals, they are determined to avoid being called intellectuals instead of

activists. So they're not willing to examine how we think, and they turn into ideologues, stuck in old calcified ideas.

SP: *When and why do new theories and new ways of thinking emerge, and why is this important to activism today?*

GLB: New ways of thinking are important because the world has changed so much. I feel very fortunate that I've lived for so long because I have some idea of the world in which Marx wrote in the nineteenth century—my professors in college in the 1930s had gone to college in the lifetimes of Marx and Darwin—and I know that world is long gone. I also have a pretty good idea of how revolutions took place in the early part of the twentieth century and the enormous impact that those revolutions have had on how radicals thought and still think about revolution.

I have a pretty good sense of how the world began to change after World War II and after the splitting of the atom. I often recall Einstein's statement that "the splitting of the atom has changed everything but the human mind, and thus we drift toward catastrophe." That's why he insisted that "imagination is more important than knowledge." I think most of us are not sufficiently conscious of how much the world has changed since the middle of the twentieth century.

SP: *These kinds of new theories and new ways of thinking that enhance people's ideas of change—where do they come from? Do they come from movements and the knowledge they produce? Do they come from others?*

GLB: It's difficult to tell how the changes actually take place. But I think that prior to the splitting of the atom, radical thinking focused on the oppressed struggling against the oppressor. There were only victims and villains in the scenario. But when the atom was split, *we* became part of the problem. *We* became responsible for how the world has developed. So we had to recognize our complicity and thus acknowledge our responsibility for creating our unsustainable society.

The turning point in movement history was the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Instead of just struggling against the Montgomery Bus Lines for their absolutely inexcusable treatment of black passengers, the blacks in Alabama who decided to boycott the Montgomery buses (for more than a year!) began to act as models of the new kind of human beings we need to become in the twenty-first century.

Women were very important in triggering and organizing the Montgomery boycott. It was not only Rosa Parks, who has become an icon for her refusal to give up her seat, but women like Jo Ann Robinson, a university professor who helped organize the boycott,⁵ and Mother Pollard, the old black woman who, when asked if she was tired from so many weeks of walking instead of busing, replied, "My feet's tired, but my soul is rested." Together, a number of different people, including Martin Luther King Jr., created something new.

Most of the struggles that took place in the 1960s and thereafter—the anti-war struggles, the women's struggles, the ecological struggles—were inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It introduced something new into the world: the concept of two-sided transformation. To change the world, we must not only transform the system. We must transform ourselves.

SP: *Would you say that movements today have inherited those new questions of human transformation, of what is possible in human life?*

GLB: I don't think enough people have. I don't think we have even begun to internalize that concept, especially in our response to 9/11. But I think that at the Battle of Seattle in 1999, people began to understand something new. It was not only the World Trade Organization, not only those huge structures that have been created by corporate globalization that we have to replace. Especially with the climate crisis, we have to begin changing ourselves radically.

That's the challenge of the twenty-first century. What's going on now at Copenhagen is making that clear.⁶ At Copenhagen there are many activists both from 'developing' and 'developed' countries saying, "The main question is how you/we in the Global North live." We in the North are responsible for global emissions that now threaten all life on Earth. We have to begin living differently so that others can simply live.

SP: *So what is happening at Copenhagen is the raising of those larger questions. But you were saying we had not addressed that in our relationship to 9/11; why do you suppose that is?*

GLB: I was at a women's forum the week of 9/11. An older woman with her four-year-old grandson in her arms spoke up and said that, watching the attack on the World Trade Centers on 9/11, he had asked a very simple question: "Why do they hate us so?" We've not yet asked that question of ourselves. It was really sad the other night to hear Obama at West Point,⁷ mouthing those myths about how we represent freedom and that it is our duty to bring it to the world. We still believe in that myth of our exceptionalism, that we are the ones who can save the world even though we're an empire with a hundred military bases all over the world. It was very sad.

Fortunately, more people are starting to question this. For example, Andrew Bacevich, a retired colonel, Vietnam War veteran, and Boston University professor of history and international relations, is currently being invited to share his views on many talk shows. He's the author of *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*.⁸

SP: *I agree that the myth of exceptionalism still runs strong; a big part of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign success came from trumpeting that tone. It was not too far removed from Reagan and his "morning in America." What does that say about Obama? Or more importantly, what does that say about the Left in the U.S.?*

GLB: In the last year, Obama's support has steadily declined with his bailout of the bankers, his compromises on health care reform, and his latest decision to send additional troops to Afghanistan. This is disappointing, but it also provides us with the opportunity for serious reflection and discussion. Why, as President, has Obama become the capable and self-satisfied manager of problems? Why is he no longer the visionary for which people—especially young people—campaign? It is a learning process through what Hegel, reflecting on his experience of the French Revolution, called the "labor, patience, and suffering of the negative."

What do we do now? Do we campaign for a president with more radical or progressive solutions, like Dennis Kucinich or Ralph Nader? Or do we start looking elsewhere for leadership, to people at the grassroots, to be and to make the change in ourselves and in all our institutions?

SP: *That brings us back to that notion you had mentioned earlier, of two-sided transformation and what we will need personally to re-conceive and re-think the kind of world we want to have. But it seems like we cannot confine this to what we in the U.S. want, important as that is; it seems that two-sided transformation must be planetary.*

GLB: I think that the people of the United States are probably the most backward people on Earth. Europeans, while they still have a long way to go, are more advanced than we are because they have suffered two World Wars on their territory. Because they have experienced so many losses of life through war, they have become more peace-loving. The American people haven't even thought about what it means to be peace-loving, either abroad or in our communities at home. We have not even begun to understand how much we are responsible for the number of deaths that take place on the African continent. We have not begun to look at ourselves in the mirror. I think that the inability of the American people to look in the mirror is one of the most tragic episodes in world history and the evolution of humanity. We need to recognize that we are at a very special time on the clock of the world when we need to make a huge leap forward in what it means to be a human being, not only for our own survival, but for the survival of the earth and for the survival of all living things on earth.

SP: *How do these processes—a national “looking in the mirror”—happen? I understand the notion, but maybe you could provide an example to clarify. Does it happen nationally? Is it more local, or from person to person? What do your experiences tell you?*

GLB: When Kennedy was killed in 1963, Malcolm X warned that “the chickens have come home to roost.” A few years later, in his 1967 anti-Vietnam war speech, Martin Luther King Jr. warned that our country is on the wrong side of the world revolution. In his 1976 ‘malaise’ speech, President Carter tried to alert the American people to the consequences of our over-consumption.

We still need to ask ourselves and discuss with our families and friends why 9/11 happened. When these discussions finally get under way, we will begin to understand that, essentially, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked because we haven't heeded all these warnings.

SP: *But this also comes from a much longer history we are complicit in—colonization, genocide, slavery; the list is endless. I think the larger question, though, is how do we create change from this position, and how do we engage people accordingly.*

GLB: I think the thing that we have to do is probe more deeply, to understand the link between our passion for economic growth and slavery. We talk about enslaving people as if it were only a question of racism. It was not just racism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this country's rapid economic growth depended on having many more people doing the work. That's why we enslaved blacks. And it depended on getting more land. That's why we exterminated so many Native Americans.

That fundamental contradiction—of dehumanizing ourselves by degrading others for the sake of rapid economic growth—was built into the founding of this country. We still don't recognize the extent to which rapid economic growth and slavery have been linked together in our history.

We have to rediscover our past as it really was. Until then, we cannot recognize that a revolution in the United States will be unlike all previous revolutions. Instead of getting more, the next American Revolution means giving things up because so many of our comforts and conveniences have been bought at the expense of the earth and other people. That's a very different way of looking at revolution, which Jimmy explained in his chapter on dialectics and revolution, in *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*.⁹ The next American Revolution is for the purpose of recovering our humanity, restoring our humanity. Advancing another stage on the evolutionary road of humanity requires that we Americans start giving up things. Despite the physical suffering from the economic meltdown and the climate crisis, these have a positive side, because they force us to face that reality of our past and our challenge for the future.

SP: *You mentioned that whatever revolution is to come has to be unlike others that have come before. Could you speak more to what that means to you, in terms of the old ways of organizing and the new ways we will need to see?*

GLB: I think a lot of people are still organizing to get *more*. I'm not saying that when people are hungry and homeless, you should not organize to get food stamps or to have a roof over your head. What I am saying is that in this period, we need to be organizing ourselves, at the same time, to live differently. We have to begin living more simply so that others can simply live, for the sake of all living things, including ourselves.

SP: *How do you see those questions developing in Detroit?*

GLB: I think that Detroit is very fortunate, in the sense that, having once been the symbol of the miracle of industrialization, and then becoming the symbol of the devastation of deindustrialization, we find more people willing to begin anew, even *forced* to begin anew.

To me, one of the most amazing things about Detroit is the rapid growth of the urban agricultural movement. I remember when it started. Back in the early 1980s, the "Gardening Angels"—mainly Gerald Hairston and African American women who had been born and raised in the South—looked around them at all the vacant lots and decided they could be used for community gardens. They said very openly that these gardens could not only grow food for our bodies, but could also give our young people the sense of process that they cannot get in an urban environment. This combination of material need and psychological need was what created the community gardening movement in Detroit. That's why it has grown so rapidly.

I remember when the Detroit Agriculture Network was established. We used to sponsor a garden tour every August so that people could visit the gardens. In the beginning, we only needed one bus, seating forty-two people. We would complete the tour in maybe an hour, an hour and a half. However, in the last few years, so many community gardens have been planted—there are now over 800!—that we need as many as *six* buses, and several *hours* for the tour. And still, people can only see a few of the gardens. Some buses go to the east side, and some to the west side. And the community gardeners now hold quarterly meetings during the year so that they can share experiences and resources. So gardening becomes a way of building community. It's an example of how something new can emerge out of crisis and out of disaster,

SP: *It sounds like this particular struggle builds community, but also helps to build power as well.*

GLB: The idea of power is a very complicated concept. What do you mean by power?

SP: *In this case, I think power is the control and ability to act in the ways that we wish to live our lives.*

GLB: Have you ever thought that talking about power in terms of control is a very masculine way of talking about power?

SP: *Well, how do you conceive of power?*

GLB: I think that as a result of the women's movement, we are able to think less of control and more of the power within us to create the world anew. In other words, we are able to think more about empowering people and people empowering themselves. The whole concept of revolution has been undergoing a seismic shift. In the first half of the 20th century, when the Russian Revolution was the model of revolution, radicals thought of revolution as seizing or grasping power from those in power so that we, rather than they, would be in control. But at the beginning of the 1960s, the idea of power began to divide into two: between the idea of power as control and the idea of power as empowerment.

SP: *So there were new conceptions of power that were contesting older conceptions of power.*

GLB: Right. To me, one of the most important things is to recognize how one is constantly dividing into two. For example, we are now at the point of recognizing that the more the black middle class has succeeded in integrating into and gaining access to the system, the more blacks at the bottom are suffering. One has divided into two. At the same time that an African American has achieved the pinnacle of power—election to the Oval Office—we are also faced with the fact that the conditions for blacks and other have-nots at the bottom continue to deteriorate. So we have to get rid of kid gloves in examining and critiquing Obama.

SP: *Could you enumerate more clearly what “one dividing into two” means in terms of how we re-think these political questions?*

GLB: There are many examples of one dividing into two. For example, there was the Grassroots Leadership Conference in November 1963. As Malcolm began finding the personal conduct of Mr. Muhammad increasingly unacceptable, he also began to question black political unity. The high point of the Grassroots Leadership conference, which Jimmy chaired, was the distinction Malcolm made between “house Negroes” and “field Negroes.” That was one dividing into two.¹⁰

I also recall how the Detroit Black Power movement developed in the 1960s. While most people saw the movement as a struggle for access to positions at City Hall and in the state legislature, some of us began to think of power in terms of the majority black population at the grassroots creating a new kind of life, a new kind of living to address the questions of deindustrialization.

We also need to give more thought to the split that was emerging at the height of Black Panther Party prominence, between those Black Panthers committed to violent confrontations with the ‘pigs’ and those creating community-building breakfast programs, especially some of the women. Detroit’s Ron Scott, one of those community builders, has remained in the community, and is now leading the struggle to transform the “war zones” of our inner cities into “peace zones.” So one is dividing into two all the time, in every struggle.

SP: *Can you describe how that process of division is necessary in how movements mature?*

GLB: I have arrived at this understanding mainly because I have been part of so many movements over so many years. I joined the radical movement when the Russian Revolution was still fresh in people’s minds and radicals and progressives were struggling over whether the Soviet Union was still a workers’ state. During the Depression, if you were on a college campus in New York and you weren’t some kind of radical, Communist, Socialist, or Trotskyist, you were considered brain-dead—and you probably were. There was still some of that around when I worked with C.L.R. James in New York in the 1940s. But reality shifted again come World War II. Roosevelt had taken us into the war because there was no other way for him to create jobs; all his New Deal programs still left millions unemployed. So in the course of World War II, we became a nation that depended on the military-industrial complex for jobs, and during the mid-century years, that complex became a growing reality in the United States.

At the same time, World War II introduced new production technology—high-tech automation—that was eliminating millions of people from work, *reducing* the work force rather than expanding it, as Marx had anticipated. So we had to go beyond the thinking of Marx. It’s the constant changing of reality that forces us to begin thinking differently. You don’t begin thinking differently just because it would be nice to think differently.

SP: *You think differently because the conditions change.*

GLB: Yes. Reality is constantly changing.

SP: *I am wondering if you could speak more about changes in labor and industry and how they are raising new challenges and questions for us in terms of how we struggle.*

GLB: I think that one of the most fundamental questions facing us is how to begin ‘working’ rather than ‘laboring.’ Post-industrial production has created the opportunity and necessity to begin thinking seriously about this distinction. In the book *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*,¹¹ there is an article by Brian Milani which talks about how jobs have changed over the last hundred years. In Marx’s time in the nineteenth century, people had to labor so hard and were so exhausted from their jobs that they couldn’t think for themselves and needed radical parties. But gradually, as a result of workers’ struggles, the hours of work have been reduced, and work itself has become much more relational, not just occupied with the production of material things.

In their new book, *Commonwealth*,¹² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that production has become “bio-political.” In other words, it produces subjectivities—new subjective relations, new commonalities—as well as material things. There have been

tremendous transformations in production that not only make it possible for us to communicate 24/7, but also enable us to think much more subjectively about what kind of human beings we want and need to be and what kind of society we want and need to create. So work can become ennobling and life-giving, rather than just something done for a paycheck. For example, when you look at the growing number of health workers, you realize how relational they are to their clients. They produce charts and measurements, but the charts and measurements are only a minor part of what they produce. What is produced, hopefully, is a mutual social relationship—something that in the words of Hardt and Negri is “bio-political.” This new stage of “bio-political” production is what should be at the core of health care reform in our time—not changing health insurance.

SP: *As you have talked about previously, we have seen immense cultural changes since World War II. Materialism, mass consumption, suburbanization—we could list many of these forces. They have had many devastating and damaging consequences: the prison industry, crack cocaine, deindustrialization. Where do the questions of health—on mental, emotional, and spiritual levels—enter into our struggles and our theory-making, and in our relationships?*

GLB: I remember when violence and crime began to explode in the wake of the urban rebellions of the 1960s. It forced us to begin thinking more programmatically about what it means for young people who can no longer look forward to the kinds of jobs their parents had, jobs which enabled them to raise a family, buy a house and a car. All of a sudden, these young people were faced with the prospect of not being of any use. So a lot of them turned to drugs, burglary, and other petty crimes. But all the power structure could conceive of was a military response, the “War on Drugs,” which meant a war on young people. They could not see that a historic change had happened in the whole productive process, something that required us to think of people not just as laborers forced to work for a paycheck, but as *human beings* who need to be of use. There is a marvelous poem by Marge Piercy, that I quote very often, called “To Be of Use.”¹³ It ends with these two lines: “The pitcher yearns for water to carry/The person for work that is real.”

We didn’t take seriously enough the reality that automation had made millions of young people superfluous or expendable, which means that we are challenged to re-conceptualize the whole meaning of what it means to be a human being. The person yearns for work that is real; therefore, we have to re-conceptualize work. It was because we didn’t re-conceptualize work that we now have so many people on drugs, two million people in prison and many millions of ex-cons.

Malcolm was an ex-con who was able to begin transforming himself and to keep transforming himself until the day that he was killed. Because Malcolm’s transformation from a hustler and a convict is so much a part of my experience and the movement of the 1960s, I see the potential in other ex-cons to build on his legacy and undertake healing themselves and others. What I see happening at this point is that some ex-cons like Yusef Shakur are coming back into their neighborhoods and trying to give back. During the Martin Luther King weekend in January 2010, Yusef’s group, Urban Network, and Detroit-City of Hope are hosting an event to explore how we can heal ourselves, our families, and our communities in order to “bring the neighbor back into our ‘hoods.’”

SP: *What is the importance of healing in both personal and political work, especially in regard to relationships?*

GLB: I think that healing begins by recognizing how damaged we have become, how in the last thirty to forty years the American people have experienced a sharp decline in our humanity. Most Americans, including members of our families with whom we get together only or mainly on holidays, are living lives of quiet desperation. They are bitter and angry because the American Dream of never-ending upward mobility which we have been living has become a nightmare. This bitterness and anger are fueling the counter-revolution. We must be ready to listen to their stories and help them face the truth which they know but have been evading, that we have come to the end of the rainbow. If we listen patiently enough, we can help people discover their compassion, which is the way to create community. In other words, we should view the emergence of the “teabaggers” as both a danger and an opportunity to help “we the American people” transform ourselves by rediscovering our humanity.¹⁴

Most people do not realize that, until we consciously explore and embrace another philosophy, the way we think and act is still based on the philosophy of the society we live in—a racist, materialist, militarist, selfish, capitalist society. Seventy years ago, I wrote my dissertation on George Herbert Mead, the “Philosopher of the Social,” because I was drawn to his philosophy, that we create ourselves in and through communication with others—a very different philosophy from the dominant one in our society. In retrospect, I suspect that it was this idea which prepared me to leave the ivory tower of the university, become involved with the 1941 MOW movement, and out of that movement experience, decide to become a movement activist.

For an introduction to this new philosophy, I recommend reading the novels and essays of Charles Johnson, who studied the phenomenologists to obtain his PhD in philosophy before becoming a university professor and novelist. In “The End of the Black American Narrative,” Johnson explains that, with the emergence of Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell, and Barack Obama, we have come to the end of the American narrative of blacks as victims.¹⁵ So we need a new, much more complex story to help us discover the kind of organizing we need to do in this period.

Johnson provides one such narrative in his 1990 award-winning book *Middle Passage*, which is the drama of how a ship’s crew undergoes apocalyptic catastrophes from which a handful emerges transformed. *Middle Passage* is Melville’s *Moby Dick* for our time. The Pequod, a whaler, has become the Republic, a slave ship; Captain Ahab has become Captain Falcon; Ishmael has become Rutherford Calhoun, a newly-emancipated African American.¹⁶ A few years later, Johnson re-discovered Martin Luther King, which inspired him to write the novel *Dreamer* as well as articles on the significance of King’s concept of Love and community.¹⁷

In the 1990s, as we struggled with growing violence in Detroit, I also re-discovered Martin Luther King. I had identified much more with Malcolm in the 1960s and had viewed King’s non-violence as somewhat naïve. But decades later, I began studying King’s life and speeches, especially his 1967 anti-Vietnam war speech calling for a radical revolution in values against racism, materialism, and militarism. I was delighted to discover that Hegel had been King’s favorite philosopher. I also learned that after Watts erupted in 1965, King realized that he had not paid enough attention to urban youth, so he moved to Chicago to connect with them. In one of his last speeches, King said that what young people in our “dying cities” need are direct action projects that provide them with opportunities to change both their surroundings and themselves. Out of our own experiences and struggles, we in Detroit came to the same conclusion. So in 1992, we founded Detroit

Summer, an intergenerational, multicultural youth program to rebuild, redefine, and re-spirit Detroit from the ground up.¹⁸ And I began talking and writing more about King.¹⁹ In 2004 I became part of the Beloved Communities Initiative, which has been identifying and reporting on the very diverse groups who are creating forms of “beloved community” all around the country.²⁰

These are the alternatives that some people are creating in response to the materialism and militarism that now dominate our culture. Looking at the kind of human beings we have become, they are asking, “How is it that we have become so dehumanized, and what do we have to do to re-humanize ourselves?” It’s a wonderful opportunity to look at evolution and revolution in a very different way. I think often of Ardipithecus, the woman who emerged four and a half million years ago in Africa and whose fossil remains have been discovered and reconstituted. I see a kind of humanity in Ardi’s face that is not present in Lucy’s, who anthropologists believe emerged a million years later. I think that is because today’s paleontologists, reconstructing Ardi for our day and age, think about evolution not only in anatomical terms, but in human/psychological/spiritual terms. What looks out from Ardi’s eyes as they’ve reconstructed her is a very spiritual human being.

SP: *What does your own process of healing and spiritual development look like, especially after many losses and splits that have happened in your life?*

GLB: It was only a few years ago, in 2003, that I made a speech called “These Are the Times to Grow Our Souls” to an artists and activists convention in Flint. For most of my life, I *never* would have used the word ‘soul,’ because I thought of ‘soul’ only as a sort of substance, as a thing. But once I began to understand how we are undergoing what Martin Luther King called a “spiritual death,”²¹ I started to recognize that growing our souls means acting differently, based on radically different values. We need to recognize and begin acting from the power within us to create the world anew. We need to view the world not just with our bodies or minds, but with our hearts, and to be creating ways of acting from our hearts, from caring. We have to stop thinking of ourselves as Descartes²² did in the seventeenth century and Scientific Rationalists have done since—that is, only as physical bodies and rational, calculating minds.

SP: *Just about six months from now, your city will be hosting the next U.S. Social Forum and who knows how many other developments to come. What excites you the most about the present moment, and what are you looking forward to on the horizon?*

GLB: Yesterday I had a very interesting visit with a young woman from Chicago. We only talked for about an hour; it was the first time we met. She told me that her mother, who is an artist, warned her very early on never to let her ‘schooling’ interfere with her *education*. She also said that she gave up on Obama when he appointed Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education because she knew how he had acted in Chicago.²³

It’s just amazing to me how young people, like this woman—who’s only eighteen!—have arrived through their own experiences at such insights. Almost every week, someone like that shows up at the Boggs Center. That doesn’t mean that everyone else is like this young woman. But we have to stop thinking in terms of ‘everybody’ or ‘masses’ so much, and recognize that the leaders we’ve been looking for are here, among the people that we meet. Human beings are not like schools of fish, all shifting direction at the same time.

There are people constantly emerging who are seeing the world anew and can help the rest of us see it anew. A young woman of eighteen, coming out of Chicago, can give us another lens to look at the larger reality. That's what leaders do.

SP: *It sounds like that is a source of hope for you.*

GLB: We call the very loose network of grassroots groups that is emerging here “Detroit—City of Hope.” I think that Detroit embodies a lot of hope. The national and international media had been conditioned to think that Detroit was hopeless, that it was the end of the world. And yet, in the last few months, I've watched a big change taking place. Reporters and filmmakers come to Detroit and find hope in small things, as we have. They discover that we don't need huge buildings to give us hope. In fact, it's the huge abandoned buildings that signal the end of one epoch and provide us with the opportunity to begin a new one.

SP: *Seeing the world anew seems very much tied into creativity and vision, as you had mentioned with Einstein's quote that “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” How are you seeing creativity manifest among the leaders we have been looking for?*

GLB: I believe that movement builders have not thought enough about that statement by Einstein, which is essentially about epistemology. When he made the statement, Einstein was at the point in his own life when his contributions to the knowledge so prized by institutions and Western civilization had resulted in his being complicit in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So he warned that knowledge only informs us of the past, of what has already happened, whereas imagination opens our hearts and minds to the future, to what is possible, to what it is within our power to create. I have never forgotten the placards of French youth calling for “L'Imagination au Pouvoir” during the May-June 1968 revolt.²⁴ At the time, Jimmy and I were in Paris on our way back to the United States after a week of speaking engagements in Italy, followed by another week of discussions with exiled Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah in Guinea. These placards profoundly influenced the conversations in Maine which we began with Lyman and Freddy Paine soon after our return.²⁵

We have to understand that the closer you get to the corridors of power, to the Oval Office and Congress, the more you become a prisoner of the past. The closer you get to the marginalized, the grassroots and the groundlings, the greater your incentive to think imaginatively and ‘outside the box.’

SP: *So much of what you have touched on here is about the challenges facing ‘we’ as Americans, or ‘we’ as human beings, but as you have noted, thinking on those lines does not necessarily mean thinking of what ‘masses’ will have to do. You have spoken and written a lot about a quote from Margaret Wheatley: “Rather than worry about critical mass, our work is to foster critical connections.”²⁶ What does this mean to you, and what might it mean to us as we work towards change?*

GLB: This quote has helped me realize how most radicals are still stuck in Newton's quantitative way of knowing. That way of knowing was crucial to beginning the industrial revolution, but that was 300 years ago. Like our leaders in Washington, today's radicals

remain obsessed with size and mass. So they are still trying to mobilize masses or large numbers to gain enough force to take power from those in power. On the other hand, a quantum view, as Wheatley explains, enables us to think less about mass and organize more organically and locally, in terms of critical connections.

For example, it was only after the Montgomery Bus boycott of 1955–56, followed by the sit-in of four students at the Greensboro Woolworth's in 1960, and by small numbers of Freedom Riders defying segregated transportation in 1961, that we began to recognize the enormous power that a few committed visionaries have within them to change the world. All the great humanizing movements of the 1960s were inspired by a relatively small number of people.

We need to learn from that experience, although we should be wary of trying to repeat it today, because we are at a new place. At this time in the evolution of the human race, especially in the United States, organizing begins with quiet listening to the stories of others, so that our individual selves become interconnected, overcoming our solipsism and self-centeredness and, instead, becoming each other, and discovering within us the power to create the world anew.

NOTES

- 1 James Boggs (Jimmy), a black autoworker from Alabama, met Grace through the Third Layer School of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, formed with Raya Dunayevskaya and C.L.R. James after a series of splits in various Workers Parties, and is widely regarded today as one of the most important contributors to autonomist Marxist thought in the U.S. Jimmy and Grace were tireless in their discussions and organizing in Detroit, starting in the Black Power movement and extending in many directions since. Jimmy in particular is known for one of his many writings, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963), which was recently re-issued with a new introduction by Grace and commentaries by six other Detroit activists.
- 2 Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- 3 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) was one of the foremost German philosophers, known particularly for his examinations of the interconnectedness of subject and object in our understanding of knowledge and epistemology.
- 4 The *Theses on Feuerbach* were written by Marx in 1845 and published in 1888 after his death. His notes are focused on critiques of Young Hegelian philosophers like Ludwig Feuerbach. The concluding statement is translated thus: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” See Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, with appendix “Theses on Feuerbach” by Karl Marx (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), translated from the German edition of 1888.
- 5 Jo Ann Robinson was head of the Women's Political Council, originally formed as a civic organization for professional African American women. The Women's Political Council was the first group to officially call for the boycott of the Montgomery buses following Rosa Parks' arrest.
- 6 The United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Copenhagen from December 7 through December 18 of 2009. Over 1,000 climate change activists were arrested in actions planned during the event. The conference ended in disarray, yielding an accord that is not legally binding, nor capable of enforcing commitments made by various nations to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

- 7 President Barack Obama announced at West Point in December 2009 the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, including the deployment of 30,000 additional troops to the area.
- 8 Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Macmillan, 2008).
- 9 James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974). The book was reprinted again in 2008 with a new introduction written by Grace.
- 10 Grace discusses this incident more thoroughly in *Living for Change*, 128–9.
- 11 Bruce Milani, “From Opposition to Alternatives: Postindustrial Potentials and Transformative Learning,” in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning: Essays on Theory and Praxis*, eds. Edmund O’Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O’Connor, 47–58 (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
- 12 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2009).
- 13 Marge Piercy, *To Be of Use: Poems by Marge Piercy* (New York, Doubleday: 1973).
- 14 The “Tea Party” movement emerged in early 2009, a New Right formulation of communities and individuals alarmed by increased government spending in the economic crisis, in addition to a plethora of other issues. Though frequently disjointed, targeted for cooptation, and in a state of general disarray at the time of this publication, this movement illustrates a serious commitment to organizing a New Right base that deserves further attention.
- 15 Charles Johnson, “The End of the Black American Narrative,” *The American Scholar*, vol. 7, #3 (Summer 2008): 43–58.
- 16 Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Scribner, 1990).
- 17 Johnson, *Dreamer: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 1999).
- 18 More on Detroit Summer can be found at [HTTP://WWW.DETROITSUMMER.ORG](http://www.detroitsummer.org).
- 19 Examples include “From Marx to Malcolm and Martin,” *The Other Side* (Jan-Feb. 2003); “Recapture MLK’s Radical Revolutionary Spirit: Create Cities and Communities Of Hope,” talk given at Eastern Michigan University, January 15, 2007; “Let’s talk about Malcolm and Martin,” talk given at the Brecht Forum, May 4, 2007. A recorded copy of these speeches as well as others given by Grace from 1990 to 2009 is available at the Boggs Center in Detroit.
- 20 More on Beloved Communities Initiative can be found at [HTTP://WWW.BELOVEDCOMMUNITIES-NET.ORG](http://www.belovedcommunities-net.org).
- 21 From Martin Luther King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” April 4, 1967: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”
- 22 Rene Descartes (1596–1650) is considered the “Father of Modern Philosophy.” His ideas were a key influence in the development of scientific—and eventually political—rationalism.
- 23 Henry Giroux and Kenneth Saltman, “Obama’s Betrayal of Public Education? Arne Duncan and the Corporate Model of Schooling” (TruthOut, Dec. 17, 2008): [HTTP://WWW.TRUTHOUT.ORG/121708R](http://www.truthout.org/121708R). Arne Duncan previously served as CEO of Chicago Public Schools. “Duncan ... presided over the implementation and expansion of an agenda that militarized and corporatized the third largest school system in the nation, one that is about 90 percent poor and nonwhite. Under Duncan, Chicago took the lead in creating public schools run as military academies, vastly expanded draconian student expulsions, instituted sweeping surveillance practices, advocated a growing police presence in the schools, arbitrarily shut down entire schools and fired entire school staffs.”
- 24 “L’Imagination au Pouvoir” translates to “All Power to the Imagination” or “Let Imagination Rule.” For additional context and analysis, see George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left* (Boston: South End Press, 1987).

- 25 See Grace Lee Boggs, James Boggs, Freddy Paine, and Lyman Paine, *Conversations in Maine: Exploring our Nation's Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1978). Grace discusses these conversations further, as well as her and Jimmy's travels and meetings with Nkrumah, in *Living for Change*.
- 26 Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2001).