

# **Abe Osheroff: On the joys and risks of living authentically in the empire**

by Robert Jensen

Abe Osheroff is a heroic figure, but he isn't my hero. Osheroff is far too engaging, and engaged, to consign to such a fate.

Heroes tend to live under glass, removed from intimacy with the people and world around them; Osheroff remains in close contact with his world.

Another problem with heroes: It can be hard to argue with them, and I can't imagine giving up the pleasure of arguing with Osheroff.

Osheroff certainly could play the hero if he liked. At age 90, he's participated in some of the most important political moments and movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century -- from fighting with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, to the U.S. civil rights struggles in the segregated South in the 1960s, to the contemporary antiwar movement. And he's right out of central casting for the role of the aging-radical-who-never-gives-up: The white-haired rascal who moves seamlessly between passionate political analysis and anecdotes of past struggles, all in his gravely Brooklyn-accented speech peppered with enough profanity to set off a fire alarm.

But instead of a hero, in Osheroff I found something far more valuable: An ally and a friend. I found someone who was interested in being honest and self-critical, both about his life and the political movements to which he has belonged. Osheroff has little time for the politeness that constrains so much internal political discussion on the liberal/left. He sees one of his contributions to left/radical politics today to be mentoring younger activists, and in that endeavor his preferred tool is an intellectual hammer. He pounds away at political points with the same force that he drove nails as a working carpenter.

Osheroff loves to tell stories about the past, and it doesn't take much to start them rolling. But he's not mired in the past; conversations loop back to his personal history not to revel in the glory days, but to extract from those experiences lessons for the struggles ahead.

That past includes a long stint in the Communist Party, during which time he organized tenants, the unemployed, and workers. In 1937 he joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, the U.S. wing of the internationals fighting in Spain. After Pearl Harbor, he re-entered the fight against fascism with the U.S. Army in Europe. He spent part of the 1950s moving around the country semi-underground, avoiding the FBI's campaign to jail Communist Party members. After leaving the party in 1956 in the wake of revelations about the horrors of Stalinism and the Soviet crackdown in Hungary, Osheroff moved to California and got involved in community organizing against real estate developers on the Venice canals. In 1964 he went to Mississippi to help build a community center. He worked behind the scenes in the Vietnam antiwar movement in California. In 1985 he went to Nicaragua with the Lincoln Construction Brigade, which he organized to build housing with a campesino collective. Along the way he made two award-winning

documentary films about Spain and the legacy of the civil war, “Dreams and Nightmares” in 1974 and “Art in the Struggle for Freedom” in 2000. He also has taught history classes on the subject at UCLA and the University of Washington.

Living in Seattle since 1989, he and his wife, Gunnel Clark, are both active in that city’s antiwar movement. Osheroff continued to give talks at universities and high schools until several spinal surgeries made it increasingly difficult for him to travel. That physical limitation led to his most recent project, the Peace Mobile. He raised the money to equip a van with a sound system and weather-proof posters to create a traveling outreach center. He hopes eventually to add projection equipment to show films anywhere, as well as computers and copiers to produce fliers on site at events. But a big part of the draw of the project is that he will be able -- sitting in the passenger seat with microphone in hand -- to keep talking to people about justice and peace.

Osheroff intends to keep at it as long as his body holds out.

“My ship is slowly sinking, but the cannons keep firing,” Osheroff says. “Or, here’s another way to say it: I have one foot in the grave but the other keeps dancing.”

I met Osheroff in 2000 when he came to the University of Texas at Austin to lecture. A second visit to Austin in 2001 led to correspondence and a trip to Seattle in the summer of 2005 to record some of Osheroff’s insights. Our conversation roamed over a wide range of subjects political and philosophical, from the planetary to the personal, and I left with a deeper appreciation for Osheroff’s analysis and honesty. In a world driven by fear, Osheroff is one of those rare people who is willing to tell you to your face what he thinks of you, and then can turn that scrutiny on himself. In the conversation that follows, Osheroff demonstrates what it means to love the world deeply enough to be willing to tell the truth.

[The following is an edited transcript of a conversation in the Seattle home of Abe Osheroff, June 17-18, 2005.]

### *Authenticity in life and politics*

**Robert Jensen:** I want to start with a term that is often used without much thought about what it might really mean -- authenticity. What does that word mean to you?

**Abe Osheroff:** Authenticity is incredibly important. To me, authenticity comes when your thoughts, your words, and your deeds have some relation to each other. It comes when there’s a real organic relationship between the way you think, the way you talk, and the way you act. You have to fight for authenticity all the time in this world, and if you don’t fight for it you will get derailed. But when you have it, when you feel that surge of recognition -- that I’m saying exactly what I’m thinking, and I’m ready to do something about it -- well, that’s an intellectual and emotional orgasm that makes sex look like nothing.

I talk about it that way to audiences, especially to kids, because it draws them in. They giggle because I mentioned sex. But they think about it. Some of those kids in that audience know what I'm trying to tell them. They're smart, and they come up afterwards and ask me about it. They ask me, "How do I follow that path?" And they realize that if they follow that path they will have to make choices. So they ask me, "What do I do when I come to a crossroads in life and I have to make a choice that means sacrifice and pain?"

I tell them that, first, it's good that they are thinking about these things. Some people are afraid to think, because thinking can present problems. When you have thoughts, you have to decide what to do with them. We can save them and take them to a therapist, or we can go to a bar and drink them away, or we can talk about them. But immediately we have to deal with self-censorship. Talking honestly can have consequences. Take an easy example. If you're involved in a relationship and there's something bothering you about the relationship, and you tell the other person your thoughts, that may be the end of the relationship. You're in a funny bind because if you talk about it you may risk the relationship, but if you don't talk about it you know that down the road the same problem will be there. What do you do? Authenticity is about making that decision.

Then once you've said something, the question is, "What are you going to do about it?" A lot of people don't do anything. Trying to be authentic is another way of saying you are struggling to let out the best part of who you are, the part that will act and take risks. We all have a choice: We can choose to be made by history, or we can choose to participate in making history.

**RJ:** Do you remember the first time you felt that authenticity as a young person?

**AO:** No, I didn't realize what this meant until my later years. As a kid I don't even remember understanding that kind of concept. And when I was in the Communist Party, I was too absolutely devoted to the party to be really authentic.

**RJ:** When you talk about yourself and the party, it sounds like there was always a struggle inside you, between your rebellious nature and your loyalty to the party. I wonder if you were always a communist with the soul of an anarchist. You were in this rigid institutional structure, but a rebel at heart.

**AO:** I suppose I am more of an anarchist than a communist, and always have been. You're right -- as young man I was rebellious. I hated authority and didn't like to be told what to do by my mother, my teachers, or anybody else. And, living in a poor part of New York, immigrant community, I also had a built-in social conscience. We saw people suffering every day. My family was relatively well off, compared to others in the neighborhood, and we ate fairly regularly. My father was a very skilled worker. But a lot of people around us were not living very well. I remember once when I saw a man eating out of a garbage can, when I was 13 or so. I ran upstairs and said to my parents, "Mama, papa, there's a man eating out of a garbage can." My mother disappeared into the kitchen and started filling a paper bag with food. My father sat down and said, "Well, what can I tell you, son. When you get a little older, you'll understand. It's too much for a young boy." And I said, "No, I want to know now." I wanted an honest answer.

**RJ:** When did feel like you started to find an answer?

**AO:** A year or two later I learned why people were eating out of garbage cans, why people were being put out on the street with their furniture when the Depression hit. I got an education quickly. Part of it came through my first activism. In 1930 I had organized a club, the Brownsville Athletic and Cultural Club, which had two activities: We pumped iron and we listened to classical music, kind of a weird combination. One day a member of the Young Communist League came to me and said, "I have a way you guys can help the community. When people are evicted and put onto the street, you get your guys and take the furniture right back in." So we did that. It was a great form of activism, a way to help people immediately. The landlords would eventually give in. But of course sooner or later, we were bound to get busted. I was young and tempestuous, and me and two other guys beat the shit out of a cop who tried to stop us. That was serious business, and the cops weren't happy.

**RJ:** You got arrested? Beaten up?

**AO:** Not beaten, really more tortured by the cops, for about 72 hours. That's one kind of lesson in this world, about power. But the important thing I want to get to is that I was sort of preconditioned for becoming a communist because -- whatever everyone thinks about the communists, and looking back I can be pretty critical -- the one thing they did was furnish a reasonable explanation for why that man was eating out of the garbage can, and why the landlords were putting people in the street, and they're the only ones who did it. The Democrats didn't do it. The Republicans didn't do it. The Communist Party appealed to anyone who was a thinking or relatively sensitive young man. So I got involved in the Young Communist League, and that led to me to going to Spain and fighting fascism there. It was all part of the same thing.

But before I ever knew what to label myself, I was already a radical humanist, and the communists were the closest thing to that. That was also the reason I left the party in 1956. You could no longer believe the party was radical or humanist. The Soviet Union, which had really been like a shining beacon to me until then, became really an evil society in many, many ways. So, for a lot of us, it was like the CP left us, not us leaving the party.

**RJ:** What was it like, making that break with the Communist Party?

**AO:** That was a tough period after leaving. I felt hopeless, didn't know which way to turn. For two years, I agonized. I didn't know what to do. I didn't just leave the party, I had to break with some of my closest, dearest colleagues and friends, some of whom even denounced me. That was devastating. People with whom I'd shared all kinds of experiences -- the brigades in Spain, jail, all kinds of shit -- now pointed a finger and said, "You've become an enemy of the working class." But eventually I came out of that, and I became aware of the beginnings of the civil-rights movement, which appealed to me a great deal, and I began to raise money for them. But just raising money didn't feel right, it wasn't enough. So I looked around to find a way to do more.

**RJ:** Before we talk about your time in Mississippi, I want to ask you more about this notion of authenticity and empathy, their role in politics.

**AO:** You can't keep yourself walled off from the pain of the world and expect to be a whole person, let alone a useful person politically. If you look out the window and see a hungry, emaciated child and do not feel -- not just pain, but a desire to do something to make the world a little better -- then you're not a complete human being, in my book anyway. There's something missing in you that makes a person complete -- empathy, compassion, the ability to feel the pain of another, whatever you want to call it. That's the starting point. From there you have to do something about what you feel. And there's a difference between real activism that flows from that, and all kinds of pseudo-activism.

**RJ:** What is pseudo-activism?

**AO:** Pseudo-activism is for people who occasionally do something useful only because it makes them feel good, but it has to be public so that others know they are good people. True activism involves public or private activity and expression under any and all conditions, including when you won't get recognition. You're driven to do it because you have no choice; you have to do it because there's something in you that needs nourishing.

**RJ:** Is the professor you mentioned a pseudo-activist?

**AO:** You can take this as a criticism, an indictment, of your profession, but most academics aren't worth shit as activists. You're overpaid, and you still all complain about the workload. I was lucky. I got out of the academic game early. What saved my ass was becoming a carpenter. Not only that, but I was a top-notch carpenter. I could work anywhere and make good money. I didn't have to worry about the boss not liking my politics, because most of them cared about your work, not your politics.

The fact is that I have contempt for most of academia. Not just criticism, but contempt for it as an institution. I know there are some wonderful teachers here and there, but to me the universities are mostly dead rocks. There are some diamonds and some gold that you can discover, but basically it's a fucking dead rock. I have a professor friend who tells me about his investment in his career. Yea, well while academics are doing their thing, some guys were down in a hole in the ground digging coal and making concrete and building your houses. Let's think about those people. Don't talk to me about your fucking investment. Academia was not too difficult a road. There are things worse than having to sit up at night and read books. Try 'em. Go out and dig a hole in the ground every fucking day, eight hours a day, and then you come back and we'll talk about it. I'm a little extreme, I must admit, but just the word academia makes me growl.

### ***Love and anger in politics and life***

**RJ:** It's interesting that you talk about your politics rooted in a connection to others, but you don't hesitate to talk harshly about others or to highlight things you think you do well, whether political work or carpentry. If someone called you harsh and arrogant, how would you respond?

**AO:** There's a difference between self-confidence and arrogance, which is self-confidence that's not well-founded. But, I have to tell you that I actually prefer being with arrogant people as long as the arrogance has some kind of foundation. That's much better than being with people who have no reason in the world to be arrogant -- stupid people. As for being harsh, well, after 90 years and a lot of work, I figure I've earned the right to say whatever the fuck I want to.

**RJ:** Empathy also comes bundled with a little bit of anger in you, yes?

**AO:** Nothing wrong with anger. But as I kid I was so angry I was dangerous. In high school, I was dangerous. There was no high school in my neighborhood in Brooklyn. So I had to take a trolley, ride five miles, to Erasmus Hall. There were three Jewish kids in that school, and life was hell for us. Those fuckers -- teachers and students -- treated us like shit. I was lucky because I already was very physical, and the Catholic kids wouldn't fuck with me too much. But I experienced extreme loneliness, and I did some things that were, under law, seriously punishable. I set fire to the school and did all kinds of shit, because I was very angry. Becoming an activist at 15, 16, gave me something to do with my anger. It was like a big valve that allowed me to be angry without blowing up.

So my first activity as a political activist -- with that mother and her children who were sitting on the sidewalk crying with their furniture sitting around them after being evicted -- was joyful. When my friends and I took that furniture back up into the apartment, it was wonderful, very healing. That was real solidarity. That's another term that means something to me, solidarity. When I hear the term chanted it makes me sick -- solidarity forever and such. Solidarity became early in my life defined as compassion for others in action, whether it was through trade unions or helping neighbors. It's beyond a political slogan. It's almost an abomination hearing people singing about solidarity who don't know shit about what it means. But at a very early age, I learned that solidarity is love in action. And if it's not an action, I don't give a shit about what you claim to love. Any kind of love without expression and action is bullshit.

**RJ:** There are different kinds of love, of course, including love for the people we know best in our lives -- our friends and family. What happens when that political love-in-action might conflict with obligations we might feel to those specific people we love in our lives?

**AO:** When I went to work in Holmes County, Mississippi, to build a community center, which was in 1964, I had three children. I moved with the understanding of my wife at the time; she agreed with what I was doing. At that point our baby girl was a year old, and the boys were 3 and 5. When I look back upon that, I can hardly believe that I did that the way I did it. I have mixed feelings about whether I would have gone had I thought about it the way I now think I should have, by thinking about the possible consequences.

**RJ:** For your kids?

**AO:** Sure. They asked, "Where is dad?" You cannot explain that to little kids. Daddy's just not there. It did damage. What disturbs me is not so much that I did it -- that I left for so long for political work and that I did damage -- but that it didn't enter my head to consider the consequences. I never thought of what it meant. That's how fucking political I was. Some people use their family responsibilities as an excuse for why they don't do anything, but there's got to

be some balance. Mine might be an extreme case, but I think that many activists -- the real dedicated activists -- suffer to some degree from similar things, from a kind of tunnel vision, an inability to calculate the consequences of your conduct, for people you care about and love and whose future will be somehow affected by your choices.

**RJ:** Looking back, do you think you did the wrong thing by going to Mississippi for so long? Or the other ways in which political activism took you away?

**AO:** I did the wrong thing by not thinking about it. And if I had thought about it, I don't know whether I would have gone or not. I think activists must think about how relationships -- including marriage and children -- relate to activism. Raising good kids, for example, is a contribution to a better world.

### *Black and white*

**RJ:** But you did go, to Holmes County. How did that come about?

**AO:** When I left the Communist Party, I also left New York and went as far away as I could and landed in California. I was working as a carpenter, but I realized I had more to offer. I was articulate as well as being a very skilled worker. So, when people were organizing the Freedom Summer, I became involved. I went down to Jackson, Mississippi, and met with Bob Moses [of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, one of the key organizers of the movement]. I told him that I wanted to come down and make a hands-on contribution. One of the problems the movement had then is that they didn't even have a place to meet in some of the rural areas. I told them I wanted to help create such a thing, that I would raise all the money, that I would provide the skilled labor, but I needed the community to help. And I wanted to know that if the center was really threatened, I was in a community where the people were willing to defend it. So he took me on a tour of three different places. I met Fannie Lou Hamer [another legendary organizer, known for, among other things, her work with SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party], and she didn't need me. She was a powerhouse and had more than I could offer her.

Then I came upon this community in Holmes County, where the movement was based on small, individual farmers who had gotten 40 acres and a mule in the early Roosevelt days. I put it boldly to them. I said, "I want to come down. I want to do this. I'll need a lot of physical help. And I also want to know that if somebody comes along and wants to bomb the place, you guys will do what you can to stop them." They agreed. It had become widely known that the black people of Holmes County were pacifists -- until you shot at them. And then they shot back. It was great. So, I went back to Moses and I told him what I wanted to do. And then I came back to California in early spring of '64, and I quickly raised about \$30,000 for materials.

I also told the community that the condition I attached to my work was that I would never come to a political meeting and judge them, and I would not permit the leaders from Jackson to come out and tell me what to do and not to do. The only people I would listen to would be the people I

was working with. I never attended a single fucking political meeting for that project, and it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful, a very happy time in my life.

**RJ:** Did you ever feel part of that community, as a white guy in a black world?

**AO:** You know, to be a white person and love or to be loved by a black person, that's very rare. There are very few whites who have had that, including whites in civil-rights circles. If you do experience it, it's beautiful. Because that's the closest you come to this world you want to build. When you break down that fucking wall, just momentarily even, it's beautiful. And most white people will never know it, because if you have 20 black people in a room having a meeting, the minute you walk in their conversation changes.

But I did become part of that black community when I was in Mississippi. It wasn't my community, but they let me in. The only time I was comfortable in that period was when I was around my black friends. When I went into white Mississippi, I was scared shitless. That was hostile territory. I felt safe when I came back to the place where I lived and worked. Everywhere else I faced danger at every little town on the way. They used to chase me like in the movies, with their pickup trucks with the shotgun, the rebel flag and they would try to run me off the road, laughing, drunk.

**RJ:** What did you do in response to those kinds of attacks or challenges? Did you ever fight back?

**AO:** Sometimes yes, sometimes no. And there was one really crazy thing I did. I was in Jackson and tried to register at a hotel, and the clerk saw that I had a civil-rights button on my shirt. So he says, "I'm not going to register you. The goddamn law says that we have to take niggers in this hotel now, but that means black niggers. We don't accept white niggers." And he refused to register me. So, I went back to the movement headquarters and there were a couple of young lawyers there. I said that for reasons I couldn't tell them, I needed them to register in that hotel and get me a room, and they did it.

Then I went back and I went up the backside of the hotel, because I wouldn't have made it through the lobby. I got in the room and must've taken three or four baths, and I lay down on the clean sheets. Man, that was heaven, because I had been sleeping on a straw mattress. I spent the night, and then I went to the lumber yard and bought supplies -- a sack of concrete, a bag of nails and other things, with some cutting tools. And I proceeded to fuck up that room. I wrecked the television set, which was easy. Then I went to work on the electrical system and practically destroyed the electrical boxes, which were set in concrete walls. Then I packed the toilet full with nails and rapid-set concrete, which meant the only one way they could take care of it would be to jackhammer around the whole fucking thing under the floor to get to it. They had these cheap velvet paintings that I slashed. I fucked up the water supply, the electric, the TV, the radio, the furniture. I destroyed the joints of the bed. I slashed the carpet into bits. And the final thing I did was to peel back a piece of the carpet, take a shit and then, in my own shit, write on the wall, "white nigger strikes again." It felt so good, even though I could have gotten lynched. Then I snuck down the back, got into my pickup and raced for home, and I didn't feel safe 'till I got there. When I got there and I told this story, to people who had never been inside a hotel, so they

couldn't fully appreciate what I had done, but they were rolling on the fucking floor. That was such a wonderful experience.

**RJ:** Not to interrupt that story, but do you ever get criticized for being a white guy and using the word "nigger"?

**AO:** Let me tell you a story about that. This is when I was a kid, before going to Spain. I went down to help organize miners in Pennsylvania in the formation of the CIO, in the early days when the union hated Communists but were willing to use us for free labor. I was Jewish, and that was a problem, too. But I managed to break in because one of the things that the miners, and steel workers in particular, did a lot in bars was hand wrestling, and until about five years ago, I had never suffered defeat in that. So, they accepted me, and said, "Hey, you're not like a Jew-boy at all," and that kind of shit.

One day, the mine operators locked out the workers, who were planning to strike. The miners were picketing the mine, and across the road was the National Guard. The officer in charge of the National Guard, a young pipsqueak of a guy, was trying to provoke the miners so he could have a reason to beat the shit out of them. And he singled out a black miner and baited him in particular, trying to provoke him into some sort of activity. Behind this black miner was a white guy marching, and he was like a cartoon of a redneck. I mean, he was as redneck as they come. So they baited this black guy, but they didn't get a rise out of him. He maintained his calm and his dignity. At the height of this officer baiting the black guy, the redneck suddenly whips out a revolver, and he says to the military guy, "If you don't stop fucking around with this nigger, I'll blow your brains out." Those exact words, and he was very convincing.

That evening we were at the union hall, having some shitty coffee and stale bread, and with me was a friend of mine from New York, Eddie, another Jewish kid but very small. He didn't fit at all. So Eddie walks up to this giant of a redneck and he says, "That was a very brave thing you did today," and the guy looks at him, "What do you mean, brave? I'm in the union, ain't I?" He didn't think what he had done was so special. Then Eddie said, "But you also did something terrible." "What did I do that's so terrible?" "You called a fellow union brother a nigger." "Well, he ain't a white man." At which point, the black guy comes walking up, puts his hand on Eddie's shoulder, and says, "Son, them were the sweetest words I ever heard."

To me that was a very profound story. I came home and told it to a group of left-liberal friends. You know what they got hung up on? That I said the word "nigger." I told them, "Don't you get what I'm trying to tell you? Do you want me to translate the fucking thing for you? It's a beautiful example of what we want people to understand." But to them, I committed a crime because I used the word nigger. Well, when I worked in Mississippi, to call a white man a nigger was a compliment because most white people couldn't be niggers if they wanted to be.

**RJ:** Back to the hotel story. Why did you do it?

**AO:** To deal with my rage. I was furious. I couldn't call a meeting with the hotel manager or stage a demonstration -- none of the usual activities were possible. So, I did it out of rage, to do damage to my enemy. It was a form of warfare. It was a guerilla attack. The fact is, to this day,

when I think of it, that was great. I didn't hurt any people, but I was fucking up their property. I caused what today would have been a \$40,000 repair job. I have to admit that when I was writing "white nigger strikes again" I was bubbling with joy, mixed with the fear. I had a bunch of those experiences where I only felt safe when I was back in that community, because the whites couldn't get me there.

**RJ:** Were you ever afraid for your life?

**AO:** There was one time when someone overheard a plantation owner and a deputy sheriff making arrangements to get rid of me. I mean, bump me off. The reaction of the elders of that community was, "Abe, you've got to get out of here. We don't want you killed. We appreciate what you're doing, but not at the cost of getting yourself killed." And I said, "Do you realize what'll happen if I do that? They're going to come here and bust your asses. You'll be in a worse position in many ways." So they put a bodyguard on me -- this is hard to conceive of, a black body guard for a white guy in Mississippi. He was tough; it would have taken the sheriff and 14 deputies to stop him. He was armed, and so was I. I had a carpenter's toolbox, and in it I had a shotgun, and they gave me a .38 and a holster, and we publicized it.

I also had Hartman Turnbow on my side. I was staying with him, and we became very close to each other. He was a legend -- the first black guy to attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. His house was full of bullet holes because he got attacked regularly. And he used to look at the holes in the wall and say, "I live in the most air-conditioned house in Mississippi." When he heard about the plot to kill me, he said, "Abe, I'm going to go see the sheriff, and you're coming with me." We walked into the courthouse, and the sheriff addresses him by his first name, which was typical. Hartman doesn't respond. He stands there. And the sheriff says, "I just talked to you. Did you hear me? Why don't you answer me?" Hartman says, "I won't answer you until you call me by my name," meaning his last name. The sheriff finally calls him by his last name, and Hartman says, "Sheriff, I'm here to register a complaint. I heard that one of your assistants and others are planning to kill my friend. No, he's more than my friend, he's my brother. Anybody that's going to deal with my brother is going to deal with Turnbow. And you know sheriff, it ain't no secret that I don't allow such things to happen. Now you better straighten this thing out 'cause somebody going to get hurt. There's going to be one dead man, and it could very well be" -- and then he names the deputy sheriff. Then Hartman imperiously turns his back on him, grabs me by the arm and starts walking out. I'm waiting for them to cut us in half. And Hartman says, "Don't worry, Abe, they're chicken shit. You notice, they come around at night and shoot us up. They ain't shot in the daytime in a long time. Not in this neighborhood, not in this community." He was right. But I was scared shitless. Later I told him that he had risked our lives. Hartman said, "Yeah, I done risked our lives, but I'd risk more if I didn't do that." I said, "What would you have risked?" He said, "I'm Turnbow, and I'm never going to let them white trash forget it." And that's who he was.

God, we had an incredible relationship. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before or since. I would risk my life for him. I really loved him. He was crude. He was rough. He was mildly undemocratic. There was only one chairman in all the meetings, and when he called for a vote there were very few people who didn't vote with him. He was dangerously authentic.

**RJ:** Dangerously authentic?

**AO:** Well, he was acting on feelings and thoughts that were very important to him to a point where he actually risked losing his life and the lives of others. He wouldn't back down. There was no negotiating when it got to that. If you hit him in that area, his dignity, there was no compromise. There was no give or take. You either backed off or you assaulted him. And assaulting him was truly dangerous.

Hartman was a phenomenon, but his end was a very sad one, which says a lot about movements. He was a pioneering figure when they needed an ice-breaker. But when they won the initial victories and had to develop a different political strategy, he was a total loss, and little by little he fell out of center position, and finally was almost disregarded. Then he got very sick, diabetes, lost a leg. I went to visit him, and he died not long after. They gave him a beautiful funeral to which hundreds and hundreds of people came. But he had gone from being a spearhead of a movement to being rejected. When you read books, his name comes up occasionally because when he attempted to register to vote, they firebombed his house that night. He's a part of that history in Mississippi.

**RJ:** Is that inevitable? The people who have the qualities it takes at the beginning of a project ...

**AO:** Are totally different than what is needed later. Yes, often the case. There are a few people who know how to make that transition. Hartman didn't have that. He had no people skills. The word diplomacy didn't register with him. He was totally authentic -- he had no tricks, no game plan. But you need a little bit of that stuff when you're building a movement.

### ***Building political movements in an affluent society***

**RJ:** Let's talk about movement building, about the tension between the need for people like Turnbow, with all that energy and passion, and the need for discipline and organization. For years you were a member of the CP, which was highly disciplined and organized. After leaving, you've mostly worked on your own politically -- with people, in groups, but not in that kind of disciplined organization. Is there a way to balance this? Can we have structures that bring people in and organize the energy, without restricting and limiting people in the way institutions sometimes do?

**AO:** Well, we may never achieve that. It may not be possible to balance those things. In fact, it's not sensible to believe it can be achieved. Rather than a goal you think we'll get to, it's a direction in which we have to move, to build a movement that keeps those things in balance. But I have to tell you, at this moment, I can't think of a movement that I would want to be a member of.

**RJ:** Do you mean a recognizable political movement in the U.S.?

**AO:** In the U.S. at the moment, I have two options. I can do what I'm doing, which is working somewhat independently, or I can quit. There's no movement that exists out there for me to join. The way I look at my work, frankly, I feel like I'm helping -- together with others -- to plant the

seeds for a different type of movement. To me, a lot of my work is a seeding operation. What I think we need is -- something that's always been absent in American political life -- is a conscious attention to activism as a way of life and as a vehicle toward achieving some kind of structure for society which will be of use, historically. Right now, that structure does not exist, and it will not come into being by declaration, or by a handful of people desperate to have some kind of movement who institutionalize one. There's no basis for that right now in this country.

**RJ:** No basis for...

**AO:** A movement, a real movement. There are a lot of people in motion, doing all kinds of things. But there's nothing that represents them -- not the Communist Party or the civil-rights movement, or anything like that. There's a void.

**RJ:** Do you mean that there just doesn't happen to be an existing structure, or that the conditions are such that you don't think one is possible right now? I agree there's no movement in any serious sense. But are you saying you think the conditions are such that one can't exist right now?

**AO:** I think right now it's kind of fruitless to work at creating such a thing, at least for me. It seems to me there's no way in the world it could happen right now. If others see it, I'd love to learn about it, but I don't see it.

**RJ:** What's missing that makes that impossible right now?

**AO:** Well, the big thing that makes everything difficult is that the so-called movement in our country consists basically of middle-class people, who are fairly comfortable. That's what most of the movement is. And such a movement has its value, but it's not exactly a durable basis for building things. I'm not going to negate it; there's a great deal happening. But it cannot result in real positive growth. We have a thing here in Seattle called SNOW -- Sound Nonviolent Opponents of War, as in Puget Sound. It's based on consensus. It became a wheel, with spokes, a coalition with no hub, no axle, and it's in a constant state of crisis and disarray. I mean, we don't deserve the reputation we've got in Seattle for activism.

**RJ:** When you say middle-class, is it U.S. affluence that stands in the way of a real movement?

**AO:** I think that's part of it. I sometimes get a bit sick and tired of Americans; I view most of them as spoiled babies. People on their way to a restaurant won't just say, "It'll be nice that we get to have a meal." They'll say, "I'm starving." That's not an accident; it's because their experience of suffering is that being a little hungry feels like they are starving, because most have never come close to starving. Very few Americans are really at dead ends. There are some places, some people, like the ones living in Appalachia maybe or places like that, who don't have much hope. But in general, we're a soft people. We can't blame them for it, but it's a fact that as a country right now we don't know what the fuck human suffering is about. Americans can be just as good and as generous and as warm-hearted as any other people, but they have many things that cushion them from that experience.

**RJ:** How can we overcome that problem of affluence?

**AO:** Well, the first thing is to do as much as you can by personal example, though I never totally succeeded. I still feel guilty about living in this house, for example.

**RJ:** This house you're in, which is a very modest bungalow?

**AO:** Yeah, but this house can certainly support more than two people. When I was a kid we had a one-bedroom apartment with no private bathroom for four people, and we had a good life. We thought it was pretty good. My mother could turn the handle and water would come out, and she had just come from a place where she had to walk a half a mile with a couple of buckets. You know, people on welfare in America have a richer life than more than half of the people in the world. We have to remember that once in a while.

**RJ:** There's a UN statistic that half the people in the world live on less than \$2 a day.

**AO:** That means they don't have clean water, they don't have medical attention, they sleep on the fucking ground. In the U.S., we whine all the time, but a skilled worker in this country lives like aristocrats used to live. They buy cars, buy a house.

**RJ:** So is this the problem of greed? Is that simply an enduring reality, that people will...

**AO:** I don't want to put it that way.

**RJ:** Then should we call it self-interest? You're saying that whatever calculation we make, our own self-interest is going to be part of the mix?

**AO:** Exactly, exactly. We have to get people to understand that it is in their self-interest not to yield to that crasser kind of greed. Let me give you an example. When I was young I was offered an uncontested seat in Congress by the Democratic Party in Brooklyn. This was an era in which there was no Republican Party there, and the machine decided who the candidate would be. They came to me and said, "You are our next congressman. All you've got to do is publicly separate from what you've been doing."

**RJ:** Which would have meant denouncing the Communist Party, to which you belonged at the time, yes?

**AO:** Yes, and even more than that. But that was pretty easy for me to turn down because at that point my Marxism was almost an obsession, almost a religious experience. But later, when I lived in California, in Venice, I had a much tougher decision. We fought a land redevelopment project, a multi-multi million-dollar project. We lost, but we held them at bay for about seven or eight years and protected that community for those years. These were very poor people living on the banks of shitty canals, but it was in many ways a nice place to live, and it had a good community life.

During that battle, a member of City Council offered me a bribe. In a very private discussion, isolated from any possibility of observation, he offered me two corner lots in the canals, which today would go for between \$2 and \$5 million. They offered me a house built to my specifications. They offered me a dock and two boats, sail and motor. And I'll tell you, it took me a hard, painful night to turn that down.

**RJ:** If you had taken it, the deal would have been you that would abandon the organizing? And that was an offer you had to think about before saying no?

**AO:** That's it. I was the principal organizer in that struggle. And I did think about it. I was very tempted. It appealed to a side of me that wasn't totally gone. I'd love to get into a powerful position. I'd love to design the house I'm going to live in. I love the idea of my kids being guaranteed certain things. There's a part of me -- it's not a big part of me, but I was surprised to find that it was still a part of me -- that wanted all that shit. And if it's a part of me, with my politics and background, then it's a bigger part of a lot of other people. I could see that my real self-interest was with the people in my community, that was where love and affection come from, but it was tempting.

### *Human nature and "enlightened selfishness"*

**RJ:** Let me push this a bit. There are two different paths to go down here. One is to say to people, "Listen, I understand that you want all these material things, but if you put aside that greed there is something in the long run that will serve you better." Or you could say, "I know you want these things, but you have to train yourself not to want them because they aren't of any real value." Which is politically more effective and more realistic?

**AO:** I recognize that people want these things, and I'm saying there is something else that is even more valuable. You don't have to get rid of the instinct for material things to do this. You begin to practice, to learn that it's more rewarding to pursue a path that brings real love and affection. Everybody needs love. Everybody needs affection. Everybody needs validation. It's a central problem of human life, and very few people really get those things.

**RJ:** I'm not sure I agree. Let me tell you what motivated the question. Someone might say, "I'd really like a fancy car, but I'm going to commit my life to activism and I know I'm never going to get that kind of car." But I never wanted a big car in the first place. I don't mean that I live like a pauper. I make more money than I need. I eat regularly and well, and I have an apartment to myself. I'm incredibly privileged. But I live in the same little apartment that I've lived in for 10 years, and people who come to visit often say, "You can afford it now, so why don't you buy a house?" The truth is that I don't want a house. I never wanted a house. I feel like my one-bedroom apartment is too big.

My point is, as long as people want the goodies, the perks of affluence, for most the temptation will be too great. Should we be challenging people to rethink the value of those things, not only in relation to other choices but in some more fundamental way? Is the politics of reducing

consumption not just about being ecologically more responsible, but about creating a way of life that is more likely to sustain people in radical political activity, making it more likely they'll resist the goodies, because they see that the goodies don't mean much?

**AO:** You see, we come from different places. I don't know where you come from, but I grew up in the slums...

**RJ:** I didn't grow up rich. It was lower middle class when I was young, and eventually middle class. But I understand your point: It's easy to not want lots of things when you've never really been deprived of the basics of life. And I've certainly never gone hungry or been homeless, or been threatened with anything like that.

**AO:** I lived my youth in a place that didn't have hot running water, didn't have electricity. Radio had been invented, but we didn't even have a Victrola. I lived in an environment in which we weren't destitute, but we sure didn't have a lot of money. I lucked out by becoming a leftist, because it opened up another path that wasn't about money. So when I faced that bribe, I discovered there was a part of me that wanted the money, but luckily there was something else I wanted more of, something I had learned about through leftist politics. And I can articulate that now, even if I couldn't always: The only thing in human life you can give away and not be left with less is love and affection. It's simple, but not everyone understands this. If I give you a little of my money, I have a little less. If I give you a lot of my money, I have much less. That's true of many other material things I can give you. But if I give you love and affection, I don't have less, I have more. It's the only thing in human relations that is guaranteed to grow like that. I've learned that the hard way, and I still have, even at this rate, things to learn about it. But that's at the center of what I try to teach activists -- the importance of the role of love.

**RJ:** That sounds a lot like therapeutic talk.

**AO:** I don't care what the fuck it sounds like, it's true. What should we value more than material comfort? Love and affection, respect and validation. I'm lucky because I'm bathed in it all the time, as a result of my political activism. And it's one of the big motivations for what I do. It's one of the things that keeps me going, even though my life these days is dominated by pain, very often physical agony, because of the spinal surgeries. I spend most of my day here in this chair, reading or on the phone, sometimes watching a movie, because I can sit in this chair in a way that relieves some of my pain a little bit. This would be impossible if I didn't have what I'm talking about, that love. Without it, I'd be just a lonely old man in pain, suffering like most. And I'd be worrying about my pain medication, which alone is \$600 a month, and insurance and all that shit. But I'm not. I have an incredible old age. Nobody I know at my age has this kind of life. I can't think of anything that's more important to a human being than having that. No other form of success can match that.

When I used to talk at schools, I would tell kids that I'm richer than Bill Gates. It stops the audience because they don't at first know what I mean. I say, "Bill Gates is not stupid. He looks in the mirror and he sees what we all see: A nerd. And when he gets affection and love, he can't help but wonder why he's getting it." I don't have that problem. I certainly don't get attention

because of my physical appearance. I have no money or jobs to offer anyone. All I have to give people is a connection to activism.

**RJ:** That's great. I understand the appeal of your life, of what you have. But I'm back to my question: Will that sustain most people, or do the comforts of an affluent society obscure their ability to see that? It's pretty obvious that one of the reasons capitalism can continue at all is because it plays to that instinct in people. It's based on a certain conception of human nature that says we're all, in the end, greedy in the material sense.

**AO:** In some ways, that's right, of course. I don't believe in a perfectibility of human beings. I believe a lot can be done to make life different, to change the way we relate to each other. But I don't think we'll ever eliminate greed. It's part of being an animal. That force cannot be totally eliminated from human life. But the other side of it is they can never totally silence certain other forces in life, other parts of our nature. There will always be also in the human community -- sometimes on a larger scale and sometimes on a smaller scale -- a deep-seated resistance to greed as the dominant feature of life. Even without being political, people live that way, just out of being loving people.

I'll give you a wonderful example. About two years ago, a dozen or more miners were buried underground, in an accident in Pennsylvania in a coal mine. And that incident revealed the incredible strengths and weaknesses of different ways of living. On the one hand, that accident was avoidable, and the only reason it took place is that the owners of the mine were greedy, period. We have to abolish that kind of ownership. The other side of it is, which was totally missed, not only by the press but by much of the left, was that it also exposed some of the most wonderful qualities of human beings. Every single guy who worked on that mine and everyone on that shift volunteered to go down to help those guys out. So the press was talking about the enormous technological success of drilling with such accuracy and such shit. But the real point was that it was a marvelous story to explore what it is to be a human being, because to me that incident represented the finest and the lowest.

**RJ:** So, if those forces are always going to be in conflict, how should those of us who want a more just world with less suffering try to present this to people? How should we think about greed?

**AO:** I think we need to talk about what I'll call, for lack of a better term, "enlightened selfishness." Selfishness, in the capitalist sense, will play a negative role in human life in our kind of culture. People may buy the big house and get the big car, and even think of themselves as happy, but there's a big vacuum in them. You don't overcome loneliness, human loneliness, by accumulating.

But at the same time, in some sense everything I do is selfish. The Peace Mobile -- totally selfish. I've never engaged in any political activity in my life that didn't turn out to be highly rewarding. And the only one that really could have cost me my life was the Spanish Civil War, and occasionally maybe in Mississippi and Nicaragua. But the risks involved in that were more than counterbalanced -- because I happened to be one of the survivors, of course -- by the benefits I derived.

To be successful as an activist, you have to be able to teach people -- not only verbally but by example -- that it's a good way to live. It is not martyrdom. It is not just sacrifice. I'm involved in the highest paid profession in the world -- social activism. Take this little exchange right now between you and me. What does that mean to me as a person? Okay, it means that you, an intelligent human being that's got a fairly decent life, finds it of value to give up a piece of that life to fly to Seattle to learn something, hopefully, from me. You can't even attach material value to that -- it's enormous. To me, it's very pleasant to know that somebody -- and somebody I have a fair respect for -- thinks they have something to learn from me. It's a marvelous feeling, and it's another example of what I'm talking about.

### *Religion and/or politics*

**RJ:** Is this, in a way, your religion? Is this an expression of your spirituality?

**AO:** It's pretty clear to me we are more than just a physical body. The most important part of us is not our physical body. To some people, that means religion, which is a shortcut through all this bullshit. But to me, religion is just a very fucked-up kind of activism, using the word very loosely. It's their way of feeling part of the world. It does reduce pain. But I got a better way to reduce pain. I've got the altar, in here [tapping his chest]. It's all in here, so I go to services every hour or every day, in a way.

But I must admit that sometimes I'm jealous of people who believe in God. It obviously can be very comforting, which is one reason religions are powerful. There's a need for comfort. There's a big empty hole in every human being, almost a bottomless well of loneliness, and you can fill it in various ways. You can drink it full, you can smoke pot, you can fuck all the time. You can do all kinds of shit and you don't fill it up. Religion is this magic thing for lots of people. Sometimes I wish it would happen to me. But it can't. What about you? Do you consider yourself an atheist?

**RJ:** I've been an atheist since I was old enough to ask the question.

**AO:** I used to be an atheist, but I'm not anymore because the truth or falsity of these assertions is not demonstrable. I'm happy with saying I don't know, and you don't know, and it's not knowable, so it doesn't enter into my ...

**RJ:** Yes, I agree with that. When I say I'm an atheist, I just mean that I've never found some of the questions that religion takes up very interesting. Even as a kid, I never understood why people cared so much about what happens to us when we die, for example. The question never resonated with me. I knew, even as a kid, the answer was beyond human knowledge. So, why fuss about it? It's interesting to ponder, but not terribly relevant to me. The answer to the question "Is there a God," from the time I was old enough to formulate the question, seemed obvious: I don't know, there's no way to know, and in the absence of compelling evidence for it, I'm going to assume there isn't, just as I would not believe any extraordinary claim for which there was no compelling evidence.

I think the real question is how we act. Do we act on the assumption there could be a god? I act on the assumption there isn't. So, I act like an atheist. I would say that you act like an atheist, too.

**AO:** I had a time in my life when I was younger where I really believed there is a God, and that he was a basket case, because how could a person have all the power and sit by and watch all this shit fly. There's a part of me that still holds to that. When somebody comes on to with me with strong religion, that's the point I make: Either God is all powerful or he isn't. If he's all powerful, tell me why he allows this? So if there is a God and he's a fascist, if you want to go by the evidence, well ....

**RJ:** But you know the true believer's answer to that: God has a plan that's beyond your capacity to understand. So, it may look to you like God is a fascist, but that's only because you can't understand the bigger plan. That's why these arguments are of so little interest to me.

**AO:** They're boring.

**RJ:** They're boring -- to me -- because, in the end they're not based in fact or logic or anything tangible. Those claims are based in this human need to explain things that are, as far as I can tell, beyond our capacity to explain. I am happy to acknowledge the possibility there is something I just don't understand about all this, but to date no one has ever said anything that makes me think much differently than when I was 9 years old. So, if I were to decide to identify with a religion it probably would be to have some scaffolding on which to hang my ethical values and political commitments, but I don't have a need to base my ethics and politics in theological claims. I'm happy to say there are lots of things I don't know -- that are beyond human knowing -- and leave it at that.

**AO:** I'm equally divided between orthodoxy and skepticism. Communism became an alternative for me. It became a religion of sorts, and in its extreme form it became as crazy as other religions. Communism, institutionalized, was as fucked up as the Catholic Church, and it very much resembled it. The Pope's infallible, and so was the party. Confession, we had that in the party, too.

**RJ:** Does that suggest that there is some deep-seated human need for orthodoxy or conformity?

**AO:** No, not an absolute need. But it suggests there's something in the human soil in which orthodoxy -- religious or secular -- can grow. You never know how it will play out in people. I have met rabbis who are religious and are incredible, wonderful activists. On the other hand, most orthodox rabbis I've known are semi-fascist. I grew up in a secular family, but it was a community in which 95 percent of the people were Jewish. The language in the streets was Yiddish, not English. I didn't speak English, and even then with a broken accent, until I was 6 years old. I wasn't religious, but I did wonder. When I was about 10, 11, 12, around that age, I used to look up and see the stars, and see things growing, and it was always wondrous. I used to think about how the whole world can be contained in a little seed, and I began to think there must be some force, something out there. So, kids would talk to me about God, and I thought maybe there is such a thing.

But then I remember challenging God. I did it publicly with a bunch of other kids, like a theatrical act. I said, “You son of a bitch, I ain’t afraid of you. Fuck you.” I really expected a lightning bolt, and the kids did, too. They separated from me; they thought I’d go up in smoke. Nothing happened, of course. So, I figured that either he doesn’t hear me or he does and doesn’t give a fuck. And I began to have an image of a God who was a fascist of some kind. Look at the shit he pulls on us. Why do we live like this? There’s enough to live better. Why is it that my uncle Jake drives a car, which nobody I knew did in those years, and lives in a good house, and he’s a fucking crook? Why is it that my dad busts his ass in the same industry, contracting, and my dad is just a worker? Why does my dad have to bust his ass so you just pay the rent and eat? That’s wrong.

### *Reason and passion*

**RJ:** Don’t you think that most people see that? At some point, most everyone has looked around and realized that there’s a rich guy who doesn’t seem like a very nice person, and a working person who’s the salt of the earth, and asked why they get treated so differently. What in this particular society cuts off people from the path you’re talking about?

**AO:** I think we’re back to affluence. People do recognize this, but then other things come into your life -- the luxuries, the job, and all that.

**RJ:** And at that point, the facts of the world just don’t matter?

**AO:** What do you do when you talk to people with the facts, and it doesn’t seem to have any effect? We have had a wonderful example recently, as the evidence has piled up of the [Bush] administration’s lies, especially about the Iraq War. No matter how much it piled up, the basic relation of forces didn’t change. He still got elected, and half the people in this country still buy his bullshit. Large numbers of fundamentally decent people support that bullshit, no matter what we say to them. Is it possible that they don’t hear us? How do we reach them?

To me, the most basic way of reaching people is through the heart. The path to the mind is through the heart. Cerebral activity does not have as big a role in history as passion, as strong feelings. You can’t think yourself into putting your life on the line. You’ve got to feel it, in your gut. But there’s also a problem when people become activists, they get on the train of activism that is fueled by that passion. The very same passion that makes it possible to do it, to get on the train, makes a lot of people forget to take on their carry-on baggage, which is critical reasoning. And that’s another problem I find on the left a lot -- the sacrifice of critical thought because of strong feelings of what’s right and what’s wrong.

**RJ:** You’re identifying two problems: One is that sometimes we think that rational argument will produce results that it won’t.

**AO:** Not sometimes, most of the time.

**RJ:** Okay, but at the same time you're also saying that people have the opposite problem on the left, which is being motivated by such strong passions that they're not always thinking critically or rationally enough. So, both things are a problem?

**AO:** Yes, but there's nothing we can do but try to intensify people's passionate feelings -- because there has to be something there to get us going -- while at the same time help people develop that critical reasoning. You do it by modeling it, you integrate the two.

Take a statistic like 100,000 Iraqis killed in the war. Does that change anything when people learn that? Usually not. But a picture of one little child with an arm whacked off, with very little commentary, does more to convey that horror. If someone can look at that and not have strong feelings, then you're wasting your time talking to them. After that come the facts, the analysis.

**RJ:** Yes, but those strong feelings are easily manipulated.

**AO:** Of course they are. And I'm a manipulator! That's what I've been doing. I try to manipulate people in another direction.

**RJ:** Does that turn it into simply a battle for who has the best manipulation? I struggle with this as a public speaker. You learn what will move people, and it's not always a good argument. Sometimes it's manipulative emotional appeals. Even when you are sure you are on the side of the angels and your cause is just, it can feel wrong, or at least I feel conflicted, when I use emotional appeals and shortchange reasoned argument. Where's the balance?

**AO:** You have to remember that it depends who you're talking to and what the objective is. If I'm talking to a big group, I want to educate them all if I can, but most are going to walk out with nothing really profound happening. But there will always be five, six people in an audience who will be touched in a way that they've never been touched. That's my real audience. I'm speaking to some part of them that has never been addressed. Those people, almost invariably, make a sharp turn in their lives. That's what most important right now, I think. It's about touching something that already was there in them. They were ripe, so to speak. Very few people in an audience are ripe like that; nobody can convince an entire audience to dedicate their lives to activism. I seek out the ones who are ready, and for the last 30 or 40 years, that's my principal work. The reason I speak before large audiences is to find those people.

**RJ:** So the goal is not to manipulate the many but touch the five or six?

**AO:** Yes, yes. And I always find them. It's becoming more difficult, but I've maintained connections over the years with a few hundred young people whose lives I have affected, not by planting new ideas but by touching their sensibility in a way nobody had touched. That's what teaching is about. Most teachers haven't got the tiniest fucking idea that they have the opportunity to be very important social activists. A good teacher is a social activist -- if they go beyond presenting material in the field of study and touch the humanity of people. That's what good teaching should be.

**RJ:** Let me tell you what was on my mind when I asked about this. Myles Horton used to tell a story about when he was young and he was a labor organizer, before he started the Highlander Folk School. As I remember the story, he said that he was in front of a big crowd -- and he was apparently fairly charismatic -- and had that feeling of having the crowd in the palm of your hand. He could get them to believe most anything. He said he stepped off the stage and vowed he would never speak like that in public again, because he didn't trust himself not to misuse that charismatic gift he had. You can be very charismatic. Do you worry about that?

**AO:** I had to deal with that earlier in my life, because my first attempts at public speaking were absolute disasters. I yielded to my egotism. I yielded to my love for applause. But it left me pretty empty. Somewhere along the line, I discovered that I could have a tremendous impact on some of the people in the audience, not by putting material into them -- I don't have some complete program to offer people -- but by honestly touching them.

### *Political programs and their limits*

**RJ:** Is it the case that you don't have a system to offer, as you did when you were recruiting for the Communist Party, or that you feel like you know what should happen in the world but back off from telling people?

**AO:** The structure, the political program, that can get us to the next phase of history doesn't exist yet, if you ask me. We're going to have to learn, discover, nurture something that is different. The overwhelming majority of people, including some historians, think there are only two alternatives in human life in the modern era -- capitalism and socialism, as we have known them. I don't buy that. That's not the end of the script. Neither one are the end of history.

Marxism had a very profound effect worldwide, a lot of it positive, but it finally got calcified and died a very painful death. Not only did it damage itself, with the Communist parties, but it even made the word socialism a little bit muddy. Now, we're in a situation in which socialism, as he projected it, is gone, and capitalism is not dying an immediate death but is eroding. Is this the end of history? I don't believe that. I believe that it's a period in which there will rise and grow ideologies which are totally foreign to those of us who came up on the traditional left. I don't have labels, but I know that history does not tolerate vacuums. Capitalism certainly is not adequate to conditions today, although it takes some arguing to convince people, because too many people are still getting goodies out of it. But I think in your lifetime you'll see that kind of change.

**RJ:** When you look around the world, where do you see the best prospects for the future?

**AO:** What's happening in Latin America, the move to the left, looks genuine and promising. There's been a certain globalization of anti-imperialist forces. I welcome them. I'm happy about them, but I do not think this is the answer. I don't expect that at all, because I've learned in my life that most radicals and revolutionaries are much better people before the revolution than after,

and some of those virtues come from not being in power -- they just lack the opportunity to be real bastards. So, these developments are very good, but to engage in wishful thinking is ridiculous politically.

**RJ:** So Hugo Chavez [the leftist president of Venezuela] is not the messiah?

**AO:** He's more than not the messiah -- he also seems to be a pretentious fucker. I've had concrete experience with this kind of thing, when I went to work in 1985 in Nicaragua, on a project to build a village for about 30 or 40 campesino families that had formed a cooperative, an agricultural cooperative. A lot of people in the Sandinista leadership knew about the Spanish Civil War and the International Brigades, and I got invited to dinner with people like [Sandinista leader Daniel] Ortega and the other big shits. It apparently was for them a treat because they could talk with an organic piece of history and all that. What did I learn about them? Nothing that surprised me very much. On one hand, nobody had ever tried as much as they did to do something substantive for the people. They did take some steps to introduce health care, which was totally absent, and education, and a few other such things. And they had run great risks, of imprisonment, torture, death. But after they seized power, they took over the nice air-conditioned homes of the guys they had kicked out. Their children went to special schools. They shopped in special stores that were set up on the Soviet model. The corruption was evident. And at dinner with Ortega and his lieutenants, we ate the finest of food -- I mean, fine food, the best of wines, smoked the best of cigars, served by a waiter, and the cook was from Guatemala and so on and so forth. At least I had the pleasure of telling them off.

**RJ:** You told them off that night?

**AO:** Oh yea. I told them what a bunch of fuckers they were. And they had to sit still for it, because I'm this living part of the history they think is marvelous and so forth. So they had to put up with me. But I've had a number of experiences in my life with people who are honestly dedicated to the movement, who risked their life for it, who suffered all kinds of horrible personal deprivations and unpleasantness, but who became very different people when they had power. Power changes people.

I know it's a little bit true in my own life. I was a son of a bitch at the height of my Communist life. I really was -- mean-spirited, sometimes cruel. I helped expel people from the Young Communist League and from the party because we determined their thinking was anti-party. I did those things, on a small scale, because I didn't have much power. If I'd have had more power, I'd have been more of an abomination.

### *The endless haul*

**RJ:** I've heard you use the term "long-distance runner" before. Is that the key -- the notion that we have to be in it for the long haul and not expect things to change dramatically all at once?

**AO:** Not the long haul -- the endless haul.

**RJ:** What's the difference between long and endless?

**AO:** Oh yeah, there's a difference. We will never win the fight. We will influence the players. We may be able to make life better in many ways. We will blunt the shit that the government and the corporations throw at us. But we'll always be coping with things. My view is that there's no destination for the train I'm on. No destination, just a direction. No final station on that train. There's no final destination, no socialist society where we will all be able to sit back and have a wonderful life. Bullshit!

**RJ:** No utopias.

**AO:** Nowhere near utopia. In fact, we'll never get completely out of hell. But we can make some progress. In my lifetime, with all of its limitations, the movement has achieved some incredible things. Forty-some years ago it was still possible to hang a black person in Holmes County, Mississippi, and not get arrested. Right where I worked, the year previous, they hung a black person in public, with half of the fucking county eating box lunches and watching it. We've come a long way, in many ways. Women? Whatever the limitations they face, women have made a lot of progress in this country. Gay people? They have had their defeats, their ups and downs, but with successes, too. On all these things, at times the train breaks down, somebody fucks up the tracks, but it'll get back on the track and go on. There's no way in the world you can stop it.

In this country, one of the biggest problems we have as leftists is that there are so many strong reasons for not being an activist, in the sense that it's possible for people -- even if they're mediocre, but if they're aggressive enough -- to make a good life in this country. It's the easiest country in the world to become a millionaire. On the plus side, it's also the easiest country to be a radical. The potential penalties are very small. I have put in less than six months jail time in a whole lifetime of radical activism in this country. I would have been dead 30 times over in 20 countries I can think of.

**RJ:** The one thing that's the hardest for me to hear people tell me is, "You're so brave for speaking out in public." Sometimes when I hear that, I literally want to cry, because of what it says about this country. I'm a tenured professor at a major university. You've been in jail six months -- I've been in jail literally for six hours in my life. The risks I take are so trivial compared to, as you say, radicals in other places and times. It's embarrassing.

The antiwar movement in the U.S. is comprised of people who mostly risk nothing to engage in that activity. The most many of them risk, or are willing to risk, is that maybe their neighbor will be pissed off if they put an antiwar sign in their yard. We seem to keep coming back to the same place. It's an affluent society. How do you persuade people that taking real risks is in their self-interest?

**AO:** You're right, the risks are trivial. I know that you know that it's bullshit. But most people don't think so because, compared to them, you're a bit braver. An affluent society limits what people can do, and I have no illusions about that. I know that in the kind of confrontations that are coming before too long, it's not clear what will happen, whether people are up to it. Those

will be people coming from a different world than I came from. I was lucky. I grew up in a world that was very hard to be in.

**RJ:** You have it easy because you had it hard?

**AO:** Well, in the sense that life made me tough, and that life made me very hard to stop. A policeman raises a club, and a hundred people shit in their pants. I was able to get beyond that early. If the policeman raises a club, he's paying me a compliment.

**RJ:** So, we have this affluent country in which it's easy to avoid political engagement and obligation and most people are afraid of any risk. It's also a country in which people -- whatever their politics -- are used to instant gratification. Then you come along and talk about a direction, not a destination, and the endless haul. Do you find it hard to ask people to be hopeful?

**AO:** I talk to people about getting rid of hope and faith. And the strange effect of it is that it makes them more hopeful. I don't deprive them of that if that's what they need at that stage of their development. But personally, I'm not hopeful because I think hope is a kind of religion, and religions don't work. If you're hopeful you're going to suffer disappointments, whether it's politics or your personal life. You can care about things, you can want things to happen, you can work to make things happen without being hopeful. The way I guarantee not being too disappointed is to not put too much hope onto things.

Take this conversation between you and me, for example. Sure, I hope that we'll get something out of it. I want something to come out of it because I don't have a lot of energy these days and I'm careful about how I spend it. But if this interaction were a total waste, I wouldn't be upset very much. All that said, sometimes I wish I could be more hopeful. Sometimes I miss that.

**RJ:** Why is that?

**AO:** Because hope is comfortable. Because sometimes the way I think makes me very lonely, a kind of intellectual loneliness.

**RJ:** I use these terms differently. I make a distinction, as have others over the years, between optimism and hope. I'm not optimistic. If you ask me whether I think that U.S. economy is going to be fundamentally fairer in a year, I would say no. I'm not optimistic about that, because it's a question of rational assessment, and things seem to be going the other way in the short term. But I think there's a way to use the term "hope" that taps into our belief that -- in that endless haul you talk about -- humans have the capacity to be decent. I suppose it's about having reasonable expectations, which is what you are talking about. I'm just using different words, perhaps.

**AO:** Yea, it may be a difference in how we use the same terms. Sometimes people I deal with describe me as cynical. I tell them, "Where do you come up with that shit? Cynicism normally leads to inactivity. I'm 14 times more active than you are. You don't do shit, and you're labeling me cynical? If anybody's fucking cynical, it's you." Those people have yielded to society's bullshit, and I think I've refused to yield. I'm not optimistic, and I'm not pessimistic. I'm none of

those things. I'm me -- learning, exploring, and, fortunately, along the way I discovered a way of living that is very gratifying. Let's start with that. I live a gratifying life. I ask people if they want to live one. If they do, I'll tell them some ideas on how it can be done.

### *Organizing struggles*

**RJ:** This is getting at things that I really struggle with these days. I'm trying to figure out ways to be more effective politically.

**AO:** That's okay. Don't worry. At your age, I was even more backward.

**RJ:** Thanks a lot. That makes me feel a lot better. But what I wanted to talk about was the ways I have failed as an organizer. I get frustrated with myself, and I don't like it. Here's an example. One of things I've failed at is organizing on my campus. When I got tenure, in about 1998, I made a choice to give up on scholarly publishing. I haven't published traditional academic research since, because I spend all my extra time doing political work and writing for the general public, not for academics.

**AO:** I'm very glad to hear that.

**RJ:** Well, it's not so noble; it's what keeps me sane. But because I made that choice, it opened up a lot of time and energy for other things, such as trying to organize faculty on my campus for left politics, and there are left faculty on my campus. But I got frustrated with other faculty who identified as left but were much more hesitant to be publicly political, for whatever reason. I should have cultivated people, gone slowly, tried to create a climate for politicizing them. Instead, I was so full of piss and vinegar and, probably, so angry that I wasn't good at creating conditions so that others who needed to make smaller steps could make those steps. In fact, I think eventually what happened is that my participation in any particular project became a disincentive for some of my colleagues. Now, if there's something going on around campus, I'm almost afraid to attach my name to it because I'm afraid people will back away. So I failed. If people don't act the way I want them to, I don't just get to say, "Well, fuck them. That's their problem." I failed, as an organizer.

**AO:** You're talking like Abe Osheroff, quite a few years ago.

**RJ:** In what sense?

**AO:** Same shit. I was very bad at that myself, until recently, to the point that, if people didn't respond the way I thought they should, I almost felt a certain contempt. There are professors on this campus [University of Washington] who I still feel contempt for. And it's a problem, because they are people in process, struggling between a narrow concept of selfishness and a social conscience, which they also can't get rid of. Sometimes they resolve it by giving me \$100 for a project. By the way, that's always been my principal source of money for projects -- guilty liberals.

But, you know, there's no crime for a soldier to have a furlough, to get away from the battlefield for a little while and look back on it. It took me a long time to accept that, but that's important. Okay, so you're driven, and a lot of that is good. But it is hard to get away and take a break if you're driven, and you would probably experience quite a bit of guilt if you weren't doing what you're doing. And I remember when I did too, but I don't feel guilty about shit these days. If I decide not to do shit for the next year or so, then fine.

**RJ:** How do you feel about your life's work?

**AO:** I really don't know how to summarize it. All I know is that deep down I believe it's the right path, not just for me, but the right path. And, at the same time, there's nothing that guarantees the survival of the fucking universe. That's the quandary we're stuck with. But let me throw a question, a more fundamental question, back at you. What brings you here to see me? You fly all the way from Texas to talk to me. Why?

**RJ:** There are probably two levels of answers to that. The easy answer is that in my life I'm partly an organizer, and I am struggling to think through ways to organize more effectively. And since you've organized people over decades, I want to learn something from you. One of the things that frustrated me when I got politically active was how little institutional memory there was. There was no place for me to go and ask someone with experience and wisdom how to do radical political work. I had a few friends, but no place to go beyond that. There are all sorts of organizers around, of course, but I couldn't find all that many people who had that experience and also shared my politics. So, part of my motivation in coming here was to get information that will help me, and by extension help other people struggling with the same questions. That's the easy answer.

**AO:** Did you get some?

**RJ:** Sure, I got some information that's helpful. But that's only part of it. The other thing that brought me here is my internal struggle. I don't find many people in the world I can talk to about that, and it does feel lonely.

**AO:** I know what you're talking about.

**RJ:** One thing about you that's interesting to me is that to be politically effective in a left context, you have to be motivated by a sense of empathy. We've been talking about that. But sometimes it's so overpowering, the pain of the world. I don't want to sound self-indulgent, but sometimes I wish I didn't feel these things. It's too painful. Day in and day out, it wears me down.

**AO:** I can see that, that it's doing that to you right now.

**RJ:** And at the same time, to be politically effective in the world we live in, sometimes you have got to be a cold, mercenary son of a bitch who can look at three choices and say, "This one might work, this one will, this one clearly won't." It's a different mode of being. What draws one in is this deep human emotion, but then to be effective you have to become almost a machine that can make decisions without emotion trumping reason.

**AO:** Well, my response to that is: Yes, it's tough. But for me, it's tougher not to struggle with it. Look, your options are to do what I'm doing or to retire and start dying.

**RJ:** I'm not saying it's a question of whether or not to do it. One does it because one has to.

**AO:** But that's a choice.

**RJ:** Maybe, but for me it no longer seems to be a choice. I feel like I know too much and that I don't have anywhere else to go. If you want to put it in blunt terms, I said goodbye to being a normal person a long time ago. So this is what I'm stuck with. Even if I wanted to abandon left politics, I don't know that I could. What am I going to do? Go back to being a professor whose biggest concern is advancing his career?

**AO:** Why not?

**RJ:** I just can't do it anymore. But what makes this so complicated is that, at the same time, I don't like losing. And you and I both know perfectly well that in the United States left politics -- real left politics, anti-capitalist and anti-empire politics, based on a deep sense of justice and equality -- isn't going to triumph anytime soon.

**AO:** Of course. So you have to accept failure and at the same time keep trying to win. It's also very true personally. I never learned that until late in life. You learn from failure. I did.

**RJ:** That I understand. I can see many of my own failures, and at least try not to repeat them. What I'm struggling with is how to keep all this in balance -- the humanity and the need for calculated efficiency. I realize this is an old problem, but if you abandon the humanity that drove you into the process in the first place ...

**AO:** You're fucked.

**RJ:** That's right -- you're fucked. And I worry that people sense that I have become that -- too cold and calculating. And if I were going to be more honest about why I'm here ...

**AO:** How could you not be honest?

**RJ:** Well, because you know perfectly well that being honest is sometimes painful. I think the reason I'm here is because in the past six months or so, I could feel myself moving out of balance. I can feel myself losing connection with my own humanity. I can feel myself becoming a calculating machine. Because I've taken on too many projects and am trying to do too much. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You heap on yourself so much work that the only way you can do it all, the only way you can do what you promised people you were going to do, is to become that calculating machine.

**AO:** That won't work, you know.

**RJ:** You're right -- it won't work. My point is that it's a very delicate balance. I don't mean

balance in the sense that people talk about having more time for oneself. I don't mean balance between political work and having leisure time. That's all pretty much irrelevant to me. I mean that balance between giving up some of my own humanity for the sake of efficiency.

**AO:** When you do that, you're fucked. Look, well-meaning people constantly get caught in various human dilemmas. It's always a struggle. Not just the one you portray, but also the relationship of an individual to the collective. I've got quite a bit of experience in the collective, and it doesn't work the way people wish it did. You start with people with a certain shared dedication to the same thing, and everybody gets an equal slice of the pie. But after a while, people look around, and wonder why I'm busting my ass, and I'm getting exactly the same thing he's getting.

**RJ:** That is what every capitalist in the world says. Does that mean capitalism is inevitable?

**AO:** No, but some features of capitalism are. I don't think we will ever eliminate a certain competitiveness. It's part of being human. A large part of my life is a search for an alternative. And that search, for me, is not a collective search. I can't do it collectively. I just can't. I can't keep my head straight collectively. Other people maybe can. And I have to be honest, that I certainly need the people I work with. Even the ones who are not going forward to help the way I think they should, I need them. They support the things I do. I could not have done without the support of liberals because I do things sometimes that need a lot of money. Building things costs money. Where was I going to get that money? I needed \$70,000 to build houses in Nicaragua.

### *The enduring, and unanswerable, questions*

**RJ:** Are you satisfied with the approach to activism that you've developed over the years?

**AO:** Sometimes when I try to get things accomplished, I unnecessarily offend and hurt peoples' feelings. I do it quite a bit, and I'm lucky that Gunnell calls me on it. Even when the criticism is painful, there's always a point I need to hear. I used to resist and immediately fight back and attack back, but no more. I'm finished with that. I listen to complaints like that carefully, when they are coming from a decent human being, because there's some truth in where they're coming from. She has helped me a lot. Maybe she's not as politically experienced as I am, but she's also nowhere as crippled. I am crippled in certain ways, and I have to see it. Growing up in the ghetto is not only an advantage but it's also a very disabling thing. It limits a lot of things. On the one hand, it makes possible a whole lot of things. But it makes impossible certain other things.

Let's go back to these dilemmas. Have you ever read the poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko? Dissident Soviet poet. Despite his open opposition to the system, he was able to survive because he was so beloved by so many people. He was able to recite poetry to an audience of a 100,000 people, because Russians love poetry. That's also an interesting question, about the role of poetry in human life. Russians love poetry. Spaniards adore poetry. Americans abhor it. Can you imagine a poet being chosen to lead a regiment of soldiers here? But that's what we had in Spain. Miguel Hernandez, one of the outstanding poets of Spain, led an infantry battalion in the war.

Raphael Alberti, one of the most famous poets, returned after the death of Franco, ran for the Senate, and got up and recited poems. That's all. He was elected by a landslide running as a Communist. Anyhow, I've been reading Yevtushenko lately. I have a feeling you'd like him.

**RJ:** What does he capture that you like? What is it about his work that speaks to you?

**AO:** Besides his beautiful command of language itself, what he's saying is "I am an individual, unique and different, and I'm part of a vast group without which I am nothing." He somehow manages to merge two deep needs that we have in the human condition: The need for independence and individuality, with the need for collective life. He captures that very well. I had known about him but never read his poetry until then one of my friends, the guy that's working with me on the Peace Mobile, bought me a few of his books. I'm just overwhelmed. If you ask me, most poetry is bullshit, self-indulgence. But I'm in love with good poetry.

**RJ:** There are certain fundamental questions that, no matter how much we pretend that we moderns have solved problems, basically remain mystery. What does it mean to be a human being? What separates us from the rest of the animal world? What is distinct about us? How do you deal with loneliness? How do we cope with the problems that are inevitably created when our individuality clashes with our need for human connection?

**AO:** Exactly my words.

**RJ:** There is no scientific revolution that can explain those things. There is no technology to relieve the pain of struggling with them. Basic questions of inequality go back to the Bible. The Old Testament prophets were talking about inequality.

**AO:** You go back and read the ancient Greek philosophers -- whether it's Plato or Socrates, Aristotle -- the same questions. Plato was a highly intelligent right-winger. Socrates was a little democrat -- the only term that today would possibly fit him -- but enough of a democrat that he was ready to put his life on the line for it. Aristotle was a straddler. They talk about the same things, and we are in the same place. Why not accept the fact that this is part of being human in any culture, in any society, for any of us, in any society or stage of development? To really examine life will bring up these things. Why not accept the insolvability of certain things? Much of it is beyond solution, and the best we can do is travel toward the sunlight, so to speak, from the darkness. We will never get to the sun, but we might have the pleasure of getting to the better light there is. We will never get to that fucking sun. The sun is attached to a stick at the end of our nose, and as we go toward it, it just keeps going with us. I feel that way. I can feel it all the time. That gap -- between the human capacity to dream and the human capacity to achieve -- will always be there. That's what dreaming is all about -- the unbridgeable gap. And to me, that's the way it is.

I'm on a path that has no fucking end. That's what it is. But the motion forward, even with the stick on my nose, is of some importance. It can be more pleasurable, less pleasurable. It can be more painful, less painful. To me these questions are so central to my life, and I find so few people that I can talk to about it. Because somehow the minute I get into something like that,

they're thinking, "He's a nice old man, but he's gone batty." To me, that insanity is essential in my life. It really is.

**RJ:** A lot of political organizers will emphasize the great rewards of struggle, about how it brings change, which it can. But there's something about that kind of speech that always leaves me a little hollow. You are talking about the other side of it, the way in which the struggle never really takes you all the way home. I've given talks like that, about how great collective struggle is, and how it historically has brought progressive social change. That's all true, but there's the other side of it, which I find people rarely want to talk about, that sense of dreams that can't be realized that you are speaking about.

**AO:** It's one of the horrible things about being human. We are fucked by unanswerable questions. Well, you have to make an estimate the best you can of what is the capacity of the people you're talking to. Some of the questions you are asking, other people don't ask me. There are only two or three who will talk to me like you have. I'm pretty sure that quite a few think about some of these things but for various reasons engage in some self-censorship, because it might be costly, it might increase your loneliness.

### ***Reactions to 9/11: Crying and organizing***

**RJ:** I want to go back to the tension I talked about earlier, in myself. The question of having to stay open to the humanity of other people and, at the same time, developing a somewhat ruthless ability to act. You told me before that you didn't start doing political work right after the attacks of 9/11.

**AO:** That's right. For two or three weeks, all kinds of people kept calling me, asking me to come down to the federal building, to protest, to speak. But I couldn't do it. I sat in this chair for two and a half weeks and cried. I felt so bad, not just for what happened, but because I could look down the road, and I knew roughly what was coming. I knew that a tidal wave of human suffering was coming down the road, and I felt it. The feeling is terrible, and the knowledge of it is almost a form of suffering in itself. But after a while that subsides, and you feel driven to get back to work, to have some effect on what's going on.

**RJ:** That's interesting, because my reaction was totally opposite. I went to work immediately. I wrote an antiwar piece the night of 9/11, and the next day we called an organizing meeting.

**AO:** I cannot understand that.

**RJ:** Well, for whatever reason, I did it, working with a few others. I felt a lot of emotion, and like you it wasn't just that 3,000 people died. Three thousand people die every god-damned day somewhere because of fucked-up priorities and politics. I knew where this was all heading, toward a new level of war, and that got to me at various times. I was often very shaken by what I knew. One night I was in my office, and a small group of us were working on strategy, organizing, writing articles. I don't remember what specifically we were doing, but it was on

deadline and it mattered to us. But I was at the computer, and I started shaking, literally, and crying. I went into an emotional meltdown. And one of my friends said, “What’s going on?” And I said something like, “I don’t know, I just feel, I can’t even tell you how I feel, I feel like some kind of raw pain that I can’t stand.” And she said, “We’ve got work to do. Are you going to do the work or not?” And in that moment, I think she was right. She could see that I needed to control that crazy emotion or I would be useless. This was not long after 9/11 and there weren’t very many people publicly challenging the Bush administration, and we needed everybody to work who could. Even though we didn’t stop the war in Afghanistan, I think what we did was worth doing. And what she was telling me was, “Okay, you feel bad. I feel bad, too. We all know this is awful. But there is a task, and that task matters. Are you going to do it?” What would you have told me?

**AO:** That it’s okay to stop and cry. And that the more of that you do, the better prepared you will be for other things you have to do. Immediate responses are not always significant, not in that situation. There was some significance to what you did, of course. So, you should have done it. That’s all you can do.

What happened here, in Seattle, was that people had an enormous need to go down to the federal building and talk to each other, which is what the rallies were. People said, “Abe, we want you to come down. You’re so good at this.” And I said, “What is wrong with stopping and crying? Why is that wrong?”

**RJ:** Yes, but the two actions -- crying and organizing -- are not mutually exclusive.

**AO:** Sure. But if anyone thinks less of me for what I did, well, fuck them.

### ***Movement directions***

**RJ:** Given what has happened since 9/11 and the state of the movement, in the context of the bigger structural problems of capitalism and liberal democracy, let me come back to the question of what shape the movement can, or should, take in the future. Do you think it should take the form of an electoral party? Should there be a move for a new third party? Should it take the form of more traditional grassroots groups?

**AO:** I know what I want, and I can tell other people what I think they can do. If you’re a trade unionist, we’ll talk about what you can do. If you’re a member of a church, we’ll talk about what you can do. At this point, in whatever area of life we are located, the question is simple: What can we do to enrich, to strengthen the streams that are flowing in the right direction. I’m not worried about a new organization or party right now. I don’t have any political goals, in that sense, and I’m never going to. I don’t want to. I teach young people not to have them. I think we need to stay on the path of righteousness and address these problems the best we can.

Ultimately, I know what I’d like to see. I’d like to see the end of this electoral system. I think no matter what parties we create, ultimately we’ll come back to the same shit. The most productive things that ever happen in this country, in terms of moving humanity forward, are totally non-

electoral -- a trade-union movement, a civil-rights movement. Yes, they had an impact on, and were affected by, the electoral process. But essentially, they worked because large numbers of people wanted something and were willing to put their asses on the line. Workers seized factories -- that's revolutionary activity. It wasn't planned by professional revolutionaries. It wasn't done by the Communist Party. Ordinary black people did what they did in the civil-rights movement. And, if you look at history, that's constantly the way it happens. Progress, when it took place in history, took place because people committed themselves passionately and in large numbers to a theme. Whether building a union, whether it was the right to vote, even though in the long run didn't mean all that much. The right to vote, period, is not such a great achievement. The main thing is: What can you do with a fucking vote? We never really came to terms with that. We did achieve big victories, including the right to vote, and women's right to vote. But I don't know what the hell the political structure should be. What I do know is that unless we get on the path of big mass movements, with limited objectives, clear-cut objectives, we're not going to go any place. I know that. I strongly believe that.

**RJ:** Is the current antiwar movement -- that kind of resistance to the way the U.S. operates in the world -- the place where that kind of traction is most likely?

**AO:** There is a growing disillusionment with the way this country is conducting its military operations. There's the beginning of a disaster for the middle class economically. If you look up the road it is a disaster, because the children of the middle class are going to inherit a big pile of shit, an incredible mortgage on their lives that they're going to have to pay off. The existing middle class is comfortable, but most of the kids coming out of middle class, in material terms, are going to live lesser lives than their parents. This'll be the first time in American history. Almost every time we move forward, the generation that followed achieved higher levels of material life. That's over -- there's no question in my mind. And the shrinking is going to be felt, painfully felt, by the children of the middle class.

**RJ:** Do things have to get worse before they can get better?

**AO:** Putting it in that form bothers me, because it makes it sound as if we should work for things to get worse. I think the resistance to things as they're getting worse makes progress possible. Just getting worse can be a disaster. You need a lot of life to resist that spiral down. It doesn't automatically follow that when people begin to suffer they will become politically active. As a matter of fact, most human beings turn to anguish, despair, they turn to drinking, they turn to therapy -- to everything but social activism. It's our job to tell them there's another way to fly. Really, that's what it comes down to.

**RJ:** You've said over and over that one of the ways to reach people is by touching their humanity, engaging their empathy, which is an attempt to get people to act on the basis of the interest of someone else. You say there's a reason to do that, which is to give yourself a sense of meaning in life, but that the motive force there is a connection with the other. On the other hand, you're saying people are going to get active once their own material circumstances get worse. Those are two different motivations. So, which one ...

**AO:** It's not an either/or. You have to present both to people. They have to feel the importance of both.

### *Dancing without guarantees*

**RJ:** Let's finish with one issue in which there eventually won't be some people on top and some on the bottom, but we'll all lose -- the ecological crisis. On that one, as the saying goes, nature bats last. We've talked mostly about politics, but increasingly I think more about -- and am scared about -- the ecological crisis. Do you?

**AO:** All the time. The planet is being destroyed, and the indications are that we're moving toward making the planet uninhabitable. I think the damage probably is so great at this point that there's no real path back. The damage to the atmosphere, to nature in general, may be too much. As a species we're not here forever, but we seem to be shortening what time we might have. Sometimes I have the overarching feeling that the damage we've done is not totally reversible.

**RJ:** So, you're not a scientist, you're not an ecologist. You're talking about a feeling.

**AO:** Not a scientist, but I know facts and figures, and they're frightening. But they don't seem to frighten a lot of people.

**RJ:** You ever said that in public? Or do you censor yourself?

**AO:** No, I haven't talked about that much in public because I can't say that without committing myself to militant activity of an environmental character. I don't know about the reason I don't feel like doing that. I truly don't understand why.

**RJ:** Maybe because you look for projects where there is an achievable goal, and maybe that one isn't achievable. So, why do it?

**AO:** Well, you know something, I don't think it's achievable. Not only because of the industrial nations and their ambitions, which are fucking up things. It's not just imperialism destroying the world. Human beings are destroying the world -- some out of necessity, others out of greed. But it's going on. We're poisoning the oceans. We're poisoning the air. There's no question about it.

**RJ:** Let me tell you a story, because it goes to political organizing again. I was talking to an activist who also is an environmental scientist by training. I said, "Well, you know, I'm not trained in the science of this, but I think a lot about whether the processes we've set in motion can be reversed." She said, "Well, I am a scientist, and the data and all the facts are much worse than you probably understand. It's worse than you can imagine." She meant that if you look across the board, at global warming and groundwater pollution and resource depletion and on and on, as you say, the damage is incredible and possibly irreversible. And so I said, "Well, how do you deal with that?" She said, "I just don't think about it."

**AO:** I don't agree with that at all.

**RJ:** Okay, but her point was it was too overwhelming. If she thought about it too much, it would undermine her ability to do activist work. You're talking about a difference between really facing the facts ...

**AO:** ... probable facts. Nobody can know for sure.

**RJ:** That's fine. But when I talk about this with people on the left they often say, "Don't even bring that stuff up. It just paralyzes people." But that's kind of an arrogant, saying people can't handle the truth. Do you think there are there certain truths that most people can't handle? From an organizing point of view, that's an important question. Are there times you shouldn't tell people what you really know and really think?

**AO:** I think it's probably true that the damage is irreversible and that, after a couple of decades, recognizing that will be unavoidable. But I can't stop with that statement. Look, I'll probably die in the next few years, which I know. My response to that is, I want to do everything I can to make the quality of my life, what remains of it, as good as I can make. And there are sons of bitches in my way, on the personal and political levels, who I will take on. Suppose I had definitive proof that this world we live in, for practical human purposes, would end in the next 40, 50 years. What would I tell my children, or my people I'm talking to intimately, the ones I'm trying to convince to live a certain way? Same thing, that there are things we should want to accomplish, to make the world we have left a little better for everyone. And I would say, this music is not going to go on for too long, so let's dance and love it. Let's dance. Let's do the things that matter, even without guarantees. And if anybody gets in the way, let's kick their fucking ass.