

From the Other Side of the Tracks

Julius Lester

Sometimes we are the victims of our own words. At best, words are poor conveyors of information. They are imprecise and must be used with the utmost care if they are to do what we want them to do. When they are used imprecisely, improperly and without regard for the many dangers inherent in them, they can turn upon the user, confounding and confusing him and eventually, be the cause of the user's destruction.

We of the left are in danger of falling victim to our own words. We have proclaimed to one and all that we are revolutionaries and involved in revolution. We have proclaimed that the revolution has begun and if red flags are a sign of revolution, then indeed it has. All of us use this word, "revolution," like a manufacturer making certain that the name of his product gets in every sentence of a commercial. And because it makes us feel good to be revolutionaries involved in revolution, we fail to ask ourselves if we are, indeed, involved in revolution; if we are indeed, revolutionaries.

To a limited degree, it is clear that we are involved in a revolution. A revolution, however, is not the revolution and too many of us mistake the former for the latter. The revolution we are presently involved in is a cultural one, an uprising of the young against the values which the society is based upon and perpetuates. It is a revolution which has involved an explosive and painful groping for new life styles, new mores, new music, new uses of the mass means of communication. It is a revolution which has seen the young go into the streets to confront the present with the new of their uncut hair, the new of their multi-colored clothes, covering less and less of their bodies (which are real and good and beautiful and yes yes it is nice to touch each other, isn't it?). They have been willing to accept the consequences of their new life-styles of lying on the grass openly passing 'joints,' of saying no to the government's immoral demand for two years of your life in a uniform to fight a war, of repeatedly placing their bodies in the streets.

It has been a cultural revolution, but not a political revolution. It has been a cultural revolution with political consequences, political ramifications, political meaning, because culture and politics cannot be separated. It has been a middle-class cultural revolution, bearing no similarity to the cultural revolution in China, which was named with scientific precision, the Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The proletariat have been the spectators of our revolution, eagerly reading the newspaper and magazine articles about us, but still regarding us as different from them.

It has been a cultural revolution which has brought an ever-growing consciousness of the necessity for a revolution which changes the economic structure of the country, because all of the cultural, social and political institutions of the country evolved to justify and maintain the economic structure. While our revolution has threatened the nation's sense of psychological security, the economic structure remains intact, leisurely chewing up millions of people every day.

We defeat ourselves by calling what we have brought about "revolution." It is a step toward that revolution, but we have not begun to approach that day when we have seized power, held it and begun to create a system that is based on a sense of community (which does not mean living together physically). When we call what we have done thus far revolution, we give ourselves the feeling that we have done much more than we actually have. We blind ourselves to the difficulties in front of us. We blind ourselves to the dangers on every side.

The feeling that revolution is a necessity is the mere beginning and is really nothing to compliment oneself for feeling. Anyone who is not afraid to feel his humanity feels the necessity for the creation of a society in which man can truly be man and woman can truly be woman. The implementation of that revolution is a job requiring a scientific precision. The tide did not stop because King Canute yelled at it. This system will not disappear because we say “fuck the system,” or because we know all the right things to say. This system will die only if we do everything from having a correct analysis to getting shoelaces for the guerrillas who will one day be fighting. This system is highly organized and to be certain that it is maintained, the caretakers of the system attend to every detail, even to the extent of trying to anticipate what details will need attending to in 50 years. We say that we are involved in a revolution because we feel better about ourselves. A revolutionary, however, does not exist for himself. In fact, it is his own self which exists least for him, because at the same time he feels revolutionized within, he feels the pain of the selves that have not been revolutionized. And as long as one man is enslaved all of us are enslaved. Thus Che, who could’ve rested on his laurels, went to Bolivia.

The revolution is not yet. The seeds have been planted, but whether those seeds will receive the sunlight, water and proper cultivation which they desperately need, depends upon our ability to look honestly at ourselves and recognize that the time has come when it is suicidal self-indulgence to engage in romantic role-playing. When this system is threatened, it bares its teeth and claws and fights and cares not who sees. (The networks photographed the beatings of Chicago in color.) The system plays for keeps. It will destroy us or we will destroy it. It is that simple. As Rap says, “in revolution one either walks off the battlefield victorious or is left lying there.” At least, if we are left lying there, let it not be because we committed suicide.

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