

On the Necessity to Liberate Minds

Talk given in Palo Alto, California, June 12, 1970.

Some months ago when I heard Cathy Melville tell the story of the DC 9's raid on the Dow Chemical office in Washington, one moment that she described struck me with the force of symbolism. She told me how they had trouble getting in through the door and finally broke into the office through a glass wall. As they were going about their work in there, scattering files, pouring blood, a stranger appeared in the hall, looked in through the large break in the glass wall and asked, "Is anything wrong?" Cathy told him, "No, everything's all right" and he went away, apparently reassured that everything *was* all right.

As of course it was—for a change—up in that office. Here was a corporation that had been making and selling the stuff with which babies are burned alive. Some people were trying to make it harder for them to do this. To most of us, I assume, that would very clearly be all right.

The difficulty is of course—the tremendous difficulty—that to a great many Americans the act of those nine people who scattered Dow files was a much more questionable, much more disturbing act than the act of Dow in making and selling napalm. So that the incident Cathy reported was like a war resister's dream: you are engaged in an act of interfering with the military-industrial machine—a death machine—and a member of the public asks you: Should I be alarmed by what you are doing? And you tell him no—and he accepts your reassurance.

Yes, like a dream. Because in actuality, as we confront a social apparatus that seems to us flagrantly irrational, out of control, in its blind quest for wealth dealing out death both home and abroad—dealing it out even to children, both abroad and at home, killing its own children now, clearly a machine that must be stopped—.

But I'll interrupt myself because the imagery that I just used is inadequate. If it were just that we had to stop a death-dealing machine in its tracks, this would be relatively simple to accomplish—although we could count on being hurt in the attempt. In a society like this one—so dependent upon

technology—sabotage is terribly easy. A relatively small number of people can cause a tremendous amount of damage, can throw everything into confusion. But our task is not to wreck. Our task is to transform a society that deals out death into a society that makes life more possible for all. To build such a new society, very many people are needed. So as we strike at the machinery of death, we have to do so in a way that the general population understands, that encourages more and more people to join us.

This is surely the great challenge to the movement: How to make the public understand that it's "all right" to attack the death machine—that it is necessary? How to free their minds to see this and to join us?

And here is the preposterous difficulty. We are all living now in a society so deranged that it confronts us not only with the fact that we are committing abominable crimes against others—crimes we shouldn't be able to live with; it confronts us also with threats to our own existence that no people in history have ever had to live with before. And confronts every single member of society with these threats—even the most privileged, even those in control of things, or rather, out of control of them. Confronts us, in the name of "defense," with the threat of nuclear annihilation. Confronts us, in the name of "national profit," with the threat that our environment may be completely destroyed. The society is this insanely deranged. And yet—we have to face the strange fact that most people are very much less terrified of having things continue as they are than of having people like us trying to change things radically.

For most Americans are in deep awe of things-as-they-are. Even with everything this obviously out of control, they still tell themselves that those in authority must know what they are doing, and must be describing our condition to us as it really is; they still take it for granted that somehow what *is*, what is *done*, must make sense, can't really be insane. These assumptions exercise a tyranny over their minds. Those of us committed to try to bring about change have above all to reckon with this tyranny, have above all to try to find out how to relieve men of it.

I read this past winter of a specially painful example of it, read in the *Times* the story of Michael Bernhardt, who was the young soldier who was the first to talk about the massacre at Songmy. He had volunteered for service in Vietnam—full of faith in the words he had heard from his leaders about what this country was trying to do over there. He found himself almost immediately in the action at Songmy. He didn't take part in the killing. As his comrades began to shoot old people, women, babies—the reporter quotes him: "I just looked around and said, '*This is all screwed up.*'" But after the action it took him quite a while to come forward and talk about it. Because he very quickly experienced the eerie feeling that neither those in command of the war nor most Americans would agree with him. There is an almost unbearable

passage in the story where he is quoted as saying, "Maybe this was the way wars really were. . . . I felt like I was left out, like maybe they forgot to tell me something, that this was the way we fought wars, and everybody knew but me." The reporter writes then that the clash between this experience he had at Songmy and his convictions about his country is something he still cannot resolve. "It became almost a question of sanity." But, he writes, "if he were forced to pick, he would choose his convictions over his experiences." He quotes him as insisting, "We hold out a hope, you know."

A terrible story, and one worth being very attentive to. Here is a young man who was exceptional. He did not take part. He saw the action for what it was: all screwed up. And yet—*he did not know how to cope afterwards with this vision. It just made him feel left out.* Because he suffered from the bondage I speak of—the awe of what *is*, of what is *done*. He suffered from the anxious sense that if one isn't part of it, *whatever* it is, one is then nowhere. And so in effect he dismisses the insight he had. Or does his best to. He chooses to accept not the truth of his own experience but something he has been told is truth: that our country "holds out a hope."

The question is: How do we cure men of this bondage? And of course how do we cure our own selves more completely? How do we set all of us free to trust our own experiences of the truth that everything is all screwed up?

The tantalizing thought is that there can hardly be an American living who has not had *some* glimpse of this truth. This must be so even of those who are most favored by the present system of things. (Even they, for example, must often now try to breathe an air that is unbreathable.) Some among us who want change talk much of the need to "know your enemy." It is of course very necessary to identify those in the society who are going to try the hardest to hold to things as they are. But it is certainly not appropriate to think of oppressed and oppressor as though the distinction between them were absolute. For the first time in history one can say that we are really *all* the oppressed—though some are certainly very much more thoroughly oppressed than others; we are all the threatened—as long as things stay as they are.

How can we release the minds of more and more men to be able to see this? See it not just as a nightmare suffered that one tries to put out of mind; see it as *meaning that we have to act to change things altogether.* How do we give people the courage to trust that if they name things-as-they-are insane, they will not in doing so simply find themselves set adrift?

Much too briefly: I think that those of us who act must always be saying with the actions that we take two things—and *always saying these two things at the same time.*

We have to be saying very strongly—and not just with words of course: Things are not going to stay as they are. The machinery of things-as-they-are is a machinery of death, and we are going to so disrupt it that it will not be able to continue functioning as it has been. To waken men's minds, *to keep them from postponing and postponing all real thought about our condition*, we have first to give them this necessary shock.

But even as we give that shock, we must be communicating something else, too—again not merely with words but above all by our actions. We must be saying: Don't be afraid of *us*. It is the system we are attacking that you need to fear—that all of us need to fear. For it is reckless with lives. *But we are not*. Don't fear us. What we seek is precisely a new community of men in which we are all careful of each other—and of the natural world around us. And look, we are beginning to build that new world right now—in our relations with each other, in our relations even with you. *Don't be afraid of us. We are trying to release men from fear.*

I think that we have to find more and more ways of making this second point, of acting it out. It is going to be very tempting to take the road of striking at the military machine quite blindly, to think: Can't we be more and more effective by being more and more destructive? Especially tempting because, as I have said, in this society a very few people could cause a very great deal of destruction. But again: a very few people could not find a new world among the ruins. This new world can only be built in the company of a great many people.

And so our acts of disruption should be taken in the most careful spirit. The actions through which it is easiest to communicate that spirit of carefulness are actions simply of noncooperation, actions by which we declare to the state: Not with my life!—you'll not commit murder by my hand, or commit it by spending my money, or by applying my wits or my labor. And of course if enough people would declare this by their acts—if enough young men would refuse to fight, and enough of the rest of us support them in that stand, so that more and more would find courage; if enough of us would refuse our taxes; if enough scientists would refuse to loan the state their minds, and enough workers would refuse to work in war industries; if there were enough ready people to launch a general strike—escalating from the recent refusal of students simply to continue their studies as usual—we could end the war by these means alone, and we could also initiate profound changes in the social order.

The trouble is that there are not yet enough people willing to make the changes in their lives that this would involve. And so unless the number of those who are willing grows very rapidly now, there will have to be more of the more aggressive acts taken—such as the blocking and occupation of buildings; and more of the still more aggressive acts such as those taken by

the Catonsville Nine,* the DC 9 and others. There is such a terrible urgency about halting the machinery of death that is still unimpeded. *For our actions even to be effective as symbolic actions—as actions that speak the truth of our condition*—they must communicate this urgency. They must communicate the utter necessity to stop a machinery so careless of lives.

But when we take actions of this sort, it does become immediately more difficult to communicate at the same time our desire for a new spirit among men, a spirit of respect for one another—more difficult to act out that respect right now. May the men and women who take such actions feel the same responsibility to communicate this spirit felt by the Catonsville Nine, the DC 9, the others in that tradition.

May they be careful above all not to harm any person. And careful, too, to make clear that they never would be willing to. May they also be scrupulously careful not to destroy the kind of property that has a valid life meaning for people. Some activists tend to speak of private property as though none of it has ever had such meaning. But some property of course is like the very extension of a man's life—or the extension of many men's lives. May people take patient care to know what they are doing here, make the most sober distinctions—willing to destroy only property that is by its nature deathly or exploitative, and unambiguously so. May they repeat and repeat to themselves the question: Can we by these acts release the minds of more and more people—who should be on our side but who have been paralyzed—so that they will feel free to face the truth of our condition, free to join us?

Postscript

I have suggested that we must always be saying with the actions that we take two things, and always saying these two things at the same time. But I might better have said: at the same time or in close time sequence. For it could not always be possible to make both statements literally at one and the same time, in one and the very same action.

It would often be necessary either to “stand” for the action after it has been taken—finding, inventing occasions to interpret to the public the felt need for that act and the careful spirit in which it was taken—or to build up to it beforehand with a series of more conventional challenges that in retrospect make its true nature clear.

Unless you can be sure of finding ways in which to speak a necessary reassurance even as you provide a necessary mental shock, I would say

* A group which destroyed files taken from a Selective Service office, in an attempt to interfere with the conscription of men to kill and die in Vietnam. (JM)

bluntly: Better not to take the action at all. Just as I would say—with even greater emphasis: Do not take the action, interrupt it at any point, unless you can feel sure that it will cause no serious injury to another.

A final word, about “standing.” More and more activists feel that to stand and wait to be arrested is inappropriate—seems to say that they respect the authority of those who will seek to punish them—when actually part of the message they are trying to communicate is, precisely, that the so-called “authorities” should not be respected as such. I agree very much with this reasoning. The problem remains: how to manage nevertheless to stand in frankness before the *public*—acknowledging their act and seeking to clarify it. Different activists have already solved this problem in a number of different ways—“surfacing” not to surrender themselves but at public rallies or at a continuous series of smaller gatherings; or through privately taped interviews or films later made public—on these occasions either exerting themselves to elude capture or not bothering to (depending on whether they could see themselves as more hampered in their lives as revolutionaries by serving time in jail or by having to live from then on secretly). There is obviously no one correct way in which to act here. There is *only the persistent question* to try to answer: How best to speak by one’s actions—and continue able to speak—in ways that open the minds of others to radical insights about our present condition, and to the courage to trust this new vision and to act upon it themselves.