

## **“You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train”: An Appreciation of Howard Zinn**

by Rev. M. Lara Hoke

April 11, 2010

*a sermon preached at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover*

“I start from the supposition that the world is topsy turvy. That things are all wrong. That the wrong people are in jail, and the wrong people are out of jail. That the wrong people are in power, and the wrong people are out of power. I start with the supposition that we don’t have to say too much about this because all we have to do is think about the state of the world today and realize that things are all upside down.”<sup>1</sup> So said Howard Zinn.

Howard Zinn has been one of my heroes since I first learned of him in the mid 90s, when I was a student in divinity school. It was then that I read Zinn’s most famous book, *A People’s History of the United States*, and I’ve never looked at our world the same way again. That’s something I can say about only a very small handful of books.

I suppose it’s natural that I should preach about Zinn at this time because I was hoping to meet Howard Zinn in April 2010. I am a member of Veterans for Peace – Zinn himself was a member of Veterans for Peace, and a member of the same local chapter, though he didn’t attend chapter meetings. The local chapter was starting to plan an event in Boston that would feature Zinn – the planning had just begun, however, when news came of Zinn’s death in January. He died, by the way, of a heart attack, while swimming in a hotel pool – taking a break before one of his many speaking engagements. He was 87. What an amazing, full life.

I should give a little background on Howard Zinn, for those of you who are not familiar with him. Zinn was a professor of history and political science. He also became well-known for his activism, perhaps particularly in the civil rights movement of African Americans. Zinn taught at Spelman, then a college for black women – during the late 50s and early 60s (ultimately, he was fired from Spelman for siding too aggressively with the students against segregation...) He also became well known, early in his many years teaching at Boston University, for his activism against the US war in Vietnam. He nearly missed out on getting tenure at BU due to his anti-war activism, in fact. He was what is known as a progressive historian, meaning that he taught history from a deliberate point of view. Of course, *all* history is told from a certain point of view, but in his case it was a *different* angle. In his case, his goal was to tell *not* the history of “great men” – the usual history we get growing up in public schools, emphasizing major political and military leaders and the like; instead, his goal was to tell the history of so-called “ordinary people” and their social movements that changed our country, and the world. I’m proud to say that several of his books were published by Beacon Press, a department of the Unitarian Universalist Association. As one telling anecdote, during the 60s Beacon Press asked Zinn to write a book on the NAACP and the civil rights movement. Zinn told them no; that he would instead write about the less-well-known and more-radical Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (pronounced “snick”), which he felt was the more important group relative to the civil rights movement. So he wrote a book for Beacon Press in 1964 called *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Zinn, *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (Seven Stories Press: 2009), pp. 436-437. This quotation also appears early on in the documentary *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train* (First Run Features, 2004, 78 minutes).

But before he became a renowned author, historian and political scientist, Howard Zinn had a more humble personal history. Zinn was born and raised in Brooklyn, son of Jewish immigrants – his father from Austria/Hungary, and his mother from Siberia. Zinn’s parents had limited formal education, and as he describes it in his memoir, called *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, the household he grew up in had no books in it. The first book he ever read was one he found discarded on the streets of New York. As a young adult, Zinn followed in his parent’s working class footsteps, working in a shipyard in Brooklyn for three years. He eventually left the docks to volunteer, with enthusiasm, to serve in the Army Air Corps in World War II. He very much wanted to fight the war against fascism. He served with distinction as a bombardier, bombing targets in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. After the war, Zinn began years of education, paid for by the GI Bill, earning a BA from New York University and later a PhD at Columbia. Those are some of the basics of his life. Oh, and he had two children and a long and happy marriage to Roslyn Zinn, who predeceased him by two years.<sup>2</sup>

I suppose you could say that Howard Zinn was an exemplary model of his generation, called “The Greatest Generation” by many. He came from humble origins; worked hard; fought the good fight in World War II; studied on the GI Bill; had a wife and kids; had a good career, and did better than his immigrant parents – the American dream!

The only problem with that description is this: Howard Zinn came to question just about every stereotype, ideal, and bit of propaganda that I just stated. Zinn wrote, “They tell me I am a member of the greatest generation.... But I refuse to celebrate ‘the greatest generation’ because in so doing we are celebrating courage and sacrifice in the cause of war.” Zinn was an outspoken critic of war throughout his academic career and life as an activist, believing that war, in general, was futile and often – given the number of innocents and children who die – evil. In the last year of his life, Zinn began to speak about the three “Holy Wars”. By that, he didn’t mean religious wars, like the Crusades. No, he used the term “Holy Wars” to describe “the three wars in American history that are sacrosanct, three wars that are untouchable, three wars that are uncriticizable,”<sup>3</sup> as he put it. The three Holy Wars? They are the Revolutionary War; the Civil War; and World War II.

As Zinn concedes, “... all three wars accomplished something.... I mean, that’s why they’re considered holy. They ... accomplished ... independence from England, freedom for the slaves, the end of fascism in Europe...” He goes on, “But the reason I think it’s important to subject them to criticism is that this idea of ‘good wars’ helps justify other wars which are obviously awful, obviously evil. And though they’re obviously awful—I’m talking about Vietnam, I’m talking about Iraq, I’m talking about Afghanistan, I’m talking about Panama, I’m talking about Grenada...—the fact that you can have the historic experience of ‘good wars’ creates a basis for believing... there’s such a thing as a good war. And maybe you can find... parallels between the good wars and this war, even though you don’t understand this war ... [for instance] Saddam Hussein is Hitler. Well, that makes it clear. We have to fight against him... To not fight in the

---

<sup>2</sup> The information in this paragraph and the preceding paragraph comes from Howard Zinn’s memoir, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Howard Zinn, January 8, 2010 talk, transcript at [http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2010/1/8/howard\\_zinn\\_three\\_holy\\_wars](http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2010/1/8/howard_zinn_three_holy_wars)

war means surrender, like Munich.... World War II is a perfect setup for analogies. You compare something to World War II, you immediately infuse it with goodness.”<sup>4</sup>

I don’t have time to go into Zinn’s fascinating analyses of these three wars – and why they weren’t necessarily so wonderful as we’ve been taught to think – but I’ll talk a bit about his own experience in World War II, the war that he says ends up being used, at least subliminally, to justify all war actions since. Howard Zinn felt remorseful most of his life for his actions as a bombardier in the second World War. In particular, he came to be haunted by his own dropping of bombs “on a little town in France [as he said] three weeks before the war was to end, when everybody knew the war was to end and we didn’t need to drop any more bombs.” “Yes,” Zinn said, “there were German soldiers there, hanging around [in the little town in France]. They weren’t doing anything, weren’t bothering anybody, but they [were] there, and [gave] us a good excuse to bomb. We’ll kill the Germans, we’ll kill some Frenchmen, too. What does it matter? It’s a good war. We’re the good guys,” he said.

And he goes on: “One thing—and I didn’t think about any of this while I was bombing. I didn’t examine: ... who are we bombing, and why are we bombing, and what’s going on here, and who is dying? I didn’t know who was dying, because when you bomb from 30,000 feet... It’s very impersonal. You just press a button... and somebody dies. But you don’t see them.... I didn’t hear children screaming. I didn’t see arms being ripped off people. No, [I] just dropped bombs. You see little flashes of light down below as the bombs hit. That’s it. And you don’t think. It’s hard to think when you’re in the military. Really, it’s hard to sit back and examine, ask what you’re doing.... So I didn’t think about any of this until after the war.”<sup>5</sup>

As I spoke about in my sermon for Veterans Day, I served in the United States Navy in the early 90s, during the first Gulf War. I wasn’t in combat, and I never went to the Gulf. I was stationed in Italy during the war, doing some work as a special agent in NCIS (well, it was NIS then) that was related to the war. I’ll never forget the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper that came out when that war ended, in February 1991. *The Stars and Stripes* is the newspaper put out for the men and women of the US armed forces, and when you’re stationed overseas, it’s usually your main source of news (or at least it was back in my day). Here’s the headline from February 28, 1991: “Allies Liberate Kuwait City”. First, note the use of “Allies”. Sounds very World War II, doesn’t it? And note the word “liberate”. Certainly sounds like a holy war – liberation, that’s what we celebrated at our Passover Seder, isn’t it? And those are some big smiles in the picture.<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after this, sometime in early 1991, there was a special insert in the European edition of the *Stars and Stripes*. It was on fancy glossy paper, slick, thick... an American flag was unfurled in the background. I wish I still had this insert – I actually held on to it for years, but apparently at some point I decided to part with it. But it said something very much like, “To the people of the United States, thank you for liberating us. From the people of Kuwait”. Those might not be the precise words, but they are very close. Now, I was young and fairly naïve – I was just 22-years-old – and part of me really did want to believe that I had helped in a valiant effort – that we

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Stars and Stripes*, February 28, 1991 (European edition). I showed a picture of the front page during the sermon. (See page 6 of this sermon.)

had done something good, that we had fought an evil and helped some oppressed people... but this piece of propaganda hit me over the head somehow, and almost made me feel sick to my stomach when I saw it. Somehow, seeing it like that, on that all-too-slick paper – that what, the people of Kuwait supposedly got together and decided to place a glossy flyer in the *Stars and Stripes*? You just *knew* something wasn't right. The flyer didn't make me feel proud. It made me feel... convicted. It made me feel, as Zinn puts it, "that the world is topsy turvy. That things are all wrong. That the wrong people are in jail, and the wrong people are out of jail." I held onto the flyer insert for years because I found it eerily compelling. Looking at it, I just knew that something about our government wasn't what I had hoped for in the idealism of my youth.<sup>7</sup>

Howard Zinn was a radical, and somehow sharing his words and even some of my own thoughts this morning, I cannot help but feel subversive. A little voice in my head tells me I'm being disloyal, unpatriotic. That's because I, like all Americans, have been very carefully taught – to use Oscar Hammerstein's lyric from *South Pacific*, "you've got to be carefully taught" – I have been very carefully taught that to speak out against our country's actions, especially against our military efforts, is unpatriotic. It's somehow against the troops themselves. I think many of us veterans in particular struggle that we don't want to say anything that will make the young men and women currently serving in the military feel badly; we care about them, after all. We've been there – and in my case, I can say the women and men serving now have it worse than I did, with these two endless wars. But Zinn would say it is veterans who need to speak out. Zinn said that veterans are "in a position to explain to people... about the difference between fighting for your country and fighting for your government... between fighting for people and fighting for Halliburton"<sup>8</sup>, between fighting for people and fighting for Big Oil.

We have been carefully taught that "it's my country, right or wrong"... We've all heard "love it or leave it"! Zinn himself admits to feeling a pang when a young woman asked him after one of his lectures, in a hostile tone, "Why do you *live* in this country?"<sup>9</sup> Zinn explained, of course, that his love is "for the *country*, for the people, not for whatever government happened to be in power."<sup>10</sup> Zinn has also famously said that "Dissent is the highest form of patriotism." As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to love this country, this beautiful land, the amazing array of people and cultures and languages found here... this is our country, our land, our people. And as Unitarian Universalists, we are called to love people all over the world, too, and the beautiful cultures and land all over this planet. These are not mutually exclusive things. You can have a special love for this country, your home, and also have a meaningful love for all peoples everywhere. Don't let any government or any false patriot tell you otherwise. As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to hold our government to the highest ideals, and when they fall short, our dissent is indeed "the highest form of patriotism".

Before we close, we need to talk about the moving train. "You can't be neutral on a moving train," Zinn writes, "events are already moving in certain deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that."<sup>11</sup> In other words, I would say, there's no such thing as neutrality. You

---

<sup>7</sup> If anyone reading this sermon has a copy of this flyer, please contact me! [mlhoke@uuma.org](mailto:mlhoke@uuma.org)

<sup>8</sup> From Zinn's remarks at the Veterans for Peace national convention, 2004, in Boston.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, *ibid*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

might like to think you're staying above the fray, not picking a side, and so on. But not picking a side *is* picking a side, just in a passive-aggressive way. When you don't pick a side – when you are theoretically “neutral” – you are taking the side of the *status quo*, of things staying the same. Or, in not picking a side in a choice between various changes (where there is no *status quo*), you are taking the side of whichever person or party is the most powerful at a given moment in time. So, for instance, if you're neither for the “war on terror” nor against the “war on terror”, then you're for it – it's the *status quo*, and if you're not opposing it you're for it by default. And if you're neither for wind turbines nor against them, then you're against them – the *status quo* is a continuing reliance on fossil fuels, and the “powers that be” are those of Big Oil. Be very careful about not taking a side. Be very careful about being too respectful and dutiful. “Historically,” Zinn writes, “the most terrible things – war, genocide, and slavery – have resulted not from disobedience, but from obedience.”

Unitarian Universalists, as people who want to work toward a more just and equitable world, are called to join – or even start – social movements toward those lofty goals. We're called (in the terminology of the UUA's new social justice campaign) to “stand on the side of love”. And Zinn was well aware of how difficult it can be to feel hopeful or empowered when you're standing on the side of the road with a sign, or marching with a small, ragtag band of like-minded others for some cause. But Zinn reminds us that “all social movements start out disconsolate... they all start out small, and feeling isolated... [but] history... [tells us] that small movements become large movements as common sense begins to assert itself... [history tells us that] “what it takes is for movements to persist in the face of what seem like overwhelming odds” – this is how civil rights were won for blacks and now for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community; this is how the women's movement made progress; this is how the anti-war movement truly did hasten the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>12</sup> Zinn reminds us not to lose heart if we never participate directly in a social movement as grand or celebrated as the march from Selma, for instance. He reminds us of the importance of “the countless small actions of unknown people that led up to those great moments. When we understand this,” he writes, “we can see that the tiniest acts of protest in which we engage may become the invisible roots of social change.”<sup>13</sup> “You have to look at the long view,” says Zinn, “you never get immediate satisfaction when you demonstrate.”<sup>14</sup>

I want to close by quoting from a non-academic work of Howard Zinn. After retiring from academia, Zinn wrote a few plays. Perhaps not surprisingly, one play was about political anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman, and another was about the philosopher and political economist Karl Marx. I close with these lines from his play *Marx in Soho*: “Remember, to be radical is simply to grasp the root of a problem. And the root is *us*. I have a suggestion. Pretend you have boils. Pretend that sitting on your ass gives you enormous pain, so you must stand up. You must move, must act... Let's not speak anymore about capitalism, socialism. Let's just speak about using the incredible wealth of the earth for human beings. Give people what they need: food, medicine, clean air, pure water, trees and grass, pleasant homes to live in, some hours of work, more hours of leisure. Don't ask who deserves it. Every human being deserves

---

<sup>12</sup> From Howard Zinn's “War on Terrorism” talk on AOTV (Athol-Orange TV) in 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Zinn, *You Can't Be Neutral*, *ibid*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> AOTV talk, *ibid*.

it.”<sup>15</sup> May we find a way to make it so. May we indeed stand on the side of love. Blessed be, and amen.

GERMANY

EDITION

# The STARS and STRIPES

Vol. 49, No. 318 Thursday, February 28, 1991

B

AUTHORIZED UNOFFICIAL PUBLICATION FOR THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

35c D 8693 A

# Allies liberate Kuwait City

KUWAIT CITY, Kuwait (AP) — With Iraq's shattered occupation army in chaotic flight, allied forces reclaimed Kuwait's capital Wednesday.

British Prime Minister John Major said Kuwait City was under allied control, and Kuwaiti radio reported allied troops were entering the city in a "majestic parade."

"I'm delighted to confirm that Kuwait City is now entirely free," Major said in London. "There are a large number of allied troops actually in Kuwait City, and other operations this morning are going extremely well."

President Bush expressed exuberance and said, "We're going to end that thing and end it right," referring to the war.

Amid wild rejoicing, Kuwaiti troops hoisted the country's colors in downtown Flag Square.

A Pentagon source said Marines on Wednesday secured Kuwait's international airport, south of the city. Marines in M60 battle tanks fought Iraqi armor there on Tuesday.

Far bigger tank battles were taking place to the west in Iraq, where U.S. armored forces were engaging Iraq's Republican Guard.

On the rain-darkened western front, U.S. forces were said to be crippling Iraq's best troops — and preventing others from making a desperate break deep inside Iraq toward Baghdad, Iraq.

The allies have reported relatively light

See **ALLIES** on Page 10

WAR IN THE GULF

SEE PAGES 2 THROUGH 7



A U.S. Special Forces member is mobbed by jubilant residents of Kuwait City during the city's liberation Wednesday

<sup>15</sup> Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho* (South End Press, 1999), pp. 46-47. This excerpt appears late in the documentary *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, *ibid.*