

Journey to a New America
By Grace Lee Boggs

“I love this country not only because my ancestors’ blood is in the soil but because of its potential, what I believe it can become.” This is how my late husband, Jimmy Boggs, used to respond to those who said they hated this country because it had enslaved blacks, put Native Americans into concentration camps and continued to discriminate against people of color. As an auto worker, organizer, writer and speaker, Jimmy was always calling on other African Americans to assume leadership not only in their own communities but in the struggle to make this country one that all Americans, regardless of race, class, religion or national origin, would be proud to call our own.

The video in which Jimmy explains why he loves this country was one of many sources of inspiration at the Spring 2002 “*State of the Possible*” retreat in the towering redwood forests of northern California which was convened to address the question, “Who are ‘We the people’ in the 21st century?”

We came together because we recognized that we are in the midst of a great turning, a time that challenges us to re-affirm our human connection and our commitment to social change. Especially since 9/11 it is becoming increasingly apparent that the administration’s “war on terrorism” is making us more, not less, vulnerable because it is further alienating us from people all over the world. For our own health and safety we need to love America enough to change it.

More than half of Retreat participants were people of color: African Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, Native Americans. We/they are the ones who, because of our marginalization and exclusion, have found it hardest over the years to love and own America. For that reason we are also the ones who have struggled unceasingly to make it worthy of being loved. That is why we were now stepping up to the plate to deepen and broaden the struggle to make it, in Langston Hughes’ words, ‘the land that has never been/and yet must be.’

Vincent and Rosemary Harding, who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s, gave quiet political/spiritual leadership. Since King’s assassination in 1968 the Hardings have been reminding the world that in the last two years of his life King was calling for a radical revolution in values and a radical reconstruction of our society. King’s reasons for opposing the Vietnam War against communism can be applied almost verbatim to the current war against terrorism. “Poverty, insecurity, and injustice,” he said, “are the fertile soil in which communism grows. War is not the answer. We must not engage in a negative anti-communism, but rather in a positive thrust for democracy.”

“Creating a more perfect union,” the Hardings explained, “is sacred work, requiring faith and courage. The only way to protect democracy is to advance it.”

African American educator and writer Belvie Rooks pointed out that viewing ourselves in relationship to Nature (which teaches interdependence) and to four billion years of [the

Earth's] evolution requires that we leave behind the labels 'black' and 'white' and create new language to describe our diversity. "The reality is that we are all one species."

Pamela Chang, Asian American environmental justice organizer, emphasized that "the democracy we're creating is not about winning a seat at the table but about changing the rules of the game. We're addressing the question of power internally, in order to build our sense of self, of family, of community."

Another Retreat participant was Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), whose "Prayer for America" at the Americans for Democratic Action meeting last February has been circulating on the Internet and eliciting tens of thousands of enthusiastic responses. A Croatian-American from middle America whose forefathers were coal miners and steel workers, the slightly-built leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus said that the messages he is getting from all over the country indicate that a new America is emerging, an America of people who want a more peaceful and more just world. Three generations of Americans, he said, are now awaiting a call to create this new America: Seniors, many of whom fought for the principles of democracy during World War II and who now worry about their grandchildren, their pensions, their social security and unaffordable prescription drugs; the New Age generation of the 1960s who want another chance to make this a better world; and the X and Y generation who yearn for something to believe in and a chance to serve.

We were inspired to enlarge our thinking about leadership and possibility by two other videos. the Veterans of Hope interview with Ruby Sales recalling her life as a teenage volunteer in the southern freedom struggle in the 1960s and "Another World is Possible," a 24 minute documentary of this year's World Social Forum in Brazil (Movingimages.org)

My sense is that since 9/11 there are people all over this country engaged in conversations like ours at this Retreat. Their discussions are not reported by the media because they are mostly informal and spontaneous, neighbors exchanging views on porches or in backyards or workers on their lunch breaks. But I suspect that a video of snapshots from these conversations would reveal that a new "We the People" is in the process of being created at the grassroots level..

The State of the Possible retreat series is convened by the Positive Futures Network with support from the Fetzer Institute and several individual donors.