

Overcoming the Biggest Obstacle

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ALTOONA, WI - Gandhi said: “Our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as in being able to remake ourselves.”

For years I’ve been blessed to be asked to travel the state to speak to every imaginable kind of group. Everywhere I’ve gone, I’ve had the chance to do way more listening than speaking. I was inspired to write a book and Blue Jean Nation was formed because of what I kept hearing.

Everywhere I’ve gone I hear something else too. Sometimes it sounds defeatist. Other times powerless. Every once in a while hopeless. Or even helpless.

I get where these feelings come from. So many barriers to true democracy and real representation have been erected. Voter suppression. Gerrymandering of political boundaries. Consolidation of control over news media in fewer and fewer hands. Ever-greater sums of money in politics. Secrecy and hostility to open government laws and traditions. Courts packed with partisans.

These obstacles are formidable. I’ll grant you, the odds are not in our favor.

But the odds have never favored common folk. The odds didn’t favor the abolitionists or suffragists or the civil rights movement either. Or the progressives and populists who were up against the robber barons in the Gilded Age, or exploited West Virginia coal miners, or children working in textile mills, or the original Republicans who gathered in the little white schoolhouse in Ripon Wisconsin, or the women’s rights movement or gay rights movement, or Gandhi in his time or Malala Yousafzai in ours.

Remember, the abolitionists ended slavery. The progressives beat the robber barons. The suffragists got women the vote. The coal miners got unions. The textile mills eventually were forced to respect child labor laws. The original Republicans drove a major party to extinction. Civil rights activists ended Jim Crow. Gandhi led the Indian people to independence. Malala is making it possible for girls to go to school all around the world.

Remember, the obstacles we face today are not new. They are as old as the hills. Voter suppression and gerrymandering were not invented in 2011. These practices are as old as the republic.

The effects of gerrymandering won't be overcome in Wisconsin by enacting Iowa's redistricting system here. Those in office won't pass such a law. It'll be overcome by political realignment, by changing enough hearts and minds of enough voters to thwart the willful rigging of elections.

We won't beat money by amending the constitution, we'll amend the constitution by beating money . . . by breaking its grip on our minds.

All the political professionals and consultants and others with the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" mentality call this unilateral disarmament.

I'm not saying you should unilaterally disarm. I'm saying we should fight with different and more powerful weapons.

We won't beat money by doing what money does. We'll beat it by doing what money can't do.

As the song says, "money talks, but it don't sing and dance, and it don't walk."

Money don't love either. It don't marry. It can't nurse a sick child . . . or comfort a dying loved one.

We don't need what all that money buys. We don't need pollsters to tell us what to think. We can think for ourselves. We don't need speechwriters and teleprompters to put words in our mouths. We can speak for ourselves. We don't need ad agencies to sell us to our neighbors the way they sell laundry detergent and hair care products and beer and potato chips. We can build relationships.

This is why I say that if Blue Jean Nation could only do one thing, my choice would be to contribute in every way we can to loosening and eventually breaking the grip of the political consulting industry that lords over our democracy and our society.

When democracy in America is rescued, it won't be political consultants and professional politicians who do the rescuing. It'll be saved by people who don't practice politics for a living, people with a life outside of politics, people with the odds stacked against them.

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