

8 Ten Ancient (and Not So Ancient) Lessons to Keep in Mind as You Prepare to Participate in the #BillionPeopleMarch

If you've been paying attention to the ecological changes we've been experiencing, it should be clear to you that a human civilization based on unbridled economic and population growth is on course for a head-on collision with the Earth. And the Earth isn't going to yield. So it's time for a global corrective — a movement to redirect humanity down a path that will avert disaster or at least slow us down enough for some to walk away from that crash. Perhaps the actions of the #BillionPeopleMarch will be the first wave of that corrective. And if so, we'd better make sure the actions we take are strategic and effective. With that in mind, I wanted to share some ancient and modern wisdom to inform and inspire as you prepare your actions for December 19th and beyond.

1) “There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit from the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in those who would profit from the new order – the lukewarmness arising partly from fear of adversaries who have the laws in their favor, and partly from the incredulity of mankind who do not believe in anything new unless they have had actual experience of it.”

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

It should be obvious that bringing about a new order — one where we degrow overdeveloped western economies, where we leave the world's fossil fuel reserves in the ground, where we prioritize justice over profit — is not going to be easy. There will be resistance by those who will be harmed as wealth is redistributed or simply erased (such as when oil fields and coal mines are written off as “stranded assets”). But perhaps worse will be the

“lukewarmness” or even resistance by those who should welcome the new order but are afraid of what the changes may bring — those who have lived their whole lives under a consumerist regime and cannot fathom life being lived any other way. This shouldn't discourage you, it should help you stay true to the fight even as you find few others who are interested in helping out or even actively deter you.



2) “A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”

—Mao Tse-tung, Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan

While there are now many examples of successful nonviolent revolutions, and we can hope that that's what the future will bring, no matter what, there will be resistance. And there will be violence (if not enacted by the revolutionaries, at least in reaction to them). Let's hope this sustainability revolution will be as beautiful as a painting, but I'm guessing Mao's insight is right. In which case, I think we should gird ourselves for that reality.

3) “One’s concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one’s distance from the scene of conflict.”

—Saul D. Alinsky, **Rules for Radicals:**

A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals

It would be nice to be able to take the moral high ground at every turn but can we really afford to? With the stakes so high, and our adversaries willing to bend and break the rules (or simply change them to suit their interests), we may have to accept Alinsky’s key insight that using only the most ethical means is a luxury that no combatant can truly afford. Perhaps the high road only leads to defeat.

4) “The important thing in strategy is to suppress the enemy’s useful actions but allow his useless actions.”

And

5) “It is bad to be led about by the enemy. You must always be able to lead the enemy about.”

—Miyamoto Musashi, **The Book of Five Rings**

There is a lot of talk of enemies in these quotes. In part, that reflects a difference in time, culture and context. But in truth, are not our enemies those who are devastating the planet and thus our future — whether thinkingly or unthinkingly? If a CEO apologizes for razing a forest or contaminating a coast, pleading that ‘our shareholders demanded growth,’ does that absolve him from his crimes? Anyone accelerating the ecological collapse we’re heading toward must be defeated, whether he does so enthusiastically or reluctantly, and whether you call him your enemy or not. But to do that effectively, we must ensure that we suppress their useful actions and allow their useless ones. Sadly, our enemies better understand this than we do — and hence we are led about. How much of the climate movement’s energy has been focused on stopping the Keystone XL pipeline? Meanwhile, there are several other pipelines being built, so any victory there will be a symbolic one at best. Knowing this, our wise enemy has battled on this field to draw our soldiers away from all the other battles we should really be fighting. The enemy has set the battlefield and continues to control the game. Considering he’s far better resourced and has far more troops, we must regain the initiative.

6) “The primary thing when you take a sword in your hands is your intention to cut the enemy, whatever the means. Whenever you parry, hit, spring, strike or touch the enemy’s cutting sword, you must cut the enemy in the same movement. It is essential to attain this. If you think only of hitting, springing, striking or touching the enemy, you will not be able actually to cut him.”

—Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*

So much of the social change sector’s energy is wasted on PR, on cultivating donors and on making foundations happy, on building consensus, on blah, blah, blah, that the actual sword-cuts we inflict on our enemies are too few and far between. Granted, our enemy is a hydra-headed Goliath — far too big to effectively wound with our little blades (and let’s be honest, even if we did wound him he’d simply grow five more subsidiaries). But we have to remember: if David had launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise enough money to buy a better weapon instead of simply using his sling to launch a lethal blow at Goliath’s head, then he would have been crushed — even if his campaign was fully funded.

7) “You decide your own level of involvement.”

—Tyler Durden

And

8) “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not”.

—The Once-ler

Two self-evident quotations but important to reiterate: if you show up for your local march and expect the world to change, well, it won’t. Without bold, radical and sustained actions — applied daily and at every level of the system — nothing is going to get better. It’s not. So get organized and get radical.

billionpeoplemarch.org