



a journal of positive futures

Positive Futures Network
P.O. Box 10818
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110-0818

telephone 206 842 0216
facsimile 206 842 5208
subscriptions 800 937 4451
yes@futurenet.org
www.yesmagazine.org

welcome to the *yes!* discussion guide series

YES! Discussion Guides are designed to help you explore your own experiences, opinions, and commitments as they relate to material found in *YES!* magazine. We especially encourage you to use them in group discussions, classrooms, or study circles. We believe that when people gather to talk with mutual respect and caring about the critical issues of our time, they create a powerful avenue for constructive social change.

We've posted selected articles from this issue of *YES!* on our website at www.yesmagazine.org. You're welcome to download and photocopy them free of charge. If you'd like to purchase multiple copies of *YES!* or subscriptions for your class or group, please phone 1-800/937-4451 and ask for the Discussion Group Discount.

***YES!* #26, summer 2003**

finding courage

Activist Robert Jenson recently wrote, "I am finally ready to admit what for months I have kept hidden: I am terrified." These are frightening times. Ask people what they most fear and you may get different answers—terrorism, war, crackdown on civil liberties, joblessness, poverty—but these days there is something to terrify everyone. These are not only frightening times; they are times defined by fear. Many of the things that terrify us are in fact themselves responses to fear, from preemptive war to attacks on dissent, or crackdowns on immigrants. It is a spiral of fear.

What ought we to fear? Why are we so afraid? How did we get to this state? And how might we leave it? Where can we find courage? The authors in this issue describe the fear they have encountered—their own, others' fears of them, our cultural fears—and offer routes to courage.

This discussion guide centers on the following articles. You might want to discuss a different one at each session.

- Susan Griffin, "Fearlessness"
- Sarah van Gelder interviews Robert Jay Lifton on "The Meaning of War"
- Michael Nagler, "The Time for Nonviolence is Now"
- Doug Pibel, "Safeguarding the Vote"

Fearlessness

Susan Griffin describes herself as a not particularly courageous person. She's not a professional activist who's used to being arrested; she was cold and stiff-kneed when she was arrested recently in Washington, DC at an anti-war demonstration. And yet she says she was happy the day she went to jail. She found a place of fearlessness, even of joy.

For many people, getting arrested is taboo, a terrifying and shameful prospect. And yet many, including those arrested during the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, came to take pride in their arrests, as part of a righteous struggle. Other people draw the line they fear to cross somewhere else. Some find even the idea of



participating in a demonstration frightening, shameful, or intimidating, even if it doesn't involve arrest.

- Would you consider committing civil disobedience? Are there any circumstances in which would you consider breaking the law or intentionally getting arrested? What political activities scare or intimidate you? Under what circumstances would you consider doing them anyway?

- A recent study found that those who engage in acts of political organizing, including demonstrations, get a sense of empowerment, pleasure, and community from it. What emotions do you associate with activism? If you have engaged in activism, what was the experience like? Have you ever gone ahead and done something you were afraid to do for a political or moral cause? How did it feel? Are there political activities you've participated in that felt better or worse than others? What made the difference?

The meaning of war

Robert Lifton describes our historical moment as menaced by apocalyptic tendencies. He defines the apocalyptic impulse as an impulse toward vast destruction in the service of renewal and suggests that it is deeply seductive, providing a sense of certainty, self-improvement, and immortality.

- Have you or anyone you know been involved in any apocalyptic movements? What drew you or someone you knew to them? Were they satisfying in the way that Lifton describes? What led you or someone you knew away from them?

- What other activities have given you a sense of self-improvement, courage, or moral clarity?

- Lifton describes the United States as pulled between a capacity for change and a reactive tendency. Does this seem true to your experience? Have you seen this played out in your own communities or in people you know? What events have shifted energy toward one or the other of these tendencies? How have you seen your own community shifted in this regard by 9-11?

- Do you think Lifton is correct when he describes the greatest opportunity of this historical moment as a deepening sense of connection between all human beings? Have you had experiences in which you gained a sense of your connection to humanity, of what Lifton calls "species self"?

The time for nonviolence has come

According to Michael Nagler, we are witnessing the shrinking effectiveness of war as a means of settling disputes and the growing power of nonviolence. People around the world have discovered that they can successfully resist overpowering military force through collective will, he says, and have been developing techniques to focus that willpower and push violence out into the open, where it grows increasingly unacceptable to the oppressed, to those imposing the violence, and to the rest of the world. Recently, millions of anti-war demonstrators engaged in the first-ever worldwide expression of will, becoming what has been called "the other superpower."

- What is it that makes nonviolence more effective now? If someone had wanted to, say, throw off the Romans' imperial control through nonviolent action, would it have been possible? Why or why not? What historical developments are crucial? How important is the development of global communications technology?

- Is nonviolence a universal requirement or merely a sometimes-useful strategy? Nelson Mandela, for example, during the struggle against apartheid, rejected demands that the African National Congress renounce violence as a strategy. Is nonviolence always required or are there times when violence is necessary? Have you seen nonviolent action work? What made it succeed? Have you seen it fail? In what way and why? Faced with an invasion and oppression of your community, what would you do to resist it?

Safeguarding the vote

The 2000 presidential election was a morass of hanging and dimpled chads, voters wrongfully "scrubbed"



from the rolls, butterfly ballots, and Electoral College absurdities, and was ultimately decided by Supreme Court fiat. Voting machines didn't work, nor did the press' exit polls. The nation's voting system had to be fixed. So states and counties around the country began installing electronic voting machines, while, quietly, the national exit polling system was scrapped. Problem solved? Quite the opposite, warn a growing number of people, including an unlikely group of grassroots activists—computer scientists. Electronic voting machines that do not provide a physical paper trail are completely unverifiable, they say. There is no way for a voter to know if his vote was recorded the way he intended. And with exit polling gone there is no other way to check if what the machines spit out is indeed the will of the majority.

Around the country, a number of oddities have surfaced around electronic voting machines. Websites such as www.blackboxvoting.com describe many anomalies that together form an ominous picture.

- What role does trust in voting—the assurance that each and every vote is counted—play in your sense of living in a democracy? What would you include on a list of essentials of a democracy? Do you vote? Why or why not?

- What could be done to increase your trust in voting procedures? If you don't vote, what would get you to vote?

- Have there been any oddities like those described in "Safeguarding the Vote" in your state or community? What community discussions have there been about the issue or about voting procedures? Are there any opportunities for public input on voting methods?

- If you vote, through what mechanisms do you do it (absentee, filling in a bubble or an arrow with a pencil on paper, pressing a mechanical lever, computer, etc.)? Does your locality use electronic voting machines? Do you get a paper receipt? Do the machines provide any paper trail for verifying the votes? What are the recount procedures? What companies provide the voting machines?

We welcome feedback on your experience in using our discussion guides. E-mail comments to DiscussionGuides@futurenet.org. Download additional copies of this guide at www.yesmagazine.org. YES! is published by the Positive Futures Network, an independent, non-profit organization whose mission is to support people's active engagement in creating a more just, sustainable, and compassionate world.

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