

book review: **By Life's Grace - Musings on the Essence of Social Change**

Fran Peavey

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Reviewed by Larry Hollar

Fran Peavey is a self-described "change agent," a dose of leaven in the muddled mush in which our world finds itself. Each of the essays, memories and poems of *By Life's Grace: Musings on the Essence of Social Change* casts its own light on how she engages in "heart politics" while remaining unembittered and delightfully lyrical even as she works to undo poverty and exploitation of people and the earth. What she offers here is useful and touching to all who see ending hunger as part of a broader struggle for justice in our day.

Peavey's life path has included ventures as a teacher, cab driver, designer and seller of furniture, and com-

munity organizer. Previous books include *Heart Politics* and *A Shallow Pool of Time*, and she cofounded Interhelp, an international network of activists who explore the spiritual, psychological and political dimensions of social change.

As her activism has flowered, she has learned the technique of "strategic questioning" -- to risk asking questions that have no finite answers but can change angles of vision on problems and in turn mobilize decisive action. Her strategic questions aim to end apathy and create motion. Rather than foreclose choices, they emphasize options; rather than resting contentedly on the surface of the issue, they try always to dig deeper. She avoids "why" questions (they lead to defensiveness) and "yes or no" questions (they end dialogue). Her questions, therefore, are empowering because they gently but persistently wrest from us answers we can live and work with. With new perspectives alternative visions of the future can be seen, possibilities of change explored, obstacles identified, and concrete actions confirmed.

To be sure, there's no magic here -- just hard work and potentially life-changing insights for both questioner and questioned. She relates how she herself was transformed while working with people concerned about pollution of the Ganges River in India. The people living there saw the problem as a human failure to take care of the sacred river rather than as a simple question of the physical state of the river requiring technological repair. The solutions, then, took on an entirely different (in part spiritual) dimension from those Peavey thought would apply, and her attitude toward the task changed as well.

Listening, then, is vital. In travels abroad she's gone so far as to carry a sign: "American Willing to Listen." Then she simply sits down in a public place waiting to see what might happen. What freeing fun! How refreshing it would be indeed if every development worker from a U.S.

voluntary organization or government agency were so transparently ready to hear what people in the Two-Thirds World might have to say about their lives and our intersection with them. Peavey insists that listening attentively to people's pain and recognizing that they bring different "change views" to the process of profound social change are critical tasks for each of us who aim to be catalysts toward ending hunger and poverty.

"The goal of life is to create beauty and life-ness; the goal of political life is to search for the maximum participation in all decisions," Peavey says. She is thus both radically democratic and soulfully creative: a poet who has felt deeply the major social dislocations of our time. Reading passages which describe her anguish over the 1991 Persian Gulf War when she and a small group debated how to cope with their alienation from the nation's decision to intervene militarily in the Middle East conflict, I found myself longing however for her to tell more of this group process rather than simply talking (in her typically rather dense prose) about her own reactions. All of us who find ourselves outside the mainstream political decision-making these days need a glimpse of how like-minded groups can give us support and nurture.

Even more moving was her personal battle with HIV, first diagnosed as HIV-positive then retested and found HIV-negative. Poignantly she describes her feelings toward friends who have tested definitely positive. In a sense her relief at her own escape from HIV was tinged with ambivalence at losing the solidarity of community in the shared yet personal struggle against stigma and inevitable death from AIDS.

Peavey is clear but generous in confronting forces arrayed against what she values. "Anytime I find myself with people I have been estranged from, I grow tremendously," she says. "I learn from their perspective, from confronting my own fears and

prejudices, and from conquering alienation." The essays titled "Dear White Men" and "My Dear Friend, George Bush" reflect a spirit that, without condescension, sense the woundedness and vulnerability that underlie the way many leaders use power and express bravado.

The alternative to traditional power Peavey offers is "heart politics." Heart politics involves centering on your own skills and carefully nurturing them, while avoiding "I can change the world" complexes and the trap of perfectionism. Heart

politics requires building bridges to those who are different, finding support groups, and above all being ready to change yourself even while seeking deep social change. She sees this whole serious task in the context of a creative search for beauty and loving relationships amid an aura of deep sensitivity and refreshingly good humor. In truth, there may be no more urgent agenda for anti-hunger advocates in these trying days than to pay attention to the likes of Fran Peavey.

Reviewer Larry Hollar is a Regional Organizer with Bread for the World, the grassroots Christian anti-hunger lobbying organization. A former lawyer, Hollar is also a biblical story-teller and singer and a lay church leader who sees "more clearly now" his vocation as a change agent.

Resources

ILO Films and Videos

(Direct inquiries to ILO Publications, ILO, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland)

IMAGES of men's and women's roles in two ILO Projects [in Nepal and Uganda]. 1993. 26 min. VHS cassette video and 32-page leader's discussion manual. Introduces the viewer to women and men who speak frankly about their troubles, triumphs and hopes as they work toward equality.

Shackled Children. 1993. (55 min. VHS) Co-produced as a television documentary by ILO and the French CAPA Agency. Heart-breaking expose of child labor around the world; awarded "Best Documentary on Social and Political Questions" at Banff (Canada) Television Festival. Available in English, French and German (generous discount in developing countries). (*Hunger Notes subscribers only: World Hunger Education Service may be able to lend its copy for educational purposes.* -- ed.)

Periodicals

ILO Washington Focus. Quarterly. Free. Editor: Donald S. Smyth, Public Affairs Officer. From the ILO Washington Branch, 1828 L St. NW, Ste. 301, Wash. D.C. 20036 (tel. 202-653-7652; fax. 202-653-7687).

International Labour Review. (ISSN 0020-7780) Bimonthly. Published by ILO, Geneva. Subscription in USA, \$64. Order from ILO Publications Center in Albany (see "Books"). Discusses recent research by

ILO and others into economic and social topics of international interest affecting workers.

Labor's Heritage. (ISSN 1041-5904) Quarterly publication of the George Meany Memorial Archives, AFL-CIO, Silver Spring, Md. Subscriptions: \$19.95 in USA, \$24.95 in Canada, \$29.95 elsewhere. A scholarly journal on history of labor organizing and unions in the USA. Re: child labor: see summer 1994 for photos by David L. Parker, M.D., on similarity between child workers in the U.S. around 1900 and child labor in developing countries today -- "Stolen Dreams: Portraits of the World's Working Children.")

Monthly Labor Review. (ISSN 0098-1818) Annual subscriptions: \$25 in USA, \$31.25 elsewhere. Single copy \$7. Published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Primary focus is on economic and labor issues in the USA. (Sept. 1994, is a special issues on ILO's 75th anniversary.)

Multinational Monitor, (ISSN 0197-4637) 10 issues per year. Annual subscription \$25. Published by Essential Information, Inc., P.O. Box 19405, Washington, D.C. 20036. Provides critical reporting on multinational enterprise activities globally with emphasis on protection of human rights, environment, and health and welfare of workers and consumers.

Our Planet. Magazine for Sustainable Development. (ISSN 1013-7394) Bimonthly. Free. Published by the U.N. Environment Program, P.O. Box 30552, Nairobi, Kenya.

World of Work. Magazine of the ILO. (ISSN 1020-0029) 5 issue per year. Free by ILO Bureau of Public

Information in Geneva. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by ILO Washington Branch (above). June 1994 is the 75th anniversary issue "The ILO -- Looking back. Looking forward.")

Books from the ILO

(Order from the ILO Publications Center, 49 Sheridan Ave., Albany, NY 12210. Tel. 518-436-9686. Fax 518-436-7433. ILO sponsors research on a wide range of topics. For a free copy of *ILO Publications Catalogue 1994-1995* or to receive the bimonthly update, *ILO Publications*, contact the Albany center or the ILO Washington Branch.)

From want to work: job creation for the urban poor. By the Policies and Programs for Development Branch (PPDB), ILO, Geneva. 1993. ISBN 92-2-109086-8. 56 pp. Free from the PPDB.

ILO. 75 Years of Making a Difference in the World of Work. A booklet of facts for Americans issued by the ILO Washington Branch Office. 84 pp. Free from the ILO Washington Branch (above).