dot matrix
Trying for Springs
2006

Anarchy: a journal of desire armed

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More faults are committed while we are trying to oblige than while we are giving offense.

— Tacitus

As people who reject the status quo, we are all critics. But most of us have learned how to critique badly, and so we either are, or are perceived to be, judgmental, dogmatic, sloppy, and ideological, as opposed to helpful, contextual and interesting.

Anarchist culture, to the extent that it operates on middle class white (protestant) values, is a culture of interpersonal niceness, with a mythology that tells us that people respond better to support and that support always looks like calm voices and careful communication, that good intent on everyone's part is not only essential but is always apparent. (If we are paying attention, we can all remember times when people have said sadistic things to us in a calm voice, and other times when people have hurt us needlessly from good intentions.) Sometimes none of the above is true, frequently it doesn't need to be true, and in fact we are hampered by the assumption that it is true. Not only that,but support and care look different coming from different people. Especially in a culture that has mixing of diverse peoples, it is inappropriate to expect that nice, support, or care, will (or should) always if look the same. The homogenization of what support is supposed to look like increases as more and more people rely on and learn from therapists — people trained in formal institutions to interact with their clients in specific ways (ways that are considered neutral, but that reflect and promote values from a specific culture). And many times this increasingly narrow range of options means that our bottom line is departure, that is, the conflict resolution tactic that we fall back on more and more is the abandonment of the conflict, be it embodied in person, place, or situation.

This tendency towards abandonment seems to increase how often and desperately people cling to the rhetoric of community. Community comes to be misunderstood as a place where everyone likes each other, where everyone agrees with each other; it could be better understood as a place where people appreciate what they like about each other and live with what they don't like, where there is enough of a buffer of size

and variety to allow that and where, even if and when people leave, they don't disappear.

lf we broaden our range of conflict options, what do we have? Talking to people more, and more creatively, about our problems, and being engaged in other people's problems more and better than we are now. Being around long enough to see things through, and (if we travel) of coming back frequently enough, and for long enough, to maintain connections and information about significant events. Becoming tougher people, who challenge each other emotionally as well as ideologically and ethically, who ask each other (and ourselves) hard questions including "how do we live with insoluble discrepancies?" (The point of these hard conversations is to increase our ability to meet each other's needs in real life situations, from violence to arrest to drug use to raising children to dying.)

What kind of support do we need to learn in order to become tougher (that is, able and willing to keep fighting for what we want when things are difficult)? Obviously there is not one answer for this. Just as obviously, we are all traumatized by this culture, and to the extent that we are explicitly and consciously outside of the mainstream, we get stepped on and beaten up. So being gentle with ourselves and each other is appropriate. But not always appropriate. The more monolithic the concept of support comes to be, the more proud or comfortable the role of victim, and the less likely we are to recognize our full range of option for acting in the world.

An appropriate toughness includes being able to avoid getting wrapped up in questions of intention. (Intention is too often brought up as a way to manipulate and deflect.) The ability to get something useful out of someone's critique does not depend on how well-intentioned the critic is. How many stories have we heard of people who were told they couldn't do something and were motivated to succeed *by that resistance*? How many times are we told that "we can succeed" by people who care nothing for us and merely want to sell us something?

Anarchists have chosen to be against most things in this culture, have chosen to fight on most possible fronts. As part of that fight, we take on our deepest assumptions about what we are taught, about appropriate relationships to other people and the rest of the world. This requires

being tough in a way that nice society doesn't teach us or support. How do we learn to be tough in the ways that we need to be?

How well we are who we want to be is an issue of luck, which we can't do anything about, and of will, which we can.

> A good critic is the sorcerer who makes some hidden spring gash forth unexpectedly under our feet.
>
> — Francois Mauriac