QUIET NO MORE

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NEW POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN CANADA AND AROUND THE GLOBE

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To Clarita, who helped me climb this mountain
To Erma Davison, my grandmother and writing muse
To Adele and Emery, whose generation inherits
our successes, mistakes, and uncertain future

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PREFACE:
WHY WRITE THIS BOOK?

Writing a book is a long, exhaustive struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.

For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed.

And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a POLITICAL purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

– George Orwell.[1]

> *You have a right to express what you see, what you feel, and what you think. To be bold. To be as bold with your vision as you can possibly be. Our salvation, to the extent that we have one, will come out of people realizing the crisis of our species and of the planet and offering their deepest dream of what's possible.*
>
> — *Alice Walker*[2]

I wrote this book to make sense of my experience as an activist, both in theoretical and practical terms. To a great extent, that experience has been driven by sentiments expressed in the above quotations, both of which come from writers I deeply respect. At its core, this book is about the recognition of injustice, the curiosity to imagine alternatives, and the desire to seek change. At a formative moment in my education, that is the path I chose: I realized something was wrong with the world and decided my life must be devoted to changing it. That realization inspired me, haunted me, nurtured me, and willed me through challenging times. Nevertheless, once I understood the power of grassroots activism, of campaigns based on the ideas, talents, and dreams of everyday people, I was hooked; I needed to do more, know more, and experience more. As my intellectual capacities developed, that understanding morphed into a desire to write about what I've seen, heard, and done first-hand. What follows is a brief sense of that journey, and why it motivated me to write this book. I hope it gives readers a better sense of where I'm coming from, and why talking about activism is as important as doing it first-hand.

Since my first days in Canada's student movement, I've learned countless lessons about movement-building, conflict, and effective activism. It was during this early period, in 1995, that I first appreciated the power of grassroots activism when a conservative government in Ontario cut social assistance benefits (or "welfare") for the poor by 21.6 per cent. I remember being in graduate school and seething at the poor-bashing on

regular display in the mainstream media, which shrieked about "welfare cheats," among other pejoratives.

My formative years came from a family headed by a single mother that relied on social assistance at certain moments to survive. The thought that our family, or any low-income family, for that matter, was a social burden infuriated me. When I was very young, after a tough divorce, my family was down on its luck and needed social supports to get back on track (which, thankfully for us, did happen). But the idea that society would be better off with fewer groceries on our shelves was appalling, as was the notion that we reaped generous benefits afforded by hard-done "taxpayers." I snapped, asked a friend to accompany me to Ontario's provincial legislature, and waited for an opportune moment to catcall Ontario Premier Mike Harris from the visitor's gallery. When I did it (and was arrested for it), I was shocked at the degree of support that came. After being detained for a short while, I walked out to a battery of cameras and reporters who asked why I had disrupted the premier. "I had no choice," was my answer, "when this premier disrupts the lives of poor families. Beating up on the poor has become a sport lately, and I've frankly had enough of it."

Three years later, I found myself in tense conversations with fellow student activists, and once again appreciated the power of grassroots activism. By 1998, I had immersed myself in campus organizing and earned an elected position in the Canadian Federation of Students. But when planning began for our yearly rally against tuition fee increases, I was surprised at the divergence of views. Some advocated a rally, as usual, outside Ontario's legislature, featuring speeches from politicians about visions for post-secondary education. Others (like me) wanted to put the emphasis elsewhere, and hold our Toronto rally at Bay and King Streets, right in the heart of Canada's financial district. Politicians, we insisted, were merely distractions from a larger agenda — it was the big banks, after all, that benefited from a growing mountain of student debt. Our arguments prevailed, and the January 28, 1998, rally was a watershed

moment in Canada's activist scene. Thousands attended, while hundreds later occupied the offices of the Toronto-Dominion Bank overnight to protest the rising costs of post-secondary education. Passers-by brought us food and slapped us with high-fives. Even media coverage was generally positive. As Occupy Wall Street did in 2011, we were sticking it to Canada's powerful, and most were pleased to see it happen.

Three years later, after going back to finish my graduate studies in political science, I was once again embroiled in a major conflict as a university worker, and reminded of the power of grassroots activism. York University's negotiators, under significant pressure from the government of Ontario, served notice that they wanted "tuition indexation," among other things, taken out of my union's collective agreement. That may seem like a technical, insignificant demand, yet it was anything but — tuition indexation (which by 2001 only existed for graduate students at York) meant our employer could not raise tuition fees to take back wage increases. Instead, when tuition increased, as it did every year, our wages would be indexed to the higher cost, and we therefore lost no ground. Our employer didn't like that, and appealed to undergrads and others to side with it.

Given our activism, however, this strategy backfired. My colleagues worked hard to mobilize union members and communicate to undergrads and the wider campus community that York management was going to make the cost of graduate school unaffordable. We documented the rise in executive salaries (York's president at the time had a personal staff of five, complete with a luxury car and driver), and asked whether "cupboard is bare" claims could be believed. We held mass meetings that propelled an eventual strike lasting seventy-eight days through the winter and drew on the creativity, passion, and talent of research assistants, teaching assistants, and contract faculty (who by then did 40 per cent of teaching on campus). We faced a hostile mainstream media, university officials who engaged in petty attacks, and even dissension from our own ranks as the strike wore on. But despite all that, the power

of our union changed the context of university life. Until then, graduate school was a largely atomizing experience where we separately toiled to please our academic masters. During the strike, we came together, supported each other, and ultimately took the tuition indexation clawback (and other things) off the table. We won a decent settlement at a time when many unions stood still. I was never more proud to be a union member, a student of political science, and a believer in people-driven politics.

I spent several years after that engaged in movements for peace and global justice, and managed, thankfully, to finish my academic work in these very areas. As I was wrapping up my dissertation, some Toronto activists were inspired to help conscientious objectors (or "war resisters") in the US military who had fled to Canada to avoid service in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars. Soon a movement emerged, known as the War Resisters Support Campaign (WRSC), to do precisely this, built largely on the experience of war resisters during the Vietnam era. In 2005, I became a WRSC activist in the Ottawa-Gatineau region where my partner and I had moved to pursue new jobs, and this deepened my understanding about activism in our highly militaristic era. This campaign achieved several gains, not the least of which was some reprieve for soldiers who would otherwise be subject to flawed military tribunals. On a more profound level, however, our campaign contributed to policy shifts in the US military itself, a remarkable outcome for a grassroots effort with few resources. I will cite the experience of two war resisters in Ottawa to support this point.

The first, James Burmeister, used our campaign to challenge atrocities being committed by sniper teams he witnessed in downtown Baghdad during the initial years of the Iraq War. These teams, according to Burmeister, placed street-level cameras on tripods with signs reading "Property of the US Government" in English and Arabic. When civilians approached these cameras, snipers were ordered to open fire, a practice Burmeister was told would meet "kill targets" established by Central

Command. After arriving in Ottawa in 2005, Burmeister drew public attention to the role of "small kill teams." Within weeks, former military comrades informed Burmeister that the "small kill teams" had been disbanded in his unit. And so, with a modest grassroots effort, the streets of Baghdad were made safer for war-torn Iraqis.

Bethany Smith, another soldier we helped, challenged the persecution and harassment of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (GLBT) soldiers in the US military. Smith, like many GLBT soldiers, endured constant abuse in basic training when her sexual orientation became known. She faced months of threats, assaults, and taunts from fellow soldiers and higher-ranking officials. Smith knew her base (Fort Campbell, Kentucky) had a reputation for anti-gay brutality. In 1999, a gay soldier named Barry Winchell had been beaten to death in his own bunk. Following a death threat posted in her dorm room, Smith fled Fort Campbell with another soldier. She sought refugee status in Ottawa and spoke out against the US military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. Sources from inside the US military have said this contributed to pressure that encouraged the review of "Don't ask, don't tell" under the Obama administration, which led to a partial repeal of the policy. Like Burmeister's case, Smith's also confirmed the value of community organizing and reinforced my own interest in grassroots activism.

The experiences I describe in this preface are the backdrop to what follows, and my primary motivation for writing this book. They have led me to believe in the enduring value of bottom-up change, where grassroots activists are quiet no more: The most effective campaigns allow people to take politics into their own hands and shape it themselves. That is a theme I saw in the other cases documented here, and it has a profound resonance. I invite you to read on, debate what you read, and apply it to your own work as an activist or concerned citizen.

I want to thank activists like Bethany Smith and James Burmeister for helping me continue on my path. I also want to thank Rachel Corrie (may she rest in peace), Tim DeChristopher, Michael Moore, Cornel

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