

Howard Zinn: Historian of the Human Spirit

By Antonino D'Ambrosio, January 28, 2010

"There is no death...People die only when we forget them...If you can remember me, I will be with you always."

— Isabel Allende (Eva Luna)

For nearly a quarter of a century, I have found solace in the above quote whenever someone close to me dies. I first invoked it as a hopeful mantra when my father died when I was fifteen and now I turn to it once again upon learning of the sad news of Howard Zinn's passing.

Like many, I was lucky enough to learn from Zinn by discovering his work at a time in life where it served as an antidote to the harmful illness that makes it seem that "America is a day," a way of living in the world where there is no sense of history or hope for the future. This anti-history took on new shape and meaning for those of us with the misfortune of attending grade school during the Reagan years. I'm sure more than a few of you remember those old world maps where the U.S. was placed squarely in the center and was seemingly five times larger than it actually is. Or that Russia was the "Evil Empire" and the U.S. the "shining city of the hill."

History seemed more like a Saturday morning cartoon where we always win, nothing really bad happens to us, and we really do nothing bad to anyone. I couldn't find myself or my family in any of the "we's," "us," or "anyone's."

In Howard Zinn's direct, sincere and often fiery voice, I first heard the words that fit the snapshots of the life and history I knew. His words imbued with compassion, the main ingredient of courage, helped push me down the difficult yet rewarding path of thinking for others.

Zinn was great at moving people, inspiring so many to aspire for something better. The millions of books bearing his name still sold all over the world that come to rest on bookshelves after the reader mark entire pages, underline sentences, and scribble notes in the jacket, are just a small indication of his impact.

As someone who first began to understand the world through do-it-yourself popular culture movements like punk rock, Zinn's DIY approach to history and citizenship made me understand that my families story—immigrant, working class, union people—was not only relevant it was real and important: it was the people's history.

There are moments in life that serve as validation, a sign that you are in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. For me, that moment presented itself when I sought out Zinn to discuss a recent article, book, and even film I was working on (I've been privileged to be published alongside him in the pages of The Progressive). At each request, he spoke openly and thoughtfully, offering me all he knew. A friendship blossomed and when I told him that the subject of my current book, Johnny Cash, admired his work, Zinn was humbled. "Really?" he told me. "Well, isn't that something because I found him quite extraordinary."

As I reflect on the many accomplishments of Zinn's life, I look once again to the quote listed above for it best describes how Howard Zinn lived his life. Zinn dedicated himself to the fight against forgetting and the struggle to honor history by telling the truth. For me, his work did more than pour a blazing light into the

cracks of American history spackled over by the powerful to conceal the true stories that are shared by the majority of human beings: he made the invisible insurrection of the human spirit shine like a beacon in the dense fog of history.

As history is known to do, it played the ironic jester as the publication of Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* coincided with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The two arose out of the same historical era but represented the present and future American epoch with drastically divergent ideas and worldviews. One believed in the American spectacle, the other in the American people. Both would alter the political and cultural landscape of America forever. And on the day that we lost Zinn, history once again showed its biting wit, as history takes another step forward as America's first Black President, one that Zinn was so willing to critically press to step-up to the challenge of "hope," was due to deliver his first State-of-the-Union address.

Here is where we must not mourn Zinn, nor relegate him to the dustbin of history remembered only with one-dimensional clichés. We must honor him by not forgetting what a people's history is and what it represents for it is the quiet revolution of the human spirit, which never stops moving forward no matter how many attempts are made to pull it back and keep it silent. This is the true significance of Zinn's work: there is only truth when there is honesty. We must be honest with our history, we must be vigilant against the forces that oppose democracy, and we must be steadfast in the pursuit of justice. We must be sovereign as a people.

Just a few days ago, I had spoken with Zinn. He had graciously made himself available in the coming months to participate with me in a few public events for my current book and film. He spoke in a hopeful tone that there were many young, strong voices out in the world. He mentioned writers like Dave Zirin, Jeremy Scahill and dropped my name in there. I was deeply moved by his belief in my work. I can only hope that now his words and how he lived will continue to arouse compassion and courage. In the end, Howard Zinn will never stop informing us on our ultimate responsibility of being human.

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