



RLM Art Studio is a union shop that produces and sells artwork Ricardo has made over the years as posters, cards, buttons, shirts and more. We also produce custom button pins at bulk prices for campaigns and causes. Browse and order online at [RLMArtStudio.com](http://RLMArtStudio.com).



# TENDING THE SOIL



from trickster artist & activist

**RICARDO LEVINS MORALES**



# TENDING THE SOIL

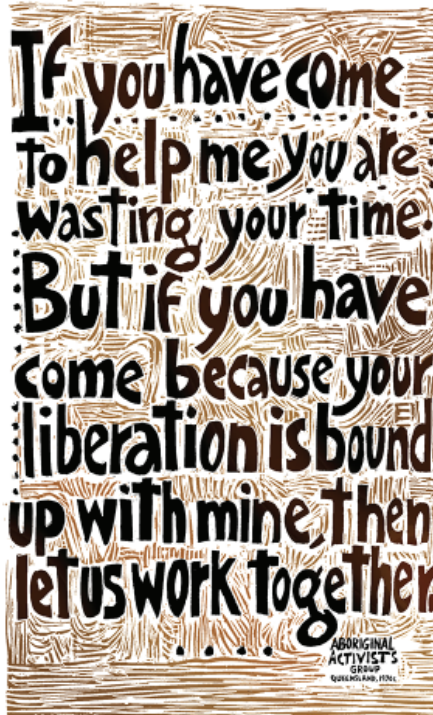
## LESSONS FOR ORGANIZING

by RICARDO  
LEVINS MORALES

The eight “lessons” in this zine were originally presented as a series of short videos produced by Line Break Media.

You can view them at [RLMArtStudio.com/category/videos](http://RLMArtStudio.com/category/videos).

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Ricardo Levins Morales is an artist and organizer based in Minneapolis. He uses his art as a form of political medicine to support individual and collective healing from the injuries and ongoing reality of oppression.

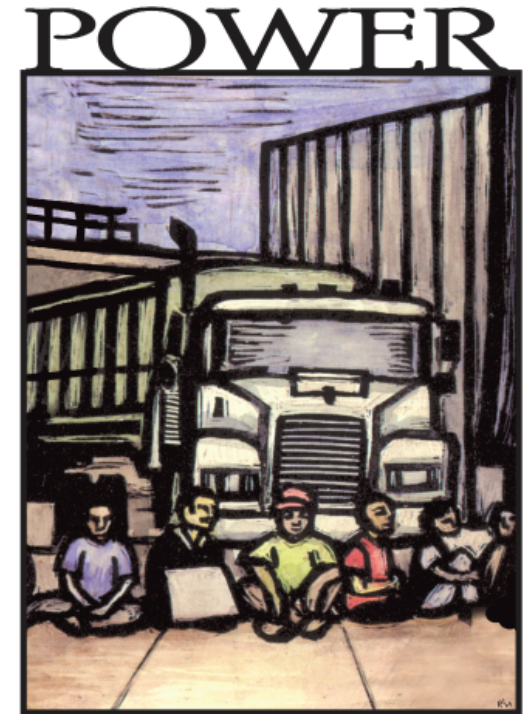
Ricardo was born into the anti-colonial movement in his native Puerto Rico and was drawn into activism in Chicago when his family moved there in 1967, including support work for the Black Panthers and Young Lords and later participating in or acting in solidarity

with farmers, environmental, labor, racial justice, antiwar and other struggles for peoples' empowerment. In addition to his art, he also leads workshops on creative organizing, social justice strategy and sustainable activism, and mentors and supports organizers.

You can learn more about Ricardo, and browse or purchase his posters, cards, buttons, shirts and more at [RLMArtStudio.com](http://RLMArtStudio.com). RLM Art Studio is a proud union shop, part of TNG-CWA Local 37002 in the Twin Cities.

size car, and one was a little compact. And no matter who sat in what seat, the person in the compact always drove more carefully. The person in the Humvee just sort of zoomed along oblivious because they can run over a Volkswagen Bug and not even feel the crunch.

If they had had a bicycle example in there too, I think that they would be even more aware, because the bicyclist needs to be aware even of every pothole. The Humvee driver doesn't need to notice anything.



That translates into political power and other forms of power.

The United States lost the war in Iraq, and further in Afghanistan, because they were driving a Humvee.

Being by far the most massively important and powerful military force on earth, they simply thought they could drive over all the little Bugs and the trees, and not pay attention to the layers of culture and loyalties and consciousness that exist in both of these countries.

The very advantage that they had militarily guaranteed and led to military defeat.

I think that's the way we need to look at the conflicts in which we're involved.

The things that both our foes and ourselves think are the demonstrations of their power are also the cause of their downfall. We have to be the trickster in order to understand how to develop our choreography around that.



# THE EMPIRE TRIPS ITSELF

# 8



**T**he struggle for justice takes place on a lot of different levels. It involves building alternatives, new kinds of relationships, new understandings, and it also involves confrontation.

To be clear, we are living in a world where a self-appointed aristocracy—one that is essentially criminal in nature—controls a great deal of the wealth and the political institutions on earth. We're up against some challenges.

I think it's important to keep in context that it's possible to turn advantages into disadvantages and vice versa.

I want to give an example of that, which has to do with power blindness. I heard a news report once on the radio about an experiment about driver safety. People sat in simulators to pretend they were driving. One of them was a big Humvee, one was a mid-

# A 2ND GRADE LIBERATION PROGRAM

# 1



**M**y theory about a program for liberation is that it needs to be explainable by a second grader, or else it's not very practical. It's not usable.

For example, the first point of my program would be "Nobody gets seconds until everyone has had firsts." That's profoundly revolutionary. It's actually incompatible with capitalism, and yet it resonates with almost everybody.

Another one might be "Don't break stuff that you can't fix." Seems simple enough. And another: "Don't use things up at a faster rate than their capacity to replenish."

There are all of these things that people know and understand and have had to learn as children in order to get by in the world—but



somehow they're convinced that they don't work on larger scales.

So I ask organizers, "If you took this program, the second grader program, and took it to your most reactionary relative at the holiday table and say, 'Hey, listen to this, reactionary uncle, what do you think of it?', what would they say?"

Almost everybody comes back with the answer that he would say, "that's all very nice. I wish the world could be that way. That's pie in the sky, but we live in the real world. Get real, get over it. If we don't take for ourselves other people will."

What he's telling us is that his heart is on our side but his despair, his hopelessness, prevents him from seeing a real pathway to that as a possibility.

So, the process of liberation is the process of making pathways visible to people.



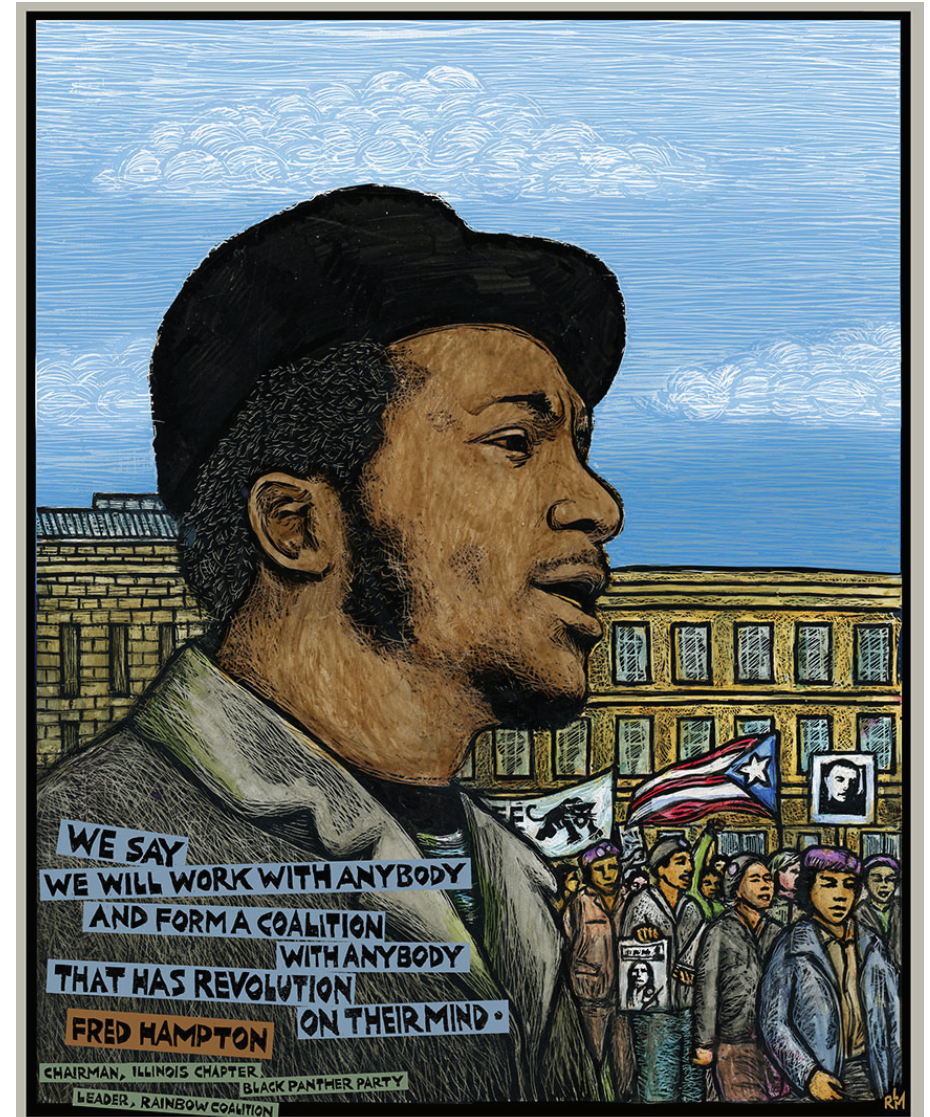
What I'm saying is that often we find ourselves asking the wrong questions. "What are these principles of struggle? Which one works and which one doesn't work?"

It's actually not the tactics so much that matter, but the questions that we ask ourselves.



And it's partly a question of storytelling but it's also partly a question of structuring our movements in a way that the experience of living that movement tells and reinforces that story.

The story that generosity is possible. That loving each other can be rewarding and is not necessarily a recipe for being betrayed or killed. It's really: How do we go back to what people hunger for most deeply but are so convinced is not possible?





not make somebody appear inside that office. However, it will increase the chances of finding them there if they're sometimes there and they're sometimes not. So it's really a question of context.

Another example would be, if you want to reach the moon by jumping-jumping and jumping and jumping-no matter how long you jump, you're not going to reach it. So persistence in that case might actually be ridiculous, but it's about the questions we ask ourselves.



For example: does change happen incrementally, or does it happen suddenly in large ruptures?

Well, it depends. If you plant enough trees, single tree after single tree, eventually something will click and you'll have a forest ecosystem. But no matter how many solar panels you install on the Titanic, it won't change the direction of the ship.



Similarly, is a system you're confronting crooked, or is it broken?

If the immigration system is broken, then you bring everybody who has an interest in it together and try to figure out a solution. If it's crooked, then you do not bring the crooks into the room with you. You work with your allies to come up with a solution.



# MOON SPACES, SUN SPACES & COMMUNITY POWER



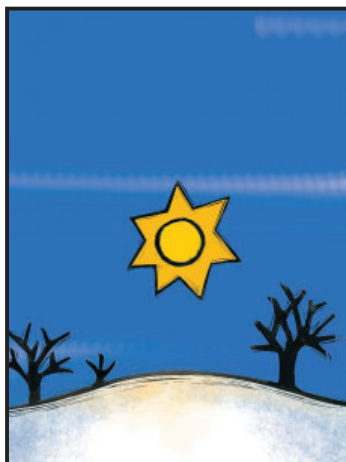
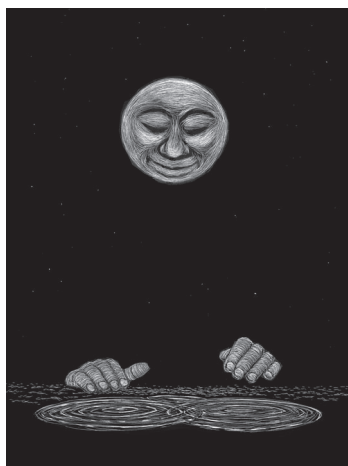
**A** lot of movements find themselves, at one time or another, negotiating for power in what I call a "Moon Space."

By a Moon Space I mean the places like union negotiating tables, peace treaty negotiations, court rooms, legislatures, the places where contending forces try to settle their differences and come up with a decision.

I call them Moon Spaces because they don't generate power. The moon doesn't generate light - it reflects light from the sun.

The "Sun Spaces" are where the people are. The Sun Spaces are where the power is generated, where the movement, where the





contending forces represented in those Moon Spaces get their energy and their strength from.

If we're in a negotiation that's not going well, where we don't have a lot of leverage, a lot of times it's not about our skills. It's about the fact that we would actually need to be on the street, we don't need to be at the table.

We're often fighting for a place at the table, but that may or may not be to our advantage.

Sometimes it's to our advantage to be doing more organizing, creating more alliances, raising the level of militance. Building power in the Sun Spaces.

These and other things are what is going to give us more energy at our backs when we go into that Moon Space to do the negotiations.

People who spend a lot of time in the Moon Spaces often come to believe that that's where the power is, that that's where the story is being written. They think of themselves, especially if they didn't go in with a real strong power analysis, as being the spear when they're really just the point of the spear, and the hands holding that spear are on the outside.

In order to really be able to take advantage of these spaces, there needs to be an organic connection. It's not so important whether it's inside the system or outside the system, but whether your feet are firmly planted in the community where the power really originates.

# 7 TACTICS ARE ALL ABOUT CONTEXT



There's a well known saying that goes something like, "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." Actually, that's a definition of persistence. And in movements, the important thing is not the tactic and whether it's being persistent or repetitive, but what our understanding of the context is.

Persistence works in a couple of ways. For example, there's the persistence of waves beating against a cliff. That persistence eventually will wear away the cliff and cause its collapse. The very persistence is changing the conditions.

Another form of persistence is going back again and again to knock on a door that never opens. Your going back and knocking does



The nonprofits have the capacity to respond to that but they cannot generate those kinds of challenges.

Even in South Africa they were able to detach themselves from the regime and unite with the anti-apartheid movement, but only after it had generated an alternative center of power with a large enough gravitational force to represent a viable challenge to the system.

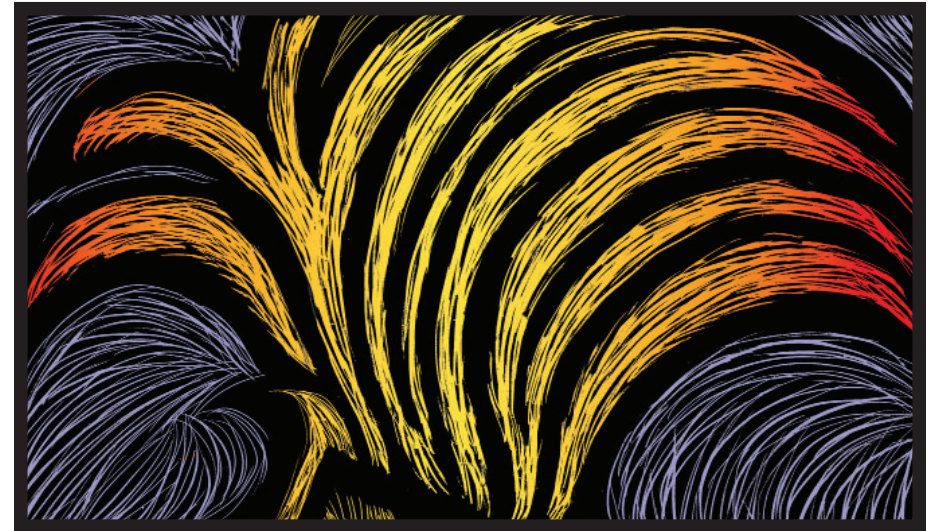
What we need to do, I would say, is restore our peripheral vision, our ability to see each other.

We each think, "It's my struggle versus the man," and other oppressed peoples are just bit players on the margin.

We need to be able to reweave that fabric of connection so that in all of these different movements we really have each others' backs.



# 3 ORGANIZING WITH KINDLING



**M**uch of the best organizing starts small. That's not always true of movements because movements can burst on the scene and take everyone by surprise, whether there's been proper preparation or not.

But organizing is different when you're organizing from scratch. I compare it to starting a fire in the forest after a rainstorm.

What you really want is to have those big, happy logs burning merrily, drying out your clothes and warming up your food. But if you use those matches holding them up against those logs, they're all going to go out and you're going to be left with no matches in the dark and the cold.

So, you start with the little leaves and twigs underneath little



branches, and make a little fire, and while that's burning, you're drying out the sticks.

And when you put the sticks in, you're drying those and it's drying out the larger branches. And then the branches are drying even larger ones, and eventually, they're drying out the logs and you have that merry fire burning.

A lot of times organizers will make the mistake of going to the hardest nut to crack. Like in the workplace, going to the most anti-union worker saying, "If I can convince this person, then everyone else will come along."

But really, if you start that fire, start activities with the people closest to you already, the low hanging fruits, start having fun, start creating the warmth of something people will want to come to, then those who are apathetic might get off the fence.



Those who were just a little skeptical might get on to the fence. Those who were hostile might become skeptical instead.

Eventually, as people move inwards, you're building your organization and you're building your movement. Your story is becoming more accessible.

Eventually, those on the margin, the most hostile, the most against you, maybe they'll move toward you, or maybe they'll be isolated. Either way, it's all good.

governments, modern labor unions, and the nonprofits.

The Wagner Act in the 1930s, the Indian Reorganization Act, and the emergence of the nonprofits at the end of the 1960s were all attempts to contain these peoples' struggles and prevent them from challenging the real sources of power.

One of the things that happened as a result is that their relationships became vertical instead of horizontal.



Tribal governments' primary relationship is with the federal government, labor unions' with management, and the nonprofits' with their funders. That cutting off of horizontality is what prevents real solidarity from happening.

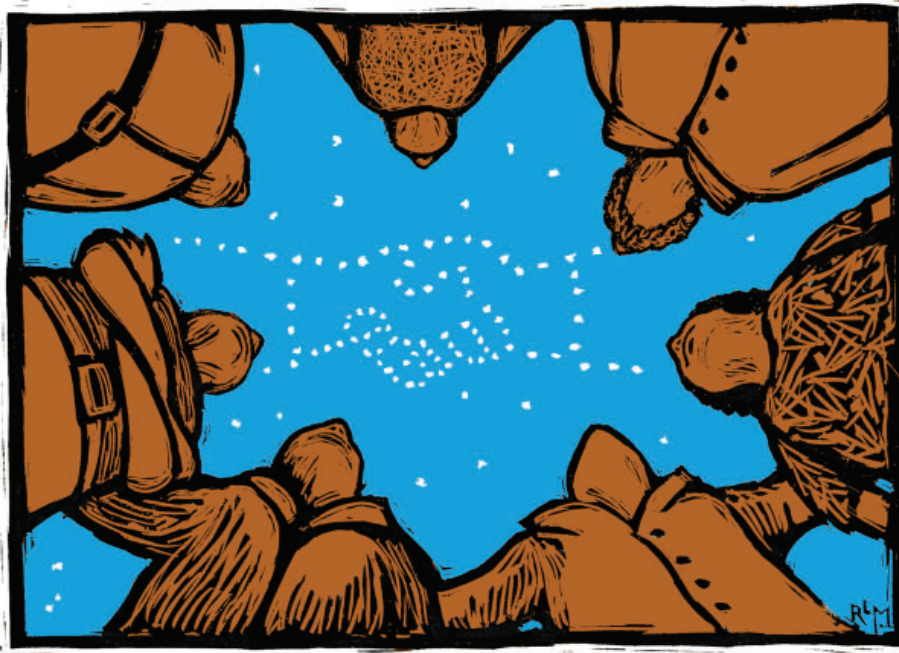


The movements that are potentially destabilizing, potentially liberatory, always emerge from the margins, from outside of those fences—from the wild country, not from the cultivated fields of the liberal system. Struggles like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and the DREAMers, all have come out of the organic aspirations of people.



# ORGANIZING ON THE TITANIC

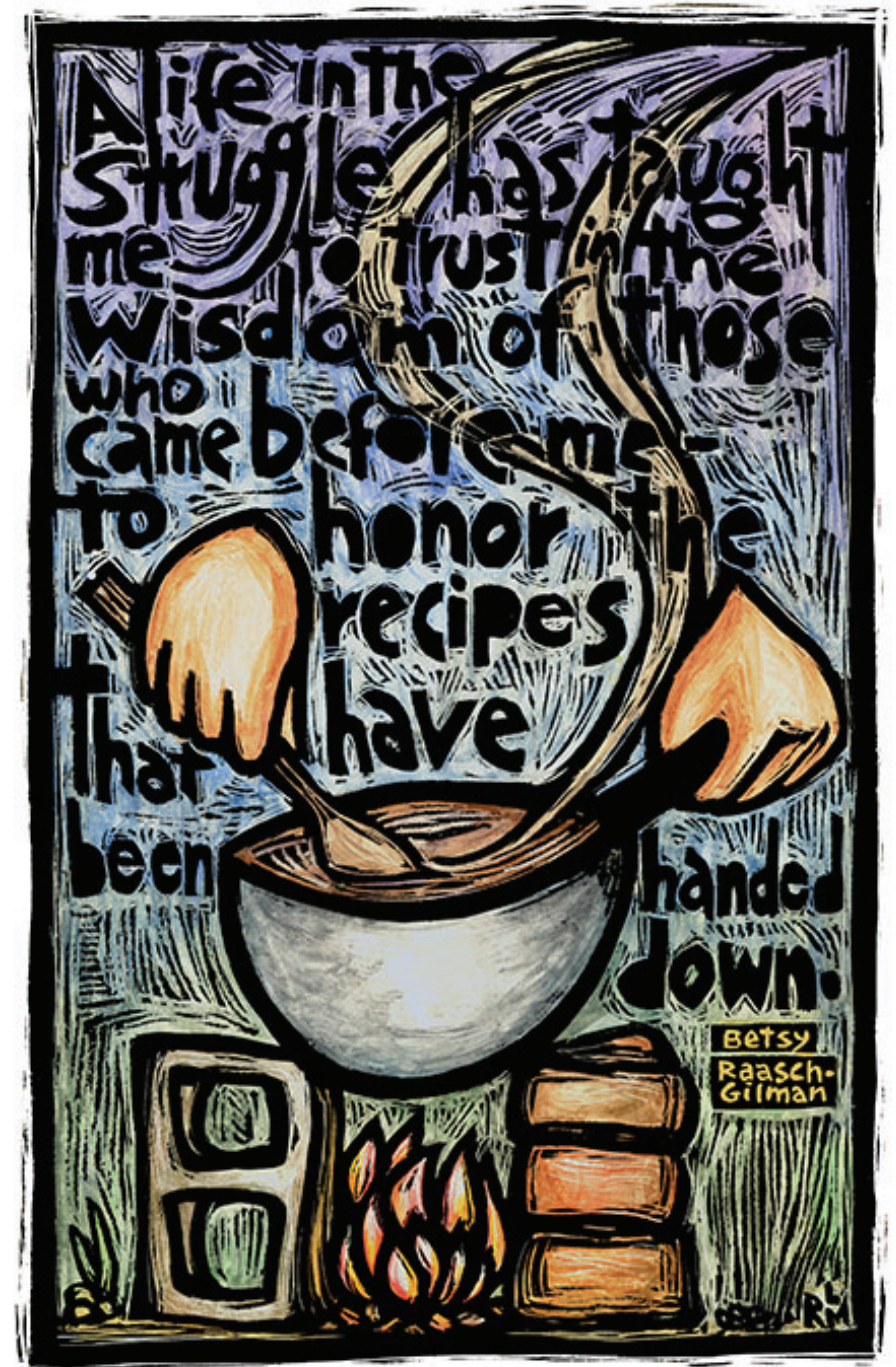
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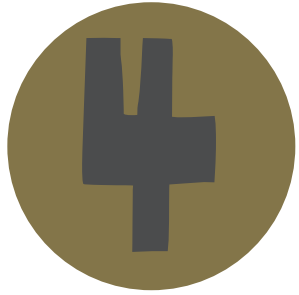
**T**he course that organizing in the U.S. has taken over the last half century or so is a lot like trying to organize for better conditions on the deck of the Titanic.

We get to struggle for what our people need, as long as we don't ask who owns the ship, how fast it's going, what direction it's going, and what that big white thing coming up ahead might imply for us.

There are three kinds of organizations that were established in order to contain popular aspirations and keep them from getting out of hand. Each is the product of a wave of mass struggle. These are tribal







# THE ENEMY ADVERTISES THEIR WEAK POINTS



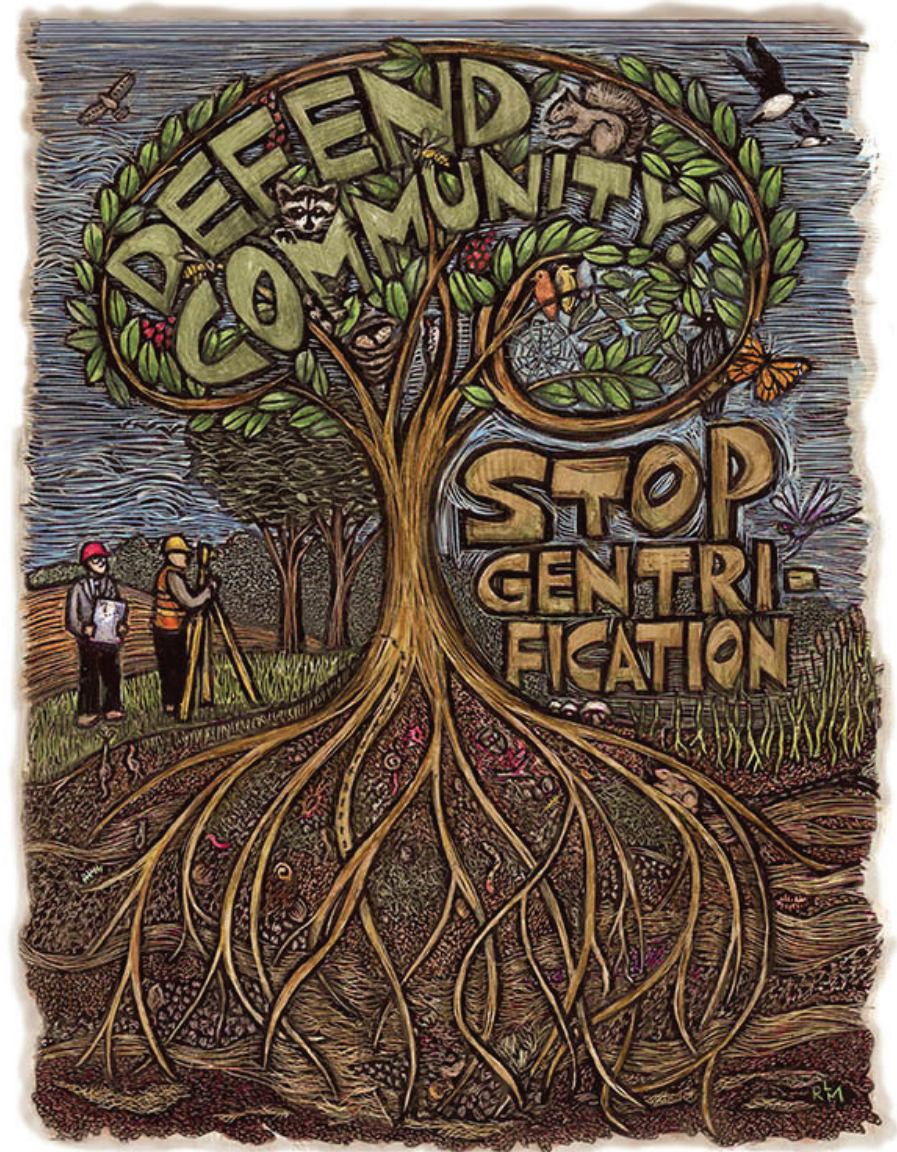
One of the principles in the Chinese soft martial arts is that your enemy will always tell you where they're vulnerable. They do that by what parts of themselves they try to protect and where they allocate their resources.

For example, if you saw me riding my bike to work in the morning, you'd notice that I'm wearing a helmet. I'm advertising to you where I think I'm most in need of protection.

If we apply that on a social scale, we'll notice that in the U.S. a tremendous amount of resources are going into the maintenance of two massive systems of incarceration. One that was developed after

We're the only ones who can plant the seed of the tree that one day we want to live under.

We need to be preparing the soil in which that tree can grow.





For example, if you're trying to win a decent contract and more funding for school teachers, it's going to be hard if "everybody knows" that teachers are greedy, lazy, indifferent and don't care about kids. The right wing has been hammering in that message, instilling that into the soil.

In fact, for forty years, the right has devoted themselves largely to preparing the soil.

That includes saying stuff that sounds ridiculous, fighting for things that aren't winnable yet, because they're investing in the future and ten years later it won't sound ridiculous and they'll win.



The question I would pose to you is:

What stories, what narratives, what beliefs—if they were widely disseminated in the soil of our communities—would make it easy to win?

Just imagine it for a moment: what would make victories easy if everyone believed it? Now, we're fighting against the weight of all these toxic narratives that people have internalized.



the Civil War for Black folk but has expanded to include other dark and poor people, and one that is engineered to contain immigrants. For the most part, people who have not harmed anyone.

That tells us that something else is going on. What are they trying to protect?

It could be that these populations, for demographic or historic reasons, have the ability to shift the balance of power, if they were freed from these straitjackets of legal entanglements.

Undermining those systems, challenging them, confronting them, and dismantling them is a strategic task for the entire movement.

This is true across the board. It's true of storytelling. What are the stories they're trying to suppress? What does that tell us about their vulnerabilities?

If they are trying to criminalize Chicano and Native struggles in the schools in Tucson, well, let's tell those struggles out in the streets. If right-wing pundits spend their time trying to prevent their listeners from being curious about other people, that's a strategic vulnerability, because it means that their default is to become curious about us. And curiosity is the basis of compassion. Compassion is the basis of solidarity.





We have an opportunity just by listening to and watching the enemy, to get a list of vulnerabilities, of places where the stories need to be told.

They are putting so much frantic energy and desperation into trying to maintain the lies, it's revealing where their weak places are.



# THE SOIL IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE SEEDS



One of the most important insights that cultural organizing has brought to movement struggle is the idea that the soil is more important than the seeds.

Almost anything will grow in rich, nutritious soil, whereas it's hard to get anything to grow if the soil is barren, toxic and won't hold moisture.

The seeds are our projects, our initiatives, our campaigns, our organizations, our institutions that we want to build.

The soil is the compost of beliefs, ideas, values, and narratives that create the environment in which we're working.