



NONVIOLENT ACTION IN SANTIAGO, CHILE

PHOTO: ARCHIVES OF ROBERTA BACIC

Coping with the Stress and Strain of Taking a Stand

Roberta Bacic with thanks to Clem McCartney

People protest for many reasons, but often it is because we are confronted with a situation to which we must respond and take a stand. The reality we face – be that our own or that of others – pushes us to act, react, challenge, or change what we experience and see. We forget to seriously consider the possible consequences of any such choice. Positive consequences are often empowering. Negative consequences can be disempowering. We need to think about both in advance to prepare for the next steps, but also so we are not surprised by them and suffer even more stress.

Consequences of Taking a Stand

In taking a stand, we may put ourselves into situations that will push us to our limits and put ourselves at risk. If this happens, negative experiences will almost be inevitable; fear will most likely surface as a response. In situations of insecurity and anguish, those feelings will merge: fear of being arrested, fear of being denounced, fear of being tortured, fear of being caught in an illegal meeting, fear of being betrayed, fear of again not achieving our goal, fear of the unknown (what happens if I am arrested?) and also of the known, be it a

specific threat by phone or being aware of what has happened to others. We need to know what can be done to avoid those consequences or to cope with them when they arise. Three main elements can help us to function: confidence and solidarity with our fellow protesters, good training, and emotional preparation and debriefing.

Some of the Consequences We Need to Prepare For

1. Dealing with the Consequences of Fear

When we think of traumatic consequences, we immediately think of the physical consequences, such as being manhandled, arrested, beaten, or having our human rights violated. This risk is greater in some societies than others; people protesting in very militaristic and authoritarian states are particularly courageous. But all of us will normally feel at least some anxiety and fear and at least be aware of the risk of physical pain or discomfort. These fears may immobilise us. But ignoring them is not good. If we are not prepared, our natural reactions in the situation may actually lead to greater hurt. For example, we may have an urge to run, but if we start running, we lose our discipline; those opposing us may be tempted to attack at that moment. Being prepared, rationally, emotionally, and practically, is therefore important. Training in fear control is very helpful. (See ‘Consequences of Fear’ Exercise, p129.)

2. The Strength of Coming Out in Public

We need to be aware that we are choosing to stand outside conventional opinion. It is not so difficult to share our feelings in private with those who share our views, although we may worry about being betrayed. Coming out in public is more difficult. We are taking a stand not only against the state but also against common social attitudes. The very reason that we need to protest is to challenge those conventions, but knowing that does not make it easy. We are exposing ourselves. We think of Women in Black in Israel who simply stood as a silent witness to what they could not accept in their society. Now that form of witness has been used in Serbia, Colombia, and elsewhere. Solidarity with our colleagues is very important in such situations, as is creating space to air and deal with our feelings. Even those who appear confident may have worries with which they need to acknowledge and deal. (A ‘Hassle Line’ Exercise, p119, is helpful to practice.)

3. Preparing Ourselves to Deal with Distress

Other risks and consequences may be more subtle, but for that very reason can be more distressing. We may face disrespect and humiliation or be mocked and goaded by bystanders or state forces. Again Women in Black come to mind; they were spat at and abused by a hostile public, yet remained silent and non-reactive. This can be emotionally distressing. Role playing (see Exercise, p134) a situation in advance helps us to prepare emotionally and to understand more

fully the motivations (and fear) of our opponents. Solidarity and confidence in our fellow protesters is again important and is partly built up by such rehearsals. Less emotionally distressing, because it is less immediate, is bad publicity. The press, who may libel us with all kinds of inaccuracies, may challenge our good faith and motivations. Preparing ourselves for such humiliation makes it easier to cope with it when it comes.

4. Putting Yourself in the Position of the Other

We may even seek out humiliation as part of the statement we are trying to make, as when protesters try to put themselves into the situation of people they are defending. Many groups have done street theatre playing the parts of prisoners and guards at Guantánamo Bay; unanticipated feelings rose to the surface, which participants sometimes found difficult to control. For instance, the 'prisoners' may begin to feel violated while the 'guards' find themselves either entering into the experience too enthusiastically or feeling a sense of revulsion. Either way, participants may feel defiled and polluted. To deal with such possibilities they need to be prepared for such reactions in themselves and be debriefed sensitively afterwards. Another example is protests over factory farming when volunteers use their own bodies to model slabs of meat. The reaction may be to feel really enthusiastic and liberated by taking a stand or alternatively troubled at the situation they have put themselves into.

5. Dealing with Disillusionment

Sometimes we have few problems before and during the protest, but a real blow comes later if we seem to have had no impact. The huge protests against the war in Iraq on 15 February 2003 did not stop the war. Our worst fears were realised. Not surprisingly, many people were disillusioned and disempowered. Naturally they asked, 'Was it worth doing'? They may not want to take part in the future in other actions on this or other issues, feeling it worthless. What can be done to address this disillusionment? We need opportunities to reflect together on what has happened and what we can learn from the experience (See 'Action Evaluation', p90.) We need to adjust our expectations. Protests are important to show our strength, but they alone will not stop a war.

6. Dealing with Success

As well as worrying that a situation may turn out worse than anticipated, we might have, paradoxically, difficulty coping with what might on the surface seem positive or successful. Examples are if security forces act more humanely than we anticipated or authorities engage with us and seem willing to consider our demands. Such outcomes can have an unsettling effect if we have steeled ourselves for confrontation. What happens to all the adrenaline that has been built up in our bodies? What do these developments do to our analysis? Are we wrong in our analysis? Should we trust the system more? Or are we being duped by sweet words? Our movement may achieve more solidarity when we are faced with harsh opposition and may fracture when that does not materialise.

Therefore, we need to be ready to know what responses might be most effective and test out what is possible. Then, when and if it happens, we are more able to collectively assess the situation and act appropriately.

7. When Levels of Aggression Rise

Many of us have been shocked at the aggression that arises during a nonviolent protest – and not only from those opposed to the protest. We may find a wave of aggression rising in ourselves when we are treated roughly by authorities. Even if we do not react, such a feeling can make us very uncomfortable and doubtful. Or other protesters may start to riot, and we have to be able to find an appropriate response. Do we join in, leave, or hold our ground, continuing the protest nonviolently as planned? Such situations leave little time to think, so possibilities need to be considered in advance. We need to have our clear alternatives so that quiet decisions can be made. (See ‘Decision-Making’ and ‘Role Playing’ Exercises p133 and p134.)

Different Contexts

In the North, we might protest in states and cultures that claim to be liberal and democratic. Or we might be in an authoritarian regime. But we should not assume that protest is easier in liberal democracies, as some such states can be very harsh in their treatment of protest.

Other factors may determine the potential of protest and its limits. The society may be closed or open. In a closed society the risks are greater because dissidents can disappear, and there is little possibility of any accountability. It may have a functioning judicial system, independent of the government, that can act as a check on human rights abuses. The culture of a society is also a significant factor as it may value conformity and respect for authority. Or a society may feel weak and vulnerable to the pressures of modernity or the influence of other states; in such situations, any form of protest may be seen as disloyal and destructive.

While protest is more difficult in some situations than others, all the issues discussed here may arise in any context, albeit with varying intensity.

** For more on contexts, see also ‘Sending the Protest Message’, p57.*

Conclusion

If we prepare for the mixture of emotions and reactions that may result from our protest, build solidarity with our colleagues, and analyse and debrief ourselves on the consequences of our actions, then we are better placed to continue the struggle for a better society, even though we may know that that will not be achieved in our lifetime, if at all.

However, if we do not prepare well and deal well with the consequences,

we may end up not helping anyone, even ourselves. We may get discouraged and decide to give up or take up other types of strategies that may be counter-productive, such as mainstream politics and the use of force. Or we may get into a pattern of protesting for its own sake, without any strategic sense. As such, we may appear superficially to be still engaged in the struggle and others may admire our persistence, but we have lost a purpose for all the energy we expend. Our ineffectiveness and purposefulness may discourage others from engaging. If – as I believe – we have a duty to protest, we also have a duty to prepare ourselves well: to identify the risks to our physical and emotional well-being and to take steps to ensure that we can overcome these risks and continue the struggle in a positive and effective manner, keeping true to our ideals. Last, but not least, let's keep trying, have some fun while we do it, and by that, give peace a chance. We are not the first ones to do it, nor will be the last ones.

Humour and Nonviolent Actions

Majken Sorensen

We usually use nonviolent action about serious problems. Thinking about an action in humorous terms may therefore seem a strange way to deal with an issue and not your first choice. However, humour and seriousness may be much more closely related than at first they appear. Almost all good humour thrives on contradictions and absurdity; nonviolent action often tries to point out the contradiction between the world as it is and the world as we want it to be. Humour is powerful because it turns the world as we know it upside down and escapes the logic and reasoning that is an inevitable part of the rest of our lives.

How to Start?

If humour doesn't come to you easily, don't despair – it can be learned. Watch your opponent: If there is a contradiction between what they say and what they do, might this be the basis for a good joke? The closer you stick to the truth about what your opponent is saying and doing, the better the humour will work. Almost all dictators say that what they are doing is 'for the good of the people'. That kind of statement might be contradicted by their actions.

Using Humour Wisely

- Don't overdo it – humour should be used with moderation and works best if complemented with a serious message.
- Choose the object of your humour carefully!