

" I mean, you have a vague idea of participating in a march or taking up a particular campaign but the serendipity of the way things turn out, I think one has to be open. In some ways, I don't know if it's as one gets older, you're more drawn to this idea of the experiment of struggle."--Ken Salo

Every community, from small rural towns to urban centers, has residents that are not paid, not trained and are inherently beginners. They agitate for rights, remedies and the community they want to see. They are librarians, high school students, teachers, writers, janitors, social workers, retirees, health care workers, IT workers and unemployed people. They often react or respond to something-- a personal incident, a story from a friend, a call from a religious community, an injustice on their block-- and before they know it, they are beginning. This is how we find each other; I found many, many people in my small town when I started looking for book donations for a class I was teaching at a prison.

"We started talking to the kids in the community, and they starting saying to us, "we don't need a mentor program, we need help with the police". When they said that, I would reply to them they were at the wrong place at the wrong time-- the same thing I would tell my son-- hanging around the wrong people. But then, we started observing some things. We we started observing some things, we started seeing some things-- differently. One of my first incidents was at Douglass Park.

I was talking to some kids over at the basketball court..." --Martel Miller

"...one of the guys who was observing was like, "You provoke" --provoke is the right word--"You provoke the other side. See, if you'd just be quite you wouldn't provoke the other side and this thing could end as the officials approve of it, but you're just making it worse by demonstrating because you are making them mad." And of course, this is an argument I've heard thousands of times since, in different forms." --Barbara Kessel

There is no template, there is no marked path to alleviate violence, oppression or abuse of power. Our challenges are daunting, our stakes high: in this year alone, in our town of 150,000, police shot and killed two young people--an unarmed teenager and a mentally ill student. Concerned community members continue to mobilize, to change laws that might hold our town's police accountable. But, armed with the tools of a regular resident, keeping up with new rules and

ordinances can feel tedious and draining. Just a few days before the shooting of the teenager, Kiwane Carrington, new rules of engagement for police pursuing suspects had been passed. Very few people knew of the change: police could now shoot to kill if the suspect resists arrest. Carrington was, allegedly, resisting arrest when he did not heed the call of the police officer one rainy, spring day. Where is the beginner's guide to challenge these kinds of abuses, to prevent tragedy?

"It's grueling work that you would go to city council and hound and hound and hound and after six to eight months, still no measurable changes. So the successes are few. There is embarrassment, there is humiliation, let alone the blatant failures of what we do, but still we keep doing it for one reason or another. It's hard work but if this was easy it would have been done a long time ago, you know. It's a hard big beast of a machine and it's there through a lot of work and tradition and institutional memory and it takes a lot to fight that kind of inertia." --Brian Dolinar

Experiments of Struggle stitches together stories from eleven people I found, years ago, before I knew I'd be a beginner. The people with whom I found myself beginning were themselves beginners, even though many of them had participated in sit-ins, written editorials in newspapers, created citizen review boards, fought off corporate influences in educational settings and more. When I asked each interviewee how they began, and how they are still a beginner, their stories unravelled the vulnerability bound up in becoming involved, and the risks of not participating. For each person, history, theory, and action were tied, and one could not overcome inertia without them. Before the interviews I thought that I might find the idea of beginning tied to age or experience. I figured that beginning got easier over time and the path might eventually clear. I thought the elders in my community would feel a coherent sense of passing on know-how to my generation. But, I found that, together, we are beginners because we don't know exactly what is coming our way, even though we study the past; we are beginners because we want to learn, with and from each other; we are beginners because we don't want to create gate keepers to liberating knowledge or action and we don't want to professionalize struggles. We want to make changes that are meaningful--and flexible-- for the people we care about and the places we live. We are bound in our multivalent ideas of what social and environmental justice means, and we are connected in our vulnerability, our contingent place in this world. We are a coalition

of many people, our ages as diverse as our occupations. And, we are all beginning.

"I don't believe that it is happenstance that you have certain issues of poverty and certain issues of incarceration, these things are not happenstance. And so, in order for me to fight current day injustices, then I have to look back at the fight of the old day, so that I can use that as inspiration to help me move forward in this fight today. Because the fight have shifted, slightly, doesn't mean that it's not the same fight." --Carol Ammons

"I don't think there is such a thing as being an expert in terms of being an activist. There are a set of skills that are very useful that you learn over time-- like you learn how to network, you learn how to communicate with people and you learn how to convince people to care about what you care about and what you think is important. And those are all skills that are crucial and you aren't born with, or very few people are born with, at least! And those are really important but I think that the most important part of being an activist is that you care and everyone who is an activist begins with that. You begin doing stuff because you care about something and so that sense everyone is an expert and everyone begins as an expert."--Rachel Harmon

\* All quotes excerpted from Experiments of Struggle