

Teaching the Sixties

Margot Fortunato Galt

In 1964, when Fran Galt found his draft card in his University of Minnesota mailbox, the Vietnam war had been heating up for about two years. Soon Americans would be exposed to this war in a new way: on their televisions. Two years later, in 1966, eating dinner in an Atlanta apartment I watched, spellbound and horrified, as U.S. troops napalmed Vietnamese villages into swirling clouds of dust and smoke. The war had marched into my rather complacent life and gripped me by the throat. It struck me immediately that we Americans had no real reason for killing families in Vietnamese rice paddies; whatever their government was doing (and those politics were hazy with U.S. government smokescreens), the Vietnamese people in no way threatened me. Fran had agreed two years before: after holding his draft card for a few moments, he sent it back to the draft board. His revulsion against this war or any war was so strong that he knew he could not take up arms. Over the next few years, his act of resistance would bring him before his Iowa draft board, would place him behind two armed U.S. marshals in a car heading to Missouri, and would land him for seventeen months in the U.S. penitentiary in Springfield, Missouri, where he would meet bank robbers, Jehovah's Witnesses, (and other conscientious objectors), along with a few murderers. The incarceration derailed his 20-year-old life, led to eventual divorce from the woman whom he had married just before entering prison, and put him "underground" while the rest of his peers sang the songs of the Beatles' "Seargent Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." What was unusual about Fran's experience was not that he went to prison—though he was one of the earliest, a number of other young men protesting the war would soon find themselves in the same boat. But Fran landed there not strictly on religious grounds: He protested not just Vietnam; he declared himself a pacifist, opposed to all war, all violence, except in extreme cases of self-defense. The Beatles' album contained the songs that would eventually mark the 1960s counterculture hippiedom: "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" being code for LSD.

When I wrote *Stop This War: American Protest of the Conflict in Vietnam* (Lerner 2000), I used Fran's story as a narrative thread, bringing home the many marches, sit-ins, and lock-outs which protested the war. Now when I think about teaching the 1960s, I return to two things: nonviolence as a passionate response against the disgust and fear young people felt about being forced to participate in an unreasonable war, and what could be called its twin sister: The "Make Love, Not War" motto of 1960s counterculture. Fran and I have grown-up children; the students in schools and colleges today are almost of an age to be our grandchildren. Over two generations, a lot has been lost by way of activism among young people, and love has become something not to do. Our lives have become famously global—but that began with the televised news of Vietnam. Our lives have become faster—in the 1960s my parents had one car; my 1960s husband and I had (not surprisingly) a VW Beetle. The U.S. freeway system, put in place during President Eisenhower's administration in the 1950s, had begun to change the face of American travel, and many cities had lost neighborhoods to speed. But the United States was still, in 1966, a country of defined regional politics. As my husband and I traveled west from Atlanta with New York license plates on our Beetle (we had both been graduate students in New York), we found a South wary of Northerners. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing in 1966; the Birmingham March only a few years past. The nonviolent activism which many liberal Northern students learned on the streets and by-ways of the South would fuel their resistance to Vietnam—this seems to me a crucial connection. Nonviolence, Civil Rights, northern "infiltration" into the South began to dissolve regional divisions, not with guns or invading armies, not with commercial slogans or corporate skyscrapers, but with songs, marches, door-to-door canvassing and voter-education projects, with white students from the North bringing national television attention to the poverty and oppression of black people in the South.

Among the many faces of the 1960s, I emphasize nonviolence because I believe the nonviolent message and method sparked fire within the hearts of young people all over the United States, from educated Eastern elite to rural Minnesota Catholic novitiates, from black college students to pillars of the black community who were galvanized within their churches to stand strong and resist through boycotts, newly formed political parties, and, yes eventually, through voting their own leaders into office for the first time since Reconstruction. I know the 1960s spawned noteworthy exceptions to this credo of nonviolence—both Civil Rights and war protest turned famously violent, preaching black power and black separatism, the Weatherman bombing of U.S. arsenals and the Symbionese Liberation Army. Given the decades since, these violent methods look dangerously prophetic: We have become, more than ever, a nation glorifying violence, fascinated by benighted mental states (the seeds of which were surely planted in the 1960s drug use), and the acts of disaffected loners. In an Ojibway Reservation School, Red Lake, Minnesota, a high school student recently (March 2005) shot family, friends, and staff before taking his own life. Schools deal with such deadly violence because, in part, we have not taken the original 1960s message of nonviolence across regions, races and creeds to heart.

When I teach the 1960s to young people today, I want them to understand the power of acting together to change the world, the protection which group action can give against the fear of government brutality. I urge them to use their religious convictions to enlarge opportunities and expand tolerance. I want them to plumb the realities of taking a radical nonviolent stand, even if it means going to prison. I want to rouse them from attachment to material comforts and set them on the road, not afraid to sleep in buses, face police dogs and sheriffs' nightsticks, lose sleep, delay college a year, make love in the very best sense of the word, not violence, not war.