

“What if activism looks like what I can do?” – Omkari Williams

by Cat Chapin-Bishop, Mt. Toby Friends Meeting

Activism takes a lot of forms. Large protest marches are one, but far from all there is.

Think about the variety of roles it takes to organize an economic boycott, or a union! Think about religious groups organizing sanctuary for undocumented folks in danger of deportation, or the lawyers who brought their laptops to the airport when the first Trump Administration announced a ban on Muslim entry to the US, or the volunteers who created and staffed the rape crisis center I joined in the early 80s, answering hotlines, teaching community groups, and sometimes, yes, risking arrest in order to keep cops from harassing survivors of sexual assault in hospital emergency rooms.

While the incoming administration underscores for us the importance of systemic change, one of the take-homes of Omkari Williams’s workshop was how many types of action are needed to do that—and that we all have roles we are especially drawn to and skills that might be helpful.

We were encouraged to compare activism to a film set, where hundreds of people contribute a whole range of talents. There’s the headliners—the actors who are on camera and the most visible focus of the film. There’s organizers: the directors and producers, pulling the talent together, choosing locations, getting the funding, and helping the headliners be as effective as possible. There’s the experts, who have mastery in a single narrow, essential area, from permitting and negotiating with locations, to safety directors, prop and costume masters, and the guys who supply the daily food and coffee to the set.

And finally, there’s what Williams called “the indispensables”—the hundreds and sometimes thousands of extras, background and supporting actors, and the whole range of union roles that keep the cameras running. As she pointed out, if Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech had not had a quarter of a million indispensable people gathered to hear it, the impact on history and politics would have been very different.

My sense is that we’re building a pro-democracy movement right now, and we’re building it with both highly experienced activists and a host of newcomers. And right at this moment, we’re assembling the cast and crew, sorting ourselves into our roles and identifying which skills are needed where.

Getting 250,000 people onto the national mall, or ending the deliberate policy of family separation at the border are things that don’t just happen. They all

took incredible, coordinated efforts of thousands of activists, working in different ways.

Nor is getting schools, hospitals, and courthouses to refuse to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) in mass deportation sweeps just going to happen. Protecting voting rights in majority- minority districts, preventing mass takeovers of housing by corporate landlords who use AI to fix rents as high as possible—all those tasks are going to require a film set's range of skills and contributors.

It's going to take a sophisticated, coordinated, strategic movement. Lots of skills. Lots of roles. Lots of work. It's heartening to see it coming together, and to be reminded of the successes we've seen before.

They do seem small in the face of the challenges ahead, true. We're going to lose a lot of very important struggles —also true.

But every time we win, we'll save lives by it. It's worth it.

And looking for the place our skills are relevant is a pretty good place to start. Sure beats feeling helpless, or obeying in advance!

(Last Trump administration, I wore fuzzy slippers and a bathrobe, doing overnights in a church basement offering sanctuary to one undocumented person. That's pretty unglamorous. It was a small contribution, but I could make it, so I did. One of a cast of hundreds)