

FIGHTING AGAINST THE TRUMP DICTATORSHIP: AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

by Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D., March, 2017

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Introduction

I realize that technically speaking the United States is not a dictatorship, and that we have a president—not a dictator. But I must say that it feels to me like our new President Trump, complete with his cabinet of appointments with unapologetic views against science, the environment, women, Blacks, Jews, Muslims, the poor, and peace, and buttressed by a Republican majority in both houses of congress and an impending conservative majority in the Supreme Court, has all the characteristics of a dictator in power. Of course in the United States any president or would be dictator can hold office for at most 8 years, and this is indeed a blessing. But 8 years of dictatorial power is far more than enough to cause massive disasters to the world, including the abysmal dangers of nuclear war. This, coupled with our egocentric, narcissistic, emotionally reactive, irrational, Ku Klux Klan supported new president who is highly influenced by his reactionary racist leaning chief strategist who presently sits on the National Security Council, is enough to cause much alarm for many U.S. citizens, including myself.

In a number of my essays, I have utilized what I have described as an integrative perspective that includes diverse contrary views,¹ and I am continuing my integrative perspective in this present essay, but with the focus of finding common ground on one particular issue. The particular issue I have in mind is “hate crimes and discrimination” and the diverse contrary views I am alluding to can be described simply as “Trump supporters and Trump non-supporters.” For the past 2 months I have actively promoted and have been highly engaged in a group which I initially entitled “Trump Supporters and Non-Supporters Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination” in my local community in rural Maine². However, I gradually learned that the initial flyer to promote my group, which included a rather complimentary picture of Trump² that I purposely included to try to attract Trump supporters to my group, was labeled as “political” and rejected by my local school superintendents, my local librarian, the director of my local Chamber of Commerce, and even my local American Legion chapter. Consequently I decided to remove the graphics from my flyer and I changed the name of my group to

“Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination.” The change in response that I received was quite striking, and my flyer was distributed in 3 local school districts and 9 schools, to over 400 teachers. My group had its first meeting on January 23, 2017, and it was a success; but before describing the dynamics that took place in my group meeting and a description of my 3 follow-up meetings, let me backtrack to describe my initial motivation in promoting and forming my group.



From Dictatorship to Democracy

My initial motivation to form my group began soon after Trump won the U.S. presidential election in November, 2016, as I re-read the short book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* by Gene Sharp³, which includes 198 methods of non-violent tactics to overthrow a dictatorship and replace it with a democracy. I knew that these methods

were geared toward authoritarian dictatorships, but I also realized that there was no reason that these methods could not be applied to the ongoing situation we now have in the United States, which felt/feels to me like “president/dictator Trump.” The one particular method that had the most meaning to me was Sharp’s description of getting the dictator’s supporters to sympathize with the plight of the revolutionaries.³ In a section of the book entitled *Necessary Sources of Political Power*, Sharp said the following:

The principle is simple. Dictators require the assistance of the people they rule, without which they cannot secure and maintain the sources of political power. These sources of political power include: . . . human resources, the number and importance of the persons and groups which are obeying, cooperating, or providing assistance to the rulers; . . . intangible factors, psychological and ideological factors that may induce people to obey and assist the rulers; . . . All of these sources, however, depend on acceptance of the regime, on the submission and obedience of the population, and on the cooperation of innumerable people and the many institutions of the society. They are not guaranteed. . . . Withdrawal of popular and institutional cooperation with aggressors and dictators diminishes, and may sever, the availability of the sources, the rulers’ power weakens and finally dissolves. (pp. 18-19)

However, this process is by no means one that will always be successful, or that guarantees no casualties, as Sharp described:

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Of course, none of this means that weakening and destroying the dictatorships is easy; nor that every attempt will succeed. It certainly does not mean that the struggle will be free of casualties, for those still serving the dictators are likely to fight back in an effort to force the populace to resume cooperation and obedience. (p. 23)

But when I re-read Sharp's book and thought about the current situation in the U.S. with the election of Trump, something pulsed through me. It dawned on me that there was likely a large number of people who voted for Trump who do not condone hate crimes and discrimination, and that if these people could be stimulated to express their disapproval of the related sordid events that were continuously displayed over the internet, perhaps it could have the effect of weakening Trump's impact that has promoted hate crimes and discrimination. At any rate, these were the motivations that led me to give my ideas a try. And thus, I ceased being an "armchair philosopher" and I decided to try to put my ideas into action—I suppose I could now call myself, at least temporarily, a "practical philosopher."

The idea of diminishing the dictator's support is actually at the core of a recent political group that has formed to try to combat what they view as Trump's disastrous policies; this group has the name "Indivisibles."⁴ The tactics of the Indivisibles group are intensively political at the local level, putting a great deal of pressure on the congressmen and senators (referred to as "members of congress") in the region where one lives, through things like continuously requesting town meetings, staging demonstrations and congressional office sit-ins, extensive phone calls to the members of congress, etc. The idea is to persuade the members of congress that they will have trouble getting reelected if they don't listen seriously to the views of their vocal constituents. There are currently over 5,000 Indivisible groups active in the U.S.⁴, and the strategy is to evolve a growing powerful effect in a multitude of regions in the country, in a somewhat similar manner to how the Tea Party was able to stimulate tremendous political change in the far right direction, starting off in very small numbers in local living rooms.⁴ I am an active member of the Bangor, Maine Indivisibles group, having thus far attended 3 of their meetings, and I have played a part in getting the task action on our agenda to contact our members of congress about supporting the congressional legislation to investigate Trump's business conflicts and possible Russia ties with manipulating the election, and force him to submit his tax returns, all of which I am especially interested in as necessary precursors to the possibility of impeachment.⁵ In addition, I'm on the listings for two other Indivisibles groups in Maine.



Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination: The First Three Meetings

The ideas that resulted in the formation of my Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination group are quite different from the ideas that resulted in the formation of the Indivisibles group, but the goals are similar. The Indivisibles group wants to erode Trump's power by weakening his support from members of congress, hopefully stimulating a handful of Republicans to think twice about their support of controversial issues that are against progressive values, inclusive of the environment, health care, immigration, and abortion. If my Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination group develops and expands, my goal is also to weaken Trump's power, but specifically in the way that it has stimulated an increase in hate crimes and discrimination, and it may possibly overlap with some of the tactics of the Indivisibles group in making contact with members of

congress. If I dream big, I would say that I would like to see an impact on Trump himself to much more actively and forcefully make statements against hate crimes and discrimination, though my much stronger preference is to see Trump impeached. But let me get back to nuts and bolts and describe my small successes for the first 3 meetings of my Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination group.

Eighteen people (including myself) attended my first group meeting, which included one person whom I would describe as a mild Trump supporter, and took place in a large meeting room at the Belfast, Maine public library. However, this mild Trump supporter was very vocal, and it led to a number of dynamic interactions with the other members of the group, all of whom I would certainly describe as "Trump non-supporters." I facilitated the group in a contemporary person-centered way⁶, listening as non-judgmentally as I was able to, and gently guiding the discussion back to its main theme whenever it invariably lost its focus on hate crimes and discrimination. Many people were emotional in the group and were filled with fear; the group consisted of mostly women (there were 3 men including myself), a few Jewish people, an Asian man, and a Mexican/Puerto Rican woman. The mild Trump supporter said that he knew Trump had his faults, but that he thought he was more accomplished than Hillary Clinton, that he thought Trump has gotten unfair bad press, that people are too sensitive about being called names (as in "sticks and stones. . .") and defended Trump's sex tape by agreeing with him that it was just "locker room talk," and added that Trump was not president at the time. Needless to say, this stirred up some intensive reactions from the progressive thinking anti-Trump women in the group, but things did not get out-of-hand. The group ended on a positive note, and 15 of the participants filled in their contact information, indicating

that they were interested in having another group meeting.

I had to keep my intention clear of maintaining the central focus on hate crimes and discrimination, as one woman suggested that the group become more open-ended, with a focus on negotiating diverse viewpoints. Someone asked the mild Trump supporter if he would be willing to bring other people who thought more like him to our next meeting, and he was agreeable to try to do this. Other people suggested that we all try to bring people with diverse viewpoints to the group, and as I left the meeting I saw the mild Trump supporter continuing to engage in what looked to me like some constructive intensive dialogue with a few of the women in the group.

Thus all things considered I think we had a successful first group meeting. Luckily there was a Trump supporter there, and he was both vocal and relatively constructive in his communications, which for me enabled my group to serve as an overture to fighting Trump from an integrative perspective.⁷ I was motivated to hold a second group meeting, but I felt that there needed to be more Trump supporters who attended the meeting if my integrative perspective of fighting against Trump was going to develop. I knew that this is easier said than done, but I believed in Gene Sharp's wise counsel about overthrowing dictatorships through getting a segment of the dictator's supporters to sympathize with the revolutionaries. At our first meeting, I was able to get the mild Trump supporter in the group to agree that it would be a good thing for Trump to be more active and forceful about making statements against hate crimes and discrimination, though it was important to him that I acknowledged that hate crimes have gone in both directions—i.e., committed by both Trump supporters and non-supporters. I have no doubt that there have been far more hate crimes committed by Trump supporters than non-supporters, but this kind of factual detail would have been counter-productive to pursue in the group, and I chose to not go there. Rather, I gave some concrete instances of hate crimes, such as swastikas painted on synagogues, bombing threats to Jewish community centers, and Muslim women threatened to be burned to death if they did not take off their burkas. The mild Trump supporter immediately countered with the recent episode of 4 black youth beating up a Trump supporter, and I had no hesitation to agree that this was equally reprehensible.

In the subsequent few days after our first meeting, there was a large amount of e-mail communications between a number of members of the group, a few of whom expressed having much difficulty listening to and interacting with the Trump supporter in the group. Two participants eventually chose to remove themselves from further contact with the group, but some people in the group conveyed that they wanted to meet again soon. As it turned out, we had our second meeting 2 weeks later, at the office of a psychotherapist who was at our first meeting. There were 7 people who attended our second meeting, all of whom were at our first meeting, including the Trump supporter, and a few people conveyed to me that they were still interested in the group but were unable to make it to the meeting. Our dynamic conversations continued during our second meeting, which included some intensive challenging of the Trump supporter by one of the women in the group. However, I felt that the meeting was still basically respectful and constructive, and the atmosphere was much more informal and comfortable in this therapeutic office setting

than it was at the public library for our first meeting; we ended the meeting with a decision to continue to meet every 2 weeks at this same location.

Our third meeting continued with similar dynamics to that of our second meeting, and it was attended by 9 people, including the Trump supporter and 2 people who were new to the group. Much of the discussion was centered around understanding people who voted for Trump, stimulated by the book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right: A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide* by Arlie Russell Hochschild,⁸ that one member of the group was reading and strongly recommending that we all read (and which I am presently reading). Aside from this, the dominant part of our discussion was focused on bringing in Republicans/Conservatives to our group, as we still only had our one Trump supporter in the group, but a few people made the commitment to try to bring Trump supporters they knew to our next group meeting. The group atmosphere during our third meeting felt more comfortable with our Trump supporter, who said he was committed to attending our meetings, and joked that he was the “diversity” that I described when he briefly introduced himself at the beginning of the meeting. I was also able to get the Trump supporter to agree that immigrants should be welcomed to the U.S., with the stipulation that they were here legally, and I saw this as a small indication of success for my integrative endeavors to fight against hate crimes and discrimination. However, it was also frustrating to me that the Trump supporter still did not have any problem with anything Trump had done during the first month of his presidency, including his attempted travel ban on immigrants, and was completely against any efforts to impeach Trump.

Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination: The Fourth Meeting; Conclusion

Some significant developments took place after our third meeting, as it was suggested to me by one member of the group that I have a conversation with a very experienced workshop presenter who has conducted programs related to hate crimes and discrimination all over the world for many years. I had this conversation with the workshop presenter, which went well, and he agreed to attend our fourth group meeting as a visitor.⁹ In addition, the psychotherapist whose office we were meeting at arranged for someone she had met who had a lot of experience in conducting



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planet that is literally being destroyed by male-dominated religions that promote misogyny and other bigotries. I know the heart of Nehemiah's organizer, Dr. Doshie Piper, is for a truly interfaith, permanent resource for citizens reentering from prison to San Antonio. I am fortunate that I could address that with her and the crowd, as opposed to death threats faced by Wiccan lawyer Phyllis Currott; Jewish community centers; and mosques.

In Summer 2004, I stepped into the Esperanza Center for the first time. Everyone was washing the sins of our country out of our flag. I was too afraid to say that the Austin police had arrested me that January after finding my abusive, ex-boyfriend on top of me subsequent to him smothering, strangling, and beating me for 90 minutes. I told a man about it afterwards, who sneered and asked what I had done to deserve to be beaten.

On February 5, 2017, I showed the film *Sin by Silence* about the successful laws providing clemency for incarcerated, battered women in California – in stark contrast to the failures in our own state. San Antonio police arrest battered woman about 50 percent of the time on a domestic-violence call, according to PEACE Initiative. The phrase “domestic violence offender” has no meaning in a state that wrongfully arrests battered women and refuses to fix the problem it knows has existed since the 1980s.

Now we ALL have a president who is a self-admitted profer of women, as well as an anti-immigrant, ableist, classist, racist, journalist-hating thug. It's time for everyone to accept responsibility for changing themselves, then connect with others to hold accountable our government officials whose salaries we pay. Those in power have a myriad of ways to blame those with lesser power. There is always an excuse for blaming the person at the bottom of a power dualism.

In prison, we incarcerated citizens “put our pens in the wind” to grieve our conditions of confinement and write our own legal pleadings to challenge our holding convictions. On February 13, I spoke from the South steps of the state capital at the Texas Families for Justice Rally sponsored by criminal-justice reform groups. I then met with staff of my district senator, Donna Campbell, and others with whom I have cultivated relationships. I've come a long way since the November 2014 rally, when I was still on parole and too afraid to step into an office!

I want to thank Gloria, Graciela, and Esperanza – the Center, although my new computer still has that name – for providing a safe space for me to put my pen in the wind for the past 7 years. By giving me hope, I am able to give others hope.

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With members of First Universalist Church of San Antonio

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conflict resolution workshops, to also attend our fourth meeting. To make things even more interesting, this psychotherapist managed to secure a radio interview spot for herself to talk about our group, the day before our fourth meeting was scheduled, and she hoped that this radio interview might perhaps bring in some more Trump supporters to our group.

As it turned out, our fourth group meeting was relatively well-attended, as there were 10 people at our meeting, but once again we had only our one dedicated Trump supporter attending our group. The hate crimes and discrimination workshop presenter was not able to make it to our meeting, though he conveyed that he wanted to come either to our next meeting or the one after that. However, the experienced conflict resolutions person did attend our group, and helped facilitate various conflicting interactions between our Trump supporter and others in the group. Once again it felt to me like a dynamic and constructive group meeting, and a few people, including the Trump supporter and myself, suggested that it would be good for us to start talking about positive actions that we could take as a group. It struck me as especially meaningful and confirming that in the introductions at the beginning of the meeting, the Trump supporter expressed how he felt valued and not judged in our group, and though I must admit that I do have my own judgments about him, I was glad to hear that he felt so comfortable with us. People also started talking about wanting to promote our group to the public, as well as continuing to try to persuade Republicans and Conservatives to join us.

In conclusion, I believe that my initial ideas stemming from Gene Sharp's³ work in regard to moving from a dictatorship to democracy, are in a process of creative and constructive development as they play themselves out in the group arena that I have been describing. It is satisfying to me that my ideas have taken shape as much as they have, and I am excited and curious to see how far they can develop in the context of the group that I have formed. I encourage people in all areas of our country to form their own Citizens Against Hate Crimes and Discrimination groups, with the goal of forging common ground for this urgent theme with both Trump supporters and non-supporters, i.e., with people of diverse political perspectives—who have a problem with the increase in hate crimes and discrimination that has occurred since the campaign and election of Donald Trump.

Note: For footnotes and complete references, please contact La Voz de Esperanza at: lavoz@esperanzacenter.org.

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