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The Making of A Radical

Dick Ellington

1991

[Editor's note: FW Ellington passed away this spring. This piece appeared previously in *Kick It Over*.]

Most radicals seem horrified when I say that the U.S. Army made a radical out of me, but it's true—not that the army intended it that way of course. My father was a "self-made man" who clawed his way up during the Depression from grocery clerk to a high executive position with a large grocery firm. He died suddenly when I was eight and we went very quickly from comfortable middle-class to bottom-line poverty. At 17 I had never been exposed to any radical ideas and had no aim in life. An army recruiter who was charged with filling a recruiting quota for an army technical intelligence outfit found in me an ideal candidate—high school grad, high IQ, and—mainly—"clearable" for high-level security work. There was no draft on at the time but it was obvious there soon would be so I enlisted and spent four years in the outfit, including two-and-a-half years in the Far East. Along the line I was exposed to the inner workings of the murkier side of governments up close (nothing James Bondish, mind you, just all the routine paper-pushing that makes up 99 percent of the real world of intelligence gathering). I also began to see the workings of power, both in government and

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on a personal level in the army itself. Off duty my natural curiosity and a certain natural empathy drew me to the peoples of the Far East countries where I was stationed and I finally began to see how the social system worked, still without any conscious knowledge of why it worked that way. By the time I got out I knew I was thinking differently from most of the rest of the world but I didn't know why. Among other things, the army had taught me it was best to keep your mouth shut about weird ideas so I kept my feelings to myself.

When I was discharged I drifted around aimlessly and, in 1953 in New York, I first made contact with radical ideas. I read voraciously and nosed around various radical groups, mostly Marxists, but it quickly became obvious to me that they were simply the other side of the coin from what I was beginning to label "Capitalism." Finally, with an equally discontented friend, I drifted down to one of the Friday evening forums sponsored by the newly-formed Libertarian League and it all began to click into place. If I was a freak in my thinking, at least I had company.

Here was a whole group of people who thought pretty much the same way I did and they weren't afraid to talk about it, argue about it, write about it. They introduced me to the history and philosophy of Anarchism and within a few months I was a committed Anarchist.

The two men who founded the Libertarian League had great personal value for me. Sam Dolgoff introduced me to the IWW and shared bits of personal history with me. Russell Blackwell was the first person I'd met who had a sense of humor at least as black as my own. Both of them were incredibly patient with my continual questions and problems in sorting out all the new information I was absorbing.

I was plowing through the Anarchist "classics" with varying degrees of success but my real "bible" was *Freedom*, in those days a weekly. I read and reread every issue. The thoughtful articles all moved me and, mainly, helped me relate anarchist ideas to the mod-

Slowly, over the years, I've come to realize that the ideas of anarchism now color every phase of my life and I've come to realize that I wouldn't have it any other way.

ern world. By this time I was a general Jimmy Higgins with the Libertarian League, working on production of our modest publication, *Views & Comments*, and also handling our literature distribution. I corresponded quite a bit with Lillian Wolfe at *Freedom* and finally got up enough nerve to ask her who "CW" was (most of the articles in *Freedom* in those days were simply signed with initials). "His name is Colin Ward and he is an architect," was her terse reply—Lillian wasn't one for wasting words in those days, though over the years, after I had "paid my dues" for a while, she did open up a bit, and I know she was touched when I named my daughter after Marie Louise Berneri. At any rate, I really feel that Colin Ward's writings and his editorship of *Anarchy* were what most influenced my thinking, closely followed by the writings of Philip Sansome and Vern Richards.

I suppose the hardest thing then, as I'm sure it is now for the younger comrades, is to come to some kind of terms with our ideals and our daily lives in this society. I can only say that this is a deeply personal, individual thing and no two people draw the line in the same place. I slowly came to realize that our ideas might not triumph in the foreseeable future and I had to learn to deal with that. It is, of course, an oversimplification, but basically I decided that an Anarchist society is the best goal I can conceive of socially and I see no point in working for anything less than the best, even if immediate gains are not evident.

We moved to California in 1960, primarily to provide a somewhat more healthy environment in which to raise my daughter. I continued to work with the League and also with the IWW. The problem of "burnout" was becoming apparent to me, although it didn't really impress itself on me until, in the mid-sixties, I went through a period of it myself, complicated probably by the onset of crippling rheumatoid arthritis. I just lapsed into an apathetic state for a few years, during which I did little but live from day to day. Other people talk of their "salad days"; I think of those years as my "vegetable days." The vague sense of uneasiness and—let's be

honest—shame that I felt gradually grew strong enough to pull me back into activity. The only thing it taught me was that periods of brilliant and frenzied activity may be the way to go for some, but not for me. I learned to pace myself, to acknowledge my own limitations and to deal with the fact that I couldn't do everything myself. I slowly pulled myself together and began to work again, not at the same level as before, but steadily, and it has worked for me. I may never accomplish anything tremendous for our movement but the next time I burn out will be when they cremate my remains.

Except for brief periods of unemployment I had always held full-time jobs, working at whatever was available, trying to ameliorate the boredom of wage slavery by changing not only jobs but kinds of work regularly. As a cripple—and that's what I am—I could no longer indulge in that luxury, nor could I handle a full-time job and still take part in movement work. For one thing I simply couldn't physically handle things like running a press, walking a picket line or the various other kinds of direct action tactics I believe in.

I finally settled into my current lifestyle as the best compromise available to me. I work as a freelance typesetter and book designer in a back room of our home, using an old IBM composer and my knowledge of producing the printed word economically to provide a needed service for the small press and self-publishing fraternity. I don't make great amounts of money but I like what I do and I feel it is one small answer to the increasingly monolithic nature of commercial publishing.

Even this compromise would not have been possible without the constant help and support of my companera, my love, Pat, who for 30 years has shared all of this with me. I have used "I" throughout this but it is really "we" that would be more appropriate. We are a team, a pair, a partnership, and the two of us together equal far more than just the sum of one plus one.

I try to reserve as much of my time as my hand-to-mouth economics will permit for movement work, either donating my services (for specifically anarchist projects) or discounting heavily for

related work (anti-draft, environmental causes, etc.). I started working with comrades at Newspace in Chicago and Black & Red in Detroit, providing typesetting for pamphlets like *Shays' Rebellion*, Muniz's *Unions Against Revolution* and the previously untranslated section of Voline's *The Unknown Revolution*. I regularly help out with typesetting for the IWW and for the past few years have been cooperating with Cienfuegos/BCM Refract (Stefano Della Chiaia, *Portrait of a Black Terrorist*, the still-to-be-printed *Facerias*, Sam Dolgoff's *Fragments*), plus whatever else comes my way and seems useful (*The Strike in Gdansk* for my old comrade Andy Tymowski for instance).

The few things I've learned over the years seem right for me; they may not be right for others in the movement. With that caveat in mind:

I've learned patience and tolerance, particularly with my comrades. I try to stay clear of feuds within our movement and to temper my criticisms of others with understanding. When anarchists waste time, energy and paper slanging each other we all lose and the powers that be chortle in delight.

I've learned the value of humor. Nothing—including our own movement—should be immune to laughter. When we lose the ability to laugh at ourselves we lose everything. Black humor has great survival value in our insane society and provides a great needed outlet for rage.

That delicate balancing act we all must do between day-to-day living and our own ideals requires the development of a set of personal ethics. I continue to try and shove the needle into the State at every opportunity but at the same time I feel I must act fairly and honestly with my fellow human beings. I give my word sparingly but I always keep it. I try to stay clear of work that is obviously supportive of the system. I do not allow myself to be put into a position where I must "boss" other working people, simply because I don't think I am any less susceptible to the corruption of power than anybody else.