



What the Civil Rights Movement Proved by Howard Zinn

[Excerpted from *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*, Howard Zinn. 1994, Beacon Press.]

What the civil rights movement proved ... is that even if people lack the customary attributes of power — money, political authority, physical force — as did the black people of the Deep South, there is a power that can be created out of pent-up indignation, courage, and the inspiration of a common cause, and that if enough people put their minds and bodies into that cause, they can win. It is a phenomenon recorded again and again in the history of popular movements against injustice all over the world ...

Not to believe in the possibility of dramatic change is to forget that things have changed, not enough, of course, but enough to show what is possible. We have been surprised before in history. We can be surprised again. Indeed, we can do the surprising ...

The reward for participating in a movement for social justice is not the prospect of future victory. It is the exhilaration of standing together with other people, taking risks together, enjoying small triumphs and enduring disheartening setbacks — together.

Note how often ... we have been surprised. By the sudden emergence of a people's movement, the sudden overthrow of a tyranny, the sudden coming to life of a flame we thought extinguished. We are surprised because we have not taken notice of the quiet simmering of indignation, of the first faint sounds of protest, of the scattered signs of resistance that, in the midst of our despair, portend the excitement of change. The isolated acts begin to join, the individual thrusts blend into organized actions, and one day, often when the situation seems most hopeless, there bursts onto the scene a movement.