

INTRODUCTION

The Big Lie

It is impossible to restore the sustainable societies of indigenous and aboriginal peoples. But the values they embodied — careful stewardship of earth, modest use of its riches, safeguarding the future of the generations to come, restraint and as high a degree of self-provisioning as possible — can reanimate ancient and still unrealized dreams of a secure sustenance for all.

— JEREMY SEABROOK —

From the first, let us dispense with the Big Lie. You know the one we refer to: the eternally repeated claim that we cannot make real and deep and radical change in our way of living, even if it is the right thing to do. The Big Lie narrows both our perspective and our perception of our alternatives, while making our failures seem natural and inevitable. The Big Lie claims that we are cowards, that we are weak, that we are no longer the inheritors of our revolutionary past and that we lack moral integrity. It is a slander, and yet we believe it. And until we stop believing it, we cannot lift our hands, our voices or our hoes and get on with the work of change.

We hear the Big Lie over and over again, from every side. It is told by authority, defiantly, in defense of the maintenance of power by the privileged, as when Dick Cheney announced, “The American way of life is non-negotiable” in response to questions about whether Americans should conserve energy. It is told by those who have grown frustrated with their failure to make change and who believe that the scope of change must be limited by our cowardice, as when climate change activist George Monbiot writes, “By ‘feasibility’ I mean compatibility with industrial civilization.... Whether or not we enjoy the soft life... it is politically necessary to discover the means of sustaining it.”¹ We have been told it is true for so long that we believe it, and it shapes our thinking and prevents us from seeing the choices and answers that stand just outside of our reach.

But how do we know that it isn't true? One way is simply to look around us, at our history and at other people in our world. We might look back as far as the early Christians, who held their goods in common and stood in resistance to established cultures. Or perhaps we would look at our own American Revolution, which established that national democracies can succeed over the divine right of kings. Or to Gandhi's non-violent revolution in India, the march across the subcontinent and his demonstration that non-violent resistance can overcome armies. There are tens of thousands of such examples of human beings reimagining their society, and from those reimaginings creating something real and tangible. None of those people chose the easy path. Each of them chose what they believed to be right, despite a great cost to themselves.

But, we are told, we are somehow different than they. The Big Lie carries with it the false notion that acts of courage and rebellion are exceptional and not the work of people very much unlike ourselves. Those who stand up for justice and liberty are different, we are told in a thousand ways, each enforcing the Big Lie.

How do we know that we are still courageous and powerful people, that we are still able to re-envision our society and make it over, just as revolutionaries of all sorts have done in the past? We know this for two reasons. The first is that we recognize the theory of exceptionalism as false doctrine. We believe that we are like other people, that other people are like us. We look inside ourselves and see ordinary human beings, flawed and imperfect, capable of great foolishness and terrible mistakes, and also capable of a great deal of good. And we can make change. The people we know are like us — they are ordinary people, and thus capable of the ordinary acts of heroism that make revolutions possible.

The Big Lie tries to convince us that we are less good, less moral, less brave, less able than those who came before us. But we know that is false. We know in our hearts and deep in our guts what we are capable of.

The other reason we know we can transform our society is that when we look around us, again and again we see the Big Lie made false. We find acts of resistance and courage in every place, every town and state and nation. We see people who will lay down their lives for what they believe is right and people who have the courage to go on living for the same cause. We see people who go each week to church, mosque or synagogue, or out into the world and woods, and try to live honorably, doing not what is easy but what is right. We see those who will go to jail for what is right and give

up comfort and convenience for what they believe. That we have not unified our work and come to a whole and complete understanding of what is right is a problem, in part shaped by the prevalence of the Big Lie. But that fact does not mean we cannot, or should not, find a common answer and change our society, our economy and our culture if it no longer serves us.

So let us dispense right this moment, today, now, with the Big Lie. We can be the moral descendents of those who have chosen to remake their cultures. We can be the inheritors of those who fought back against slavery and oppression, those who overthrew unjust rulers, who marched and stood firm and said “No” and backed it with their action. We are those people — there is nothing inherent in us that makes us less courageous or less good, strong or moral than the world’s ordinary, heroic people. All we need to do is to begin, to take up courage and honor, morality and strength as our banner, and to bury the Big Lie beneath a thousand working hoes and shovels.