

Alas, we who wished to lay the foundations of kindness . . .

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...Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.

— Bertolt Brecht, "To Posterity"

When the great left-wing poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht penned these lines in 1938, the world was in crisis and cataclysm. In the Soviet Union, the Purge Trials of the Old Bolsheviks were underway, and Stalin's arch-nemesis, Leon Trotsky, was seeking refuge in exile. Japan had invaded China, and the impending threat of World War II loomed across Europe. In the United States, the CIO was being born, the New Deal was underway, and the country was still reeling from the Great Depression that had begun in 1929. There was reason for gloom and pessimism, as fascism was rising and socialism was divided and fratricidal. Especially for socialists such as Brecht, the hounding of Trotsky and the show trials of Lenin's associates for counterrevolution and treason were troubling for many; for the Stalinists, however, these were causes for glee. Under these conditions, Brecht penned these troubled and lamenting lines.

Yet overlooked by Brecht, and many socialists both before and after 1938, was the very fundamental question: "If we ourselves can't be kind, but only doctrinaire and self-assured, how can we honestly lay the foundations of kindness? Aren't we being as bricklayers who don't know how to lay bricks? And why should we not be judged too harshly for this failing? Haven't we, by this failing, let the masses down, betrayed their trust in us?"

My answer is Yes, and it is one shared by other socialists as well. If we of the left can't ourselves be kind, we can't lay the foundations for kindness in a serious way; we can only accomplish Political Correctness, and that is indeed a failing, a betrayal of trust we foist on the masses, for which we can't be judged too harshly.

I write thus as a forty-five year veteran of the left who has himself tried to be kind, only to frequently have others on the left treat him none too kindly. Same as others on the left have experienced. Left-wing sectarianism and heresy-hunting are unfortunately all too well known, and all too common, and stem from the same flaw—self-assurance degenerated into self-righteousness, desire for truth degenerated into cruelty toward those who differ with us. All too many of us on the left have endured such, and rare indeed is the leftist who hasn't had to endure these at least once. In an important way, it's what's turned many a former leftist into a rightist, many a socialist or communist into a virulent enemy of both.

Not all of us on the left who've endured these have abandoned the left, and I am one who has not, although I often feel the left has abandoned me. More important, since these serious flaws can't be easily hidden, the working people the left is trying to reach end up feeling abandoned by the left

also, of being used and manipulated in internecine witch-hunts and doctrinal squabbles, of being pawns in a chess game of interest and relevant only to sectarian chess players. They thus lose faith in the left too.

The antidote is for the left to realize that people count just as much as programs, and without kindness to our fellow human beings, we of the left can't lay the foundations of kindness. Without caring, without empathy, what we try to build will not be humane, despite what our now merely abstract programs say. We will be as bricklayers who cannot lay bricks, and it won't matter even if a thousand bricks are laid before us. We will render them useless.

So the left's first need is kindness. Kindness toward ourselves, and kindness toward those outside our circles. Or, in other words, simple human decency. And the essence of that is caring what people really think, what they really care about, and honestly dialoguing with them about it, not preaching our own particular nostrums and programs at them. For we are not so infallible that we of the left know for all time what the masses need, and what we can give them that will fulfill those needs. Nor should we be so arrogant to assume we do.

But this does not lead to not having programs and proposals, strategies, principles and tactics, nor to a solipsistic skepticism. There are basic ground rules that have been proven to work and work well, and one of the most basic of these was articulated by Engels at Marx's graveside: "Marx proved that man must first of all eat before he can do philosophy, the arts, etc." Or engage in politics, or organize a union, or do anything at all. Another way of saying, Economics is paramount. But we of the left have too often forgotten that, and tried to replace it with ideology. When the masses spurn our preoccupation with ideology as lacking relevance, we become angry and unkind toward them, as though they were fools for rejecting our wisdom. But they are the ones who are right, not we.

Certainly that's true now, true overwhelmingly, especially given that we of the U.S. and worldwide are in an economic crisis where the people are basically reeling and hurting for strictly economic matters: unemployment, job insecurity, low and stagnant wages, decline of trade unions, foreclosures, high gas and food prices, unaffordable education, and the rich gobbling up the lion's share of the wealth. All economic. That's what the people are concerned with now, that's what's on their minds, not leftist abstractions many of the left feel more comfortable talking and theorizing about. But they also come down to economics. Think how much wealth would be available for jobs if the war in Afghanistan weren't being waged. Think how much Green Jobs and building Green Infrastructure could both put people to work, and work in meaningful ways that would positively address global warming and the polluted environment. And this only begins the list! So economics is paramount to the left's being kind, considerate of people's real needs, not our abstract wishes.

Last, in terms of kindness, it's crucial to remember that people are diverse, messy, not always articulate, and, especially now, hurting and fearful; this is most important to remember, for many of us radicals are from more secure backgrounds, are more affluent and less troubled. We are thus given to more impatience toward those who are not "like us." And people have emotions as well as brains, disturbances as well as serenity. All needing, and deserving of, kindness. Finally, we of the left are people too. We need to be treated with kindness by our fellow leftists same as the masses, the working people. We may work more with our brains than with our hands, we may be looking for our first job while others are in despair because they've been unemployed for months or even years, and yet we're all brothers and sisters under the skin. We all need kindness. And if we of the left can't provide it, we can't be judged too harshly.

GEORGE FISH is an anti-authoritarian socialist writer living in Indianapolis, Indiana whose work has

appeared in several left publications He has also published extensively on blues and other pop music, has published poetry, and does Lenny Bruce/George Carlin-style stand-up comedy. He may be reached at georgefish666@yahoo.com. This article was first published in the June 2011 issue of The Movement, formerly the Indianapolis Peace & Justice Journal.