Revolutionary Optimism: Hope Redefined

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For as long as I can remember, I hoped to "make the world a better place." I can't quite pinpoint where this motivation came from, but my parents often tell me about the surprising wisdom I espoused as a child. One day in third grade, I came home from school and told them how some kids made fun of me because of my short height. "I don't care how tall I am. It's what's in *here* that really matters," I said, ending the story with my finger pointed at my heart. That precious heart of mine would bruise from an increasingly turbulent home life and growing awareness that a loving heart does not absolve someone from experiencing cruelty from labor exploitation, misogyny, racism, ableism, and violence. I watched my mother, who left her family in Korea to start a life in the U.S. with my father, toil in the freezer section of a grocery store while she made fresh sushi. Even with limited English language ability, she made sure my family survived at the expense of her health. Within these realities, my childlike hope for a better world morphed into a teenage righteousness. After learning about feminism and electoral politics from online discourse, I debated my classmates on their sexist views and kept up with current events. I tried to nurse my hope through these small acts, but I grew increasingly restless as I learned more.

I was in my high school's choir room when I saw the news: an active shooter at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Growing up in the "generation that came of age amid school violence" (Collinson), I was unfortunately used to these headlines, and I did my usual routine of going on Twitter for think pieces and clocking politicians' responses. A familiar rage simmered within me at the sight of the same "thoughts and prayers" rhetoric, but I stopped scrolling when I saw something electrifyingly unfamiliar. The Parkland students, many of them the same age as me, rebuked these empty condolences and demanded action. They were raw, unapologetic, and sharp. Each quip gained thousands of interactions until #NeverAgain went

viral on Twitter. Soon after, they announced the March for Our Lives (MFOL), a national day of action on March 24, 2018. At seventeen-years-old, I heeded their call and co-organized the march in Houston, TX.

After a month of rigorous planning, I looked upon a crowd of 15,000 people (Walker) while doing the opening speech for MFOL Houston. When I ended my speech by repeating the words "never again," the crowd chanted back, "Never again! Never again! Never again!" My heart swelled, swallowing gulps of what looked like the physical manifestation of my hope for the world. I thought that sweeping changes to U.S. gun policy were right on the horizon, and I wasn't alone. Communications scholars Neil Alperstein and Tina Jones collected one hundred thousand tweets containing #NeverAgain from March 24-29, 2018, and found that "10,360 tweets expressing positive feelings…the words proud, good, great, brave, courageous, excited and happy are predominant" (138). Words like "proud" and "excited" show how MFOL "not only inspire[d] political action, but it is also [made] those engaged in the movement feel positive and hopeful about their future" (Alperstein and Jones 139). MFOL would become "one of the biggest youth protests since the Vietnam War" (Lopez), and I moved up the ranks of the movement until I became a youth board member for the national non-profit.

My work with MFOL took me across the country to meet with survivors of gun violence, local community organizations, politicians in various positions of local and federal government, and fellow youth activists of color. Although I will always be grateful for the people I've met and the skills I gained by diving heart-first into this historic moment, my fervent hope cooled with disillusionment until it ultimately shrank to an all time low in 2020. At this point, I had visited the same congressional offices and got tired of hearing the typical talking points from staff who were clearly doing the tedious work of "listening" to us while not committing to tangible change.

I began to question MFOL's rallying call, "a future free of gun violence" ("March For Our Lives"). What did this really mean in practice? My thoughts cycloned until I succumbed to nihilism. I spiraled within the confines of the only type of organizing I knew: register people to vote, rally behind a gun safety candidate, lick my wounds if they didn't get voted in, celebrate if they did, and fall into deeper despair when nothing could be done despite the odds being stacked in your favor.

Then, the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd forced a reckoning within myself and everything I believed in. Coincidentally, I decided to take my first Asian American Studies course that Spring, where I learned how xenophobic attitudes towards COVID-19 mirrored the Yellow Peril of the 19th century. Combined with abolitionist theory from scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis. I realized that violence can be traced back to power and capital. This is what was missing in MFOL's gun violence prevention rhetoric. The non-profit industrial complex had "redirect[ed our youth activist] energies into career-based modes of organizing instead of mass-based organizing capable of actually transforming society" ("Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex"). Meaning, our emphasis on electoral politics and reform defanged the revolutionary potential of our work. A true movement against gun violence would mean a complete societal power shift because ending gun violence requires an end to violence itself, which is tied to money-making systems such as the military and prisons.

Through liberatory scholarship, I finally relieved my cognitive dissonance between what I thought was making the world a better place and the systems of oppression that prevented it from happening. When I went through my nihilistic phase, my intellectual transformation helped me to see just how much of a betrayal hopelessness is. From Korean Independence Freedom Fighters to the Black Panthers, revolutionaries dared to dream and imagine alternative futures.

Thus, revolutionary optimism is my childlike hope redefined. I think I had a portion of it right as a third grader when I identified that what's within our hearts matter, but it's the willingness to transform ourselves that makes hope truly tangible.

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