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Meeting Daniel Ellsberg

I'd appreciate it if you took the time to read my musings, below. It would be great to have a mail bag with responses later.

Last night we went to Peace Crimes at Rarig Center, UofM West Bank, the story of the Minnesota 8, and draft resistance in about 1970. There was not a single open seat in the house. It was an outstanding production. It plays through March 11. See it if at all possible. [www.pwh-mn.org](http://www.pwh-mn.org).

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FEB. 23, 2008

We sat in a St. Paul living room with 30 others yesterday afternoon, among them a number of old radicals who'd gone to prison for their passion, listening to Dan Ellsberg, of Pentagon Papers fame, talk about the state of the nation and what to do about it. Ellsberg seemed like an old guy (as if I'm a spring chicken), quiet, humble, soft-spoken, a slight man in stature. But one of those incredibly extraordinary folks whose every breath seems to ooze meaning. I hope I don't misquote him below. I tried to actively listen. Questions were superfluous.

He gave us far more than our moneys worth, talking for almost an hour.

We were mostly people who were once young. Some were old radicals. One in our circle, David Gutt knecht, is legend in the resistance movement for a U.S. Supreme Court win way back. Gutt knecht vs United States of America is probably easily accessible on the web.

After our close encounter with Ellsberg, on the drive home, I had some feelings of hopelessness. I'm an optimist by nature. But I didn't feel optimistic.

Ellsberg copied the infamous Pentagon papers in the fall of '69, and the Congress knew about them, but wasn't interested in having hearings mostly, he felt, because they would make the Congress look bad. (Avoiding looking bad is not an unusual problem for any of us. In hands of Congress, it's more dangerous, but it's not unusual. After all, politicians reelection depends on looking good.)

At some point the FBI learned that these papers were out there, as well as Ellsberg, but never quite caught up with him or them...he and the papers went from safe house to safe house...till they were published by many newspapers in mid-1971. More than 30 years after the fact he wrote a book about his adventure, and asked those who harbored him if he could now name their names: statute of limitations had long since expired and he wanted to give credit where credit was due. Not a single one of his protectors, then, gave permission, since the administration now included an attorney general named Ashcroft, and the security hysteria was in full sway. And this was early in the hysterical times in our country.

In the summer of 1970 the young turks called the Minnesota 8 raided draft boards in a couple of places and destroyed draft records and were caught. There were a number of other draft raids around the country preceding theirs.

In January, 1971, came their trial, and this as-yet little known guy named Dan Ellsberg showed up with a briefcase full of the Pentagon Papers, which they planned to introduce into evidence at Frank Kroncke's trial, though a simple statement by Ellsberg that the government was lying. The judge refused to allow the papers to be admitted into evidence, and the rest is history which you can revisit any time many places on the web. Later than year the Pentagon Papers were published by major media, in an act of defiance against the government which I doubt would be repeated today.

As always happens at these gatherings, the discussion sooner or later turns to tactics and strategies, and, of course, whether the Democrats are any better than the Republicans.

Like Dr. Noble on Tuesday, Dan was hard to pin down, and pretty circular. But it seemed very, very clear that this time around, from his perspective, there are two choices, Republican or Democrat, and if you want McCain as president, then support somebody other than a Democrat, or don't vote or work for anybody. On the Democrati side he seemed to lean a little towards Obama, but he didn't assure nirvana with anyone, including Obama. (For those of you who have lost hope in me, he did nudge me a bit towards Obama but...I think there is a tendency to think in terms of simple solutions - standing for principles, some might call it - and it will not be simple for whoever is elected in November.)

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Ellsberg's hero pretty clearly was Henry David Thoreau, who resisted America's first war of 'aggrandizement' (as I think he or Thoreau called it): The Mexican-American War of the 1840s. He had some other heroes too, but clearly HDT was at the top of the list. I think he was specifically talking about Thoreau's Civil Disobedience essay of 1849, though he never mentioned it by name. My guess is it's downloadable. Thoreau, he said, defined the word 'vote' very broadly - "cast your whole vote" - which is far more than simply casting a ballot (or refusing to vote at all).

Ellsberg called for activism, and he said that small activism is essential, even if it seems unproductive or hopeless. Even the Minnesota 8, or he himself, couldn't individually stop the Vietnam War, but they added their significant bits and pieces. At some point, he or someone in the group noted that 5% of any group, in action in some way, is sort of the critical mass. I tend to agree. It is excruciatingly hard to get that critical mass.

Enroute home, I was 'distressing' aloud about how to get people my kids age engaged in their future. They all have their excuses and their biases: too busy, too Republican, too religious, too uninterested.... They haven't lost their job or their rights and the threat of same is too abstract for them. Some of them should be very worried, but can't see that for some reason.

Cathy made an excellent point: when Ellsberg and the others were doing their thing, she said, she was trying to raise a child, essentially by herself. She wasn't divorced then, but may as well have been.

In '69, when Ellsberg copied the Pentagon papers, my then-wife and I had a brand new house on an acre lot, a 5 year old and an infant, and we lived out in the country, and while I saw this stuff on TV, there was a life to be lived and a living to be made, and I wasn't on the streets protesting either. I knew about the Pentagon Papers. I had two kid brothers in Vietnam, one of whom had nearly lost his life in a jet fighter refueling accident over Thailand, and stayed with us for a time in November and December, 1969, as he recovered from burns.

I don't recall anything about the Minnesota 8 arrests and trials the following year, though I'm sure they were on the news. I wasn't making much money, but I wasn't worried about job security and a future. I was very active by then, in teacher union work, but that was the circle of my activism - I was a long ways away from any campus foment.

But there was a difference, then, that might give me a small entre to the youth I know.

At that point in history, about 1970, it was harder to be a pessimist about our future. We were the 'frog in the water' and the heat was only very slowly increasing. We didn't notice any real warning signs. The first baby-boomers had just cleared college, the population was still exploding, there was a sense of security about the future, even if you weren't wealthy, or even middle class. Activism was raging in all areas that mattered: womens rights, civil rights, right to organize and belong to unions (my passion, then)....

Even the Republican side was tilted progressive in many substantive ways. (If you want a demonstration of that, look closely at a very remarkable document that was signed in March, 1971, in Minnesota, and look carefully who signed it - I have a listing of them. It's at my new website [www.amillioncopies.info](http://www.amillioncopies.info), and I know the guy who pulled it off pretty well. It is an idea we're trying to resurrect, and it is an example that could end up having real 'legs'. Soon there will be a 30 minute movie from 1971 that tells the story, posted at the site.)

Of course, all that was then, and this is now. Most kids have no idea who Ellsberg is, or Vietnam or the Draft was. They're ancient and hardly publicized history. Somebody said yesterday afternoon that high school history these days still ends with WWII, and I wouldn't be surprised if that was correct. We lost Vietnam, and history's are reluctant to learn from losses.

But the kids today have to contend with a future that is not as hopeful. We have an administration that believes in a Rule of Men, rather than a Rule of Law; which has basically taken on to itself the role of dictator until the war of terror has been won, which will be never. We essentially live in a Peace State Ellsberg thought is about as bad now as East Germany at its worst, and by no means at its worst, yet. We are at peak oil, and global warming is not a quaint abstraction, and possibility of economic collapse, or severe degrading of the economy, is all but certain in the short or long term. We live as if we're the King of the World, and we aren't even Princes. Fear and Loathing literally rule our life: just watch the ads for politicians in the coming months, including the infamous recent one put out by the House Republicans that all but assures us of being attacked by brown-skinned Islamists.

Our kids do not have the luxury we did, to be benignly dis-engaged.

SO, WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

SOMETHING, ANYTHING, THAT'S WHAT. BUT MORE THAN WHAT WE ARE DOING NOW. THE STATUS QUO IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

PS: [www.pwh-mn.org](http://www.pwh-mn.org) for tickets for Peace Crimes; and for the remaining schedule of college appearances of Peace and War in the Heartland. This is a highly significant project.

Feb.  
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\* Since someone may wonder, two weeks earlier I'd indicated my strong support for Hillary Clinton - I simply felt her better prepared for the rigors of the office than then-Sen. Obama. Later I strongly supported Mr. Obama for eight years, and in 2016 strongly supported Hillary Clinton.