

**Sarah van Gelder, *The Revolution Where You Live: Stories From A 12,000 Mile Journey Through A New America, Oakland, CA. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017. 212 pp., ISBN: 978-1-62656-765-8***

**Reviewed by Jennifer Thoman**

Confronted with the unrelenting onslaught of corporate greed, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, violent political and media rhetoric, and apathy, is it any wonder that activists in the United States face unprecedented levels of burnout?<sup>1</sup> But as the raging fire of movements like Occupy Wall Street morph and change into slow-burning embers, *Yes! Magazine* co-founder and editor-at-large Sarah van Gelder has chosen to run toward the heat, not away from it. In these tumultuous times, van Gelder seeks something more than the broad strokes change promised by national movements; instead, she endeavors to find hope and meaning in the small, place-based activism happening across the country. As an activist, I approached this project with joy: yes! Someone else is taking up the mantle of “Fight the power!”

The story of *The Revolution Where You Live* is deceptively simple. *Yes! Magazine* is full of stories of people doing the hard work of revolution-building, all over the world. Van Gelder has been, for the better part of 20 years, a passionately reflective and capable storyteller, bringing people together in service of a collective mission for good. The very nature of small-scale, anti-establishment organizing is that the media tends not to cover it when it happens. *Yes!* provides a forum where people can come together as solutionaries and work to change the world for the better. That said, it can be hard to continue fighting

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<sup>1</sup>Chen, C. W., & Gorski, P. C. (2015). Burnout in Social Justice and Human Rights Activists: Symptoms, Causes and

in the face of opposition from the governments and corporations that hold power, not to mention the friends, family, and neighbors who have not yet been awakened to the lie that is the extraction economy. Van Gelder believed, when she and others started the magazine, that the better angels of our nature would triumph in the end. After 20 years, some things have changed, but “the big trends are deeply disturbing.”<sup>2</sup> Seeking advice from a friend on how to soothe her soul, she found the answer setting out on a journey to find the people and places that were fighting back, to find out once and for all if community organizing could really save our lives.

Tied to relationship building, van Gelder’s road trip across the United States is chronicled by region and by theme. There is inspiration for everyone here—stories of humans in all kinds of life situations working for civil rights, environmental justice, food security, and other issues that impact large swaths of people all over the nation. In the Northwest, she meets ranchers and native people fighting to stop destructive coal mining, fracking, and mountaintop removal. At Turtle Creek, she meets with a tribe that successfully saved their water by passing, through Tribal Council, a ban on fracking, even as surrounding tribes succumbed to the temptation brought on by big money and big promises from the industry. In the Midwest, from cities to small towns, van Gelder meets people working for labor rights and better jobs. In Detroit, fueled by the radical power of the late Grace Lee Boggs, activists are energized in fighting evictions, water shut-offs, and a national narrative that paints a picture of an apocalyptic wasteland. The Detroit residents van Gelder meets with are trying to save their town, not only from government corruption and poverty, but also from gentrification and white saviors. The stories from

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<sup>2</sup> Van Gelder, S. (2017). *The Revolution Where You Live*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler.13.

Michigan paint a picture of a community that, like many others in the book, loves its place and wants desperately for it to be restored.

From the Midwest, she travels to the Southeast and East Coast. In Appalachia, she again learns of a community ravaged by the coal industry. The stories of coal in this book run counter to the narrative so popular in the media, that rural communities need coal to survive, and to fight coal is to fight “good American jobs.” Appalachia’s flattened mountaintops and abandoned mines are proof positive that coal is not a force for good. And while government officials attempt to bring money to rural areas by building prisons on those newly flattened mountains, some residents, energized by youth and pride, fight back. In Kentucky, an influx of young people are working to change the story of what it means to be from the mountains. A vibrant cultural landscape that includes music, art, and nightlife seeks to change the hearts and minds of traditional residents, with success as observed by van Gelder. Young people with diverse life experiences are finding ways to challenge the overt and aggressive racism that is rampant in the area. A local radio station, inspired by a phone call request, plays messages to the large local population of incarcerated people every Monday night. The love flowing through the airwaves shows locals, young and old, that there are invisible residents in Kentucky whose lives matter.

From Appalachia, van Gelder travels up through the eastern coast, meeting people in small towns and big cities who have been impacted by racism and are working to change the way their communities deal with divided identities. To bring the trip to a close, she drives through the Southwest and Texas, meeting immigrants and descendents of immigrants who are working to preserve their culture while also bringing understanding and tolerance to their new homes. When in Dallas, she learns of a Syrian

refugee family due to arrive, and the various ways religious communities are responding. And, then, she finds hope in a gay church, one that preaches radical inclusivity of all people rather than the violent exclusion and dangerous hatred found in many Evangelical churches in this country.

To be sure, these ideas are not new. Neither are they unique to this book and this author. Philosophers and activists alike have been discussing the power of people to change the world for centuries. Native people, like those van Gelder visited in the Northwest, have understood what it means to take things like love and clean water seriously, rather than treating them as idealistic dreams, since before there was a United States. What becomes evident in throughout van Gelder's stories, however, is just how strange a place is this country, united as it is in contradictions. As a nation, we distrust the government and fight tax increases in the name of righteous individualism, but refuse to accept responsibility for the breakdown of simple human kindness. Caring for one's neighbor is a radical act, often compared to the evils of socialism in particular conservative circles.

Yet, some of the most daring stories in van Gelder's journey are those of humans caring for other humans. Wendell Berry, writing for *Yes!* in 2014, says the following about small change and human good:

...Small solutions do not wait upon the future. Insofar as they are possible now, exist now, are actual and exemplary now, they give hope. Hope, I concede, is for the future. Our nature seems to require us to hope that our life and the world's life will continue into the future. Even so, the future offers no validation of this hope. That validation is to be found only in the knowledge, the history, the good work, and the good examples that are now at hand.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Berry, Wendell. "Wendell Berry on Climate Change: To Save the Future, Live in the Present." *Yes!* Magazine Mar. 2015. Web. 1 Nov. 2016.

Berry goes on to discuss the difference between living to save the world (from ending, someday in the future) and living “savingly” in it. To live with intention, taking only what you need from the earth, and to practice restoration in every aspect of your life is to live as if the world will continue indefinitely. The earth is not scarce; the earth is abundant, and will provide for its inhabitants as long as we recognize our place in the vast, interconnected web of relationships that have been at work for millennia. Humans are capable of so much more than taking the earth’s resources until there are none left, and harming each other until reparations are impossible. This is the ethos from which van Gelder builds her journey, and she endeavors to prove its worth in every story she retells.

In Harrisonburg, Virginia, a small but mighty group of activists are fighting for restorative justice practices to be incorporated into the criminal justice system. Like many stories of the system, this one includes statistics on the United States’ mass incarceration problem, along with an interview with a police officer. Distinct from other stories, this one centers on honesty and reconciliation. Police Lieutenant Kurt Boshart, a white officer in a predominantly African-American town, openly acknowledges his racial bias in an interview with van Gelder. His frankness on the issue is stunning. This is one of those aforementioned daring moments of a human caring for other humans. Boshart, a vocal supporter of restorative justice, actively encourages rookies on his force to talk about their biases. In such frankness, the good of the people, and the good work they can do, shines through. And, somehow, against my best instincts, I was moved by this project to work with police rather than abolishing them entirely.

After reading the stories that pepper van Gelder’s journey across the United States, I am left with the feeling deep in my bones that people, indeed, have power.

Communities come together and fight for recognition and acceptance, for the right to live on land that is theirs, for human dignity, for the basics of life such as food and shelter.

Arriving to the epilogue, however, there came a moment that forced me to question my own conclusion. How, I wondered, are we to reconcile a desire to detach from the institutions that have caused so much harm with our sustained drive to live in the world? After a call for increased small organizing, van Gelder describes the myriad ways corporations and complexes will fight to keep people down. “They will do this not because evil people are in charge, but because our system offers huge rewards for continuing the extraction, and big penalties for stepping out of that system.”<sup>4</sup> Having been inspired by the stories of people and places, I was then brought back down to earth by the brief concession that laws must be changed, that “the economy will need to come back to being a servant of the people, not our master.”<sup>5</sup> Was there ever a time in history when the economy was a servant of the people?, I wondered. What is it that we must go “back” to?

And, now, my activist self remembers that the worker class and ruling class have perennially clashed as their needs are at odds. Time banks, community gardens, truth commissions, and restorative justice all work *against* the tenets of capitalism and the extraction economy. They cannot be infinitely scaled up, and there is no benefit to increasing their efficiency (or introducing money, really). They are not suggestions of how to fix the system, but rather, ways to work outside of it. So why not take the extra step and suggest that perhaps the best way to fix the system is to break it?

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<sup>4</sup> Van Gelder, S. (2017). *The Revolution Where You Live*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler. 188.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 188.

Recently, while attending a retreat for a group of millennials impacted by significant loss, I found myself engrossed in a conversation about organizing and problem-solving, as I often do. The man I was talking to had co-founded an organization that enabled people to self-direct their own graduate education, and we'd started to chat about a shared passion for radical learning. As the topics we explored expanded outward, into the state of our world, the violence ever-present against marginalized people, and our mutual desire to change things, we began to feel the weight of the challenge pressing down on our shoulders. In the span of those hours, fueled by good food and better wine, we had gone from driven, young, creative-thinkers to devastated young activists, facing head-on the awe-inspiring mountain of obstacle and opposition that was our future. I then remembered, suddenly, that I had the review copy of van Gelder's book in my bag. I grabbed it, sensing it might provide counter evidence against our provisional conclusion. We paused, briefly, to think of answers to the question of what should happen next? Then, I handed my new acquaintance the book, and as he thumbed through the pages, he asked, "Do you think she's got a point?" In that moment, I struggled. Yes, grassroots organizing is the best way to connect small communities and organize towns against the forces of the extraction economy. People are capable of extraordinary things when they believe that their voices are loud and have worth. People who understand that in order for one of us to shine, we must all shine, are the ones who are most successful in radical organizing movements. Bringing the most marginalized voices to the front is a surefire way to get the needs of most people met. But then, he hit me with the same challenge that I found in the end of *The Revolution Where You Live*. I'd mentioned joining credit unions as a way to fight the big banks. "Even then," he said, "the card still has a Visa logo. We

can't disengage completely." I was momentarily disheartened. Too, I has reached the end of the book.

If van Gelder's message is that people have power, that we have the strength to do amazing things, and that love is an incredible force, couldn't one takeaway be that we *can* disengage completely? Perhaps this is not the message afterall. In choosing to acknowledge our place within these vast systems of corporate and government greed, and in accepting that we can't change those systems, maybe our real power is in choosing to transcend rather than escape. In seeking the power of the people to change, in rooting ourselves down into our communities, in finding ways to build meaningful relationships with the earth and each other and ourselves, we can build lives that have meaning above and beyond sweeping national change. Tiny movements of love and light in communities aren't *changing* the system—they are more important than the system. Eventually, that will be enough. This is the message of hope from van Gelder's journey. It is a small token, perhaps; a gift to lift the "you" in the book's title out of moments of despair. More than that, it is a call to action with a purpose. There is work to be done, and someone must do it. Why not the reader?



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