

Afterword: Returning Home, Remembering Meanings of Freedom

I read in the paper, I watched on the show
They said that it happened a long time ago
The years had gone by, I just didn't know

Working for freedom now

The songs that we sang still ring in my ears
The hope and the glory, the pain and the fears
I just can't believe it's been forty-five years

Working for freedom now

Sometimes we stumble, sometimes we fall
Sometimes we stand with our backs to the wall
This road will humble the proudest of all

Working for freedom now

Though the road up ahead may stretch out far and long
We must always remember the roads that we've gone
Memory will help us to keep keeping on

Working for freedom now

Those who have fallen and given their last
Have passed on to us what remains of their task
To fight for the future and pray for the past

Working for freedom now

The song of their laughter, the step of their feet
The voice of their pain that cries out in our sleep
Will be judged in the end by the faith that we keep

Working for freedom now

The wind in the winter is bitter and chill
 The cries of the hunted are heard on the hill
 I just can't believe there's such suffering still

Working for freedom now

The wind blows the summer from fields far away
 We stand in the dust in the heat of the day
 Our hearts stopped so still that there's nothing to say

Working for freedom now

*Been a long time, but I keep on trying
 For I know where I am bound
 Been a hard road, but I don't mind dying
 I have seen freedom!*

WE CLOSE OUR BOOK by returning to the beginning, to the roots of our own political, moral commitments in the families, the places, the times that for us, as for you, remain interwoven with all that we have learned and experienced, thought and done. We don't tell these bits of our stories because we think who we are weighs much in the large scale of things. In public matters, actions have effects far beyond the individuals who suffer or benefit from them, far beyond what any of us intends when we take the risk of "going public."

But the small stories of our lives also matter. No big story, no grand narrative, no generalizations however sound, can take adequate account of how differently the Big Events are experienced by individuals, communities, groups. No one Big Story can show us how different are the meanings, the lessons, drawn from those events by those who lived through them and passed those lessons on to their friends and children. If we do not sometimes tell each other our own stories and those of our families, friends, and communities, we will not only continue to disagree, which is not at all a bad thing in a democracy, but to misunderstand what we are disagreeing about.

What *freedom* and *equality* and *democracy* mean can be argued

endlessly and fruitlessly if we don't stop sometimes and say, But what do you mean when you use those words? Why do they matter to you? What is it that frightens, or inspires, or outrages you when you realize that others mean something very different than you do when they speak about equality, democracy, freedom? What strands of memory, of experience, of hope, of fear, of personal loyalties start vibrating?

Because we believe responses to those questions do matter, we asked ourselves how we would tell some of our stories in response to them. Here's where we came from, where we started, that put us on the road to where we are today.

Renewing Roots

Si grew up in State College, Pennsylvania. His father, Benjamin M. Kahn, was the rabbi at Penn State, where he worked with students at the Hillel Foundation and taught Hebrew and Jewish studies. His mother, Rosalind (Aronson) Kahn, was an artist, a homemaker, and an active partner in Ben Kahn's daily work with Hillel and the Jewish community it served.

As it is for so many minority groups, their life in rural, largely Christian central Pennsylvania gave them both the closeness of community supported by a rich cultural heritage and the daily challenge of negotiating their neighbors' mix of curiosity, unreliable superficial acceptance, ignorance, occasional overt hostility, self-congratulatory tolerance—and in no small measure, genuine respect and welcome. Si knew himself to be a "real American" at the same time as he knew he was "different," a small-town kid who studied Hebrew, the son of an admired and beloved couple central to their community, and one of the few Jewish children in his school.

Today, State College is a small city and Penn State a major university with some thirty thousand students on just that one campus. But when Si was growing up there, it was both a very small place and a complicated one: a largely homogeneous, white, Christian, rural community and a college town, set in the middle of one of the one hundred poorest counties in the country, an academic

center surrounded by the Appalachian mountains, just on the edge of the anthracite coal fields.

Si recalls cornfields that started at the edge of his backyard, and going to school with a fishing rod strapped to the crosspiece of his bicycle. He remembers driving to Lewistown with his parents to take the Pennsylvania Railroad Pullman sleeper to Boston to visit relatives, passing the mined-out coal camps with ragged children staring from the porches of falling-down tappaper shacks. After midnight, as the train pulled through Carbondale, Pennsylvania, his father would wake him so together they could watch the mine fires that had been burning underground for nearly one hundred years, the flames shooting high into the air through cracks in the earth's surface.

Elizabeth grew up in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., during the years when our nation's capital was changing from a sleepy, segregated southern town, with separate drinking fountains and bathrooms for "colored" and "white" within sight of the U.S. Capitol, to a modern, diverse, cosmopolitan city. Her father, Andrew M. Kamarck, an economist, went to work at the World Bank after his time at the U.S. Treasury Department, where, following military service in Italy and Germany during World War II, he participated in the effort to get Europe back on its economic feet. His cause then and throughout his life has been to find and, wherever possible, take action that addresses the worldwide causes of poverty.

Elizabeth's mother, Margaret (Goldemweiser) Kamarck, like Si's mother an artist, was active in local politics, civil rights, and organizing for fair housing. Their house was filled with a wide and fascinating array of thinkers and activists from across the street and around the world—public officials who believed government could and should be dedicated to social and economic justice, emerging political leaders from newly liberated countries, dissidents from apartheid South Africa, suburban women who were determined to open their neighborhood to anyone who wanted to live there, who worked at the polls on election day, carried around

petitions, organized political campaigns for candidates they believed in.

There were similarities in our early years and family backgrounds that were more important than the differences, similarities that we rediscovered with interest as we wrote this book together.

Among our grandparents, of whom we've written earlier, all but one were immigrants who came to this country to escape both poverty and discrimination. All of them knew what a narrow escape they'd had. Of the six out of nine grandparents who were Jewish, every one lost sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. They remembered, although they were careful to protect their children and grandchildren from confronting them too early, too starkly, the unbearable realities that not even escape and years of safety can erase. They worked hard to give their children safety, security, and belief in the possibilities of a better life. But because they did also remember, somehow we also knew that there were horrors in the world.

Years ago, in his song "Children of Poland," Si wrote:

Had my grandparents stayed in that dark, bloody land
My own children, too, would have marched hand in hand
To the beat of the soldiers, the jackbooted stamp
That would measure their lives 'til they died in those camps

The cries of my children at night take me back
To those pale, hollow faces in stark white and black
Only the blood of the children remains
It runs in the streets—and it runs in our veins²

Elizabeth, whose Russian Jewish grandfather never told her his stories, took one of her first graduate school courses with Hannah Arendt, author of *Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Study of The Banality of Evil*, among other works.³ The

course was titled *Political Experiences of the Twentieth Century*. Elizabeth wrote her paper on the 1938 purge trials in the Soviet Union. As she did her research for the paper, she realized she had to reflect on the question of how people can, and do, remain loyal to an ideology that has turned murderous, even when it is turned against them. She became Hannah Arendt's teaching assistant after that course, and continued, with her, to study political philosophy in an effort to comprehend both the achievements and the horrors of political history.

The America to which our grandparents fled from some of the worst of those horrors offered them freedom and safety, and real economic opportunity. They took advantage of its promise. This too they remembered, and we remember. In Europe, they had been more or less locked into their particular class and caste level. Here, although there was still discrimination, there was opportunity. Even those grandparents who were Jews were, by that point in U.S. history, able to find some openings they could take to better themselves. And while Elizabeth's other grandfather was a Polish Catholic, and largely Protestant America did have its issues with both Poles and Catholics, he declared himself and his children "American," and was able, as some people of color were not, to help them sustain their belief that what he claimed could become true.

In the course of one generation, making full and determined use of public education, scholarships, and fellowships to private as well as public colleges, universities, and graduate schools, our immigrant families were able to move up economically and in society, to change classes. They had started out in North America as laborers, hod carriers, paper mill workers, window glaziers, students. They became gas station and clothing store owners, economists, government officials. Their children, our parents, aunts and uncles, became economists, college professors, physicians, rabbis, dentists, artists, small business owners, Hebrew high school principals, civil rights workers, psychiatrists, writers, salespeople, artists, homemakers, engineers.

So, looking back on where they had come from, what they had escaped, what they and their children had accomplished, our

grandparents were grateful to this country that had taken them in, that had given them the chance to move up the economic and social ladder, to give their children a good start in life. They had good reason to believe that, even with its flaws, which they surely recognized, the United States offered opportunity, if not for all, for some—and they went to work to get their country to live up to its promise for all.

They remembered, we remember. Success, in all its different forms, is—but is never only—an individual matter. Had there been no free schools, no teachers to encourage and challenge and help find scholarships, no unions, no health clinics, no GI bill, no affordable decent housing open to anyone, no freedom of religion, their stories and ours and our children's would be entirely different.

Our parents all came of age during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They knew how bad it could get, even in America. They had seen the unemployment lines, the breadlines, the desperate poverty, the unending hunger, the hobo jungles, the great migrations of people looking for work, any work, anywhere. Elizabeth remembers her father, from whom she inherited both her love of music and her inability to reliably carry a tune, energetically singing "The Soup Song" that we included earlier: "Soo-oup, soo-oup, they give me a bowl of soo-ooo-oup."

During the Depression our parents experienced what was, when you think about it, a true ownership society. The problem was that if you didn't own anything, or if you lost what you owned when the economy collapsed, you had nothing. It would actually be more accurate to describe this, as well as what George W. Bush is proposing today, as an on-your-own society. If you didn't work, you didn't eat, no matter how hard you tried to find a job. If you couldn't afford fuel, you shivered in the cold. If you couldn't pay the rent, you and your family slept in the street, in an abandoned car, under a river bridge, in a hobo jungle. If you got sick, you were just plain out of luck.

Of course, there was private charity; among the most wrenching photographs from the Great Depression are those of the soup lines, ragged, starving families waiting their turn for that bowl of soup. It

is wonderful that, in times of human tragedy, community and religious organizations come forward to help those in desperate need. But voluntary charity is equipped to help small numbers of people who fall into occasional adversity, not to address the systemic ills of an entire economy that is the cause of people being out of work, homeless, hungry.

What our parents, and this country, learned from the Great Depression is that only government action can deal with that level of economic and societal dislocation. The genius of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his "brain-trusters," who included Elizabeth's grandfather Emmanuel Goldenweiser, is that they not only understood this but acted with speed commensurate to the crisis. The laws establishing Social Security, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, the right of employees to unionize and bargain over their wages and working conditions—we owe these all to the Great Depression, to the courageous people in unions and community organizations who created movements for change rather than submit passively to economic injustice, and to the New Deal that Roosevelt and his advisers and allies helped them establish to pull the nation out of its hard times.

Because of this dramatic action, Roosevelt is either praised or blamed, depending on your political point of view, for helping create a modern welfare state in the United States. But Roosevelt did something else that is of comparable importance: He helped save capitalism in the United States from its own worst excesses. In the American tradition of checks and balances, he established systems that allowed the leading corporations in this country, some of which had nearly gone bankrupt during the Great Depression, to reestablish themselves. Some of them took such advantage of what was done for them that they prepared the way for the multinational conglomerates of today.

But Roosevelt also tried to make sure that the price paid by these corporations' employees and consumers would not be unsustainably, unethically high. The corporations would have a safety net to ensure their continued survival and productivity. They would not go hungry, they would not be lacking for work. But neither would

you and I. All of us, corporate "persons" and individual human beings, would be protected and our lives enhanced. Whether it was the Social Security check Si's great-aunt Nellie Israel drew after working in shoe factories for some fifty years, the degree in dentistry his uncle David "Dubby" Kahn received on the GI bill after serving in the U.S. Army in World War II and his public sector job in a Veterans' Administration hospital, or the disability pay from the military that allowed Elizabeth's uncle Larry to work as a writer when he was unable to stand or walk, the experiences of their own lives let our family members understand how important it is to have a strong government and a healthy public sector for democracy itself to work.

Now, as much as we love to watch the Olympics on TV, neither of us is particularly a fan of the other varieties of international competition among nations. Both economic and military domination are particularly low on our list of things we think countries should do to each other. So we're not exactly wild about the idea of there being a "greatest country on earth." Arrogance and imperialism are not the drives of healthy people or countries. If you really know who you are, you do not need to be a bully.

We do, however, think that the United States actually has the opportunity, at this moment and in our lifetimes, to become—in concert with an increasingly interdependent world—a great community, a great society, a truly great country.

It is up to us whether or not this is the legacy we leave to future generations.

We are not the first and we won't be the last
 For the thread's wound too tight to unravel
 If we stare in our mirrors and never look back
 We won't see the roads we have traveled

The sound of the blood running fast through our veins
 Is louder than any word spoken
 The ties that now bind us to those who are gone
 Have grown far too strong to be broken

Our grandmothers' stories will still keep the faith
 When grandchildren gather together
 The songs of our mothers that rocked us to sleep
 Will sing to our daughters forever

Generations

Like a rock beneath the waters

Generations

More and more

Generations

From mothers to our daughters

Break and blend like the waves on the shore¹

Envisioning Possibilities

We have said a lot about the public good, about democracy and equality and freedom, about a balanced, healthy society in which power is spread around, rather than being monopolized in just a few hands. That's what we are struggling for. If we fully bent our hearts and hands to it, what could our society and country look like?

We could become the first country in human history in which no one ever, ever goes to bed hungry.

We could find cures for old and new diseases—those that affect millions, but also those that affect hundreds and dozens. We could make sure that, in the very near future, there is a mechanical heart for the smallest infant, even if there's no profit in developing one, and medicines that we can afford.

We could make sure that every person has work that is respected, that is recognized for its contributions to others, whether it pays a decent living wage or a large professional salary.

We could be the first society ever in which all have a home of their own, a room of their own, a place of their own, and where all have the public rights that ensure they can go in and come out freely, and safely.

We could make education of every sort central to our national life, so that every person can feed that part of us that is hungry to learn and grow throughout a lifetime.

We could have as many public libraries as there are video stores, as many public health clinics as there are shopping malls, as many assisted living centers as there are hotels.

We could nourish and sustain the artists, the activists, the dreamers, the visionaries, the scholars among us, so that all of our public and private lives are made more meaningful, imaginative, and informed by the empathy that comes with openness to the vision of others.

We could preserve the extraordinary physical gifts this country has been given, the mountains, rivers, valleys, plains, deserts, prairies, lakes, forests, so that our great-grandchildren will be able to explore them freely, their hearts stopped by the sheer beauty and wonder of it all.

We could protect the earth, give it the space and time to heal itself from the damage we have ignorantly and greedily done to it and to the animals and plants that depend on it just as we do.

We could take away some of the fear and retrieve the dignity of growing old by ensuring that we all have security, care, respect, company, and sustenance in our last years.

We could help make the world safe, not just for U.S. citizens but for everyone, so that children, women, and all those who are preyed upon, all those who are at risk because they have been kept powerless for so long, can be safe at home, at school, at work, in public and private places everywhere.

We could make sure that "one person, one vote" means that every one of us can vote and have that vote count, and that big money cannot buy elections, or governments.

We could make sure that independent and differing views have a chance to be heard not just through alternative media but through all the media, and in free, open public spaces.

We could keep our economy strong and growing by enforcing the rules of fair competition and by controlling would-be monop-

olizers, so small businesses can keep springing up and large corporations can do well without having to do harm.

We might then bring back a time when, all around the world, people looked to the United States as a beacon of democracy and hope.

And you know what else? We could do all that and still have millionaires. We could do all that and still have corporations. A country in which as many people as possible are educated, respected, healthy, self-confident, self-determining individuals with equal rights and responsibilities is a country that can be productive without the need for distorting motivators like force, greed, fear, desperate need, or dirty competitive practices.

That's the opportunity, the vision of what a public good culture supported by a good, strong public sector and a democratic government could look like for all of us—not in some mythic faraway future, but in a time not far from now.

We do not lack the resources. We lack the political will, the moral determination, and the systems that put them into action. It is not just a cliché to say, "If we can put people on the moon, we can do other 'impossible' things too." The lesson of history is that democratic government really can work, and that it can be saved when, once again, things get out of balance.

We have the basic constitutional framework that a healthy democracy requires. The checks and balances established by the Constitution allow this country to make haste slowly and wisely. Our system of elected representative government, from the local to the national levels, although not perfect, creates a potentially responsive set of links from the grassiest roots to the highest office in the land.

Si was once asked, "What is it that you people [here meaning progressives] want anyway?" He replied, "Well, for a start, how about the Constitution with a good grievance procedure and binding arbitration?"

We not only have democratic institutions and systems of governance, but national wealth the likes of which the world has never seen or known. That wealth was not created by a few supranational corporations with no loyalty to this country, or to its economy. Our

brew of people and talents and our natural resources are extraordinary. We have both the people and the money to solve almost any problem, if we can get our priorities straight and decide as a country and as a society to do so.

But the other side of great potential for good is an equal potential for tragedy. Instead of choosing to come together to serve the public good and its healthy Siamese twin, a fair and strong market economy, we could decide to be an ever more privatized, private-profit culture, with a government that is bought and sold to the most powerful bidder. Here's what that might look like.

We could dismember the system of checks and balances that has served us well for so long and replace it with an antidemocratic corporate model, with a commander-in-chief CEO, a board-of-directors Congress whose seats are handed them by monied interests, and a judiciary that is as independent as the accounting firm Arthur Anderson was from Enron.

We could continue and reinforce the current race to the moral and economic bottom, where the corporations' goal is to get their employees to work harder for less money, with the fewest benefits, with minimal job security—wherever in the world they move our jobs to do so.

We could measure our national worth by the amount of money corporations make by mining, drilling, damming, stripping, clearing—the water, the air, the soil, the future be damned.

We could eliminate government employees at every level, so that every service any of us ever receives comes at a price and at a profit to some corporation, with no protection and no recourse for us.

We could "get government off our backs"—and end up lying flat on our backs in front of corporations that can then run over us at will. We could define ourselves as a nation of individuals, and mean that each of us must be out for her or himself, and devil take the hindmost.

We could use our military might to intervene unilaterally anywhere in the world where there are, or could be, corporate economic interests—and then wonder why our country is so hated around the globe.

We live in a country founded on the sovereignty of its people. The choices we make today, and over the next few years, as individuals, as a society, as *We the People*, are as critical as any we have ever made.

Notes

Preface

1. Si Kahn, "What Will I Leave, 'I'll Be There" (Chicago: Flying Fish Records, 1989).
2. For more information, see the Grassroots Leadership website: www.grassrootsleadership.org.
3. Participants included current Grassroots Leadership staff members Kamau Marcharia, Alfreda Barringer, and Naomi Swinton; former staff members James Williams and Margaret Chambers; former board member Sally Thomas; and South Carolina United Action staff member Corry Stevenson.

Introduction

1. John McKinnon and Christopher Cooper, "President Provides New Detail of Plan for Private Accounts," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 3, 2005, 1.
2. We wrote this description. It is a distillation of the key points, using typical language.
3. Esther Kingston-Mann, "The Return of Pierre Proudhon: Privatization, Crime, and Rule of Law" (unpublished paper, 2005). The "more developed nations" refers to countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
4. Kingston-Mann, "The Return of Pierre Proudhon."
5. In September 2003, Yegor Gaidar said that the Americans "want to figure out how to minimize the risks and privatize the [Iraqi] economy as quickly as possible." Given the shocking effects of the fast privatization of Russian industry, we surely should be asking *whose* risks Americans so want to minimize. As Kingston-Mann writes: "Reformers"—which is to say, people following the international agenda of privatization—"instituted no meaningful safeguards to prevent [former Soviet officials and enterprise directors] from insider trading or asset stripping of state enterprises in the auctioning process. . . . Former Minister of Gas Viktor Chernomyrdin . . . became head of Gazprom, and one of the wealthiest men in the world. . . . Corrupt and dishonest collaborations flourished in the giant shadow of a Russian Mafia that controlled some 70 percent of private business and freely assassinated the journalists who exposed their activities" (Kingston-Mann, "The Return of Pierre Proudhon").