

The Future Is Yours (Still) => act out and do something

Abbie Hoffman

Serving as his own lawyer, Abbie Hoffman presented a closing argument in a district court in Massachusetts on April 15, 1987. He and eleven others were on trial for trespassing while protesting the recruiting of students by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) at the University of Massachusetts. The group was acquitted. This is part of Hoffman's statement.

When I was growing up in Worcester, Massachusetts, my father was very proud of democracy. He often took me to town-hall meetings in Clinton, Athol, and Hudson. He would say, See how the people participate, see how they participate in decisions that affect their lives—that's democracy. I grew up with the idea that democracy is not something you believe in, or a place you hang your hat, but it's something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles and falls apart. It was very sad to read last month that the New England town-hall meetings are dying off, and, in a large sense, the spirit of this trial is that grass-roots participation in democracy must not die. If matters such as we have been discussing here are left only to be discussed behind closed-door hearings in Washington, then we would cease to have a government of the people.

You travel around this country, and no matter where you go, people say, Don't waste your time, nothing changes, you can't fight the powers that be—no one can. You hear it a lot from young people. I hear it from my own kids: Daddy, you're so quaint to believe in hope. Kids today live with awful nightmares: AIDS will wipe us out; the polar ice cap will melt; the nuclear bomb will go off at any minute. Even the best tend to believe we are hopeless to affect matters. It's no wonder teenage suicide is at a record level. Young people are detached from history, the planet, and, most important, the future. I maintain to you that this detachment from the future, the lack of hope, and the high suicide rate among youth are connected. . . .

Thomas Paine, the most outspoken and farsighted of the leaders of the American Revolution, wrote long ago:

Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. Man has no property in man, neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow.

Thomas Paine was talking about this spring day in this courtroom. A verdict of not guilty will say, When our country is right, keep it right; but when it is wrong, right those wrongs. A verdict of not guilty will say to the University of Massachusetts that these demonstrators are reaffirming their rights as citizens who acted with justification. A verdict of not guilty will say what Thomas Paine said: Young people, don't give up hope. If you participate, the future is yours. Thank you.