

FLASHBACK: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Part Two of a Four-Part series, originally written and published in September 2010 during the sweet, sad, waning days of Democrats' last Congressional majority. What a journey it was from 2003, and what a trip since then.

The Angry Left: A Look Back at a Personal Journey

I've already offered a 50,000-foot view of the road to here for some of the angry left – the road taken by some of us who were progressives as we sought to wrest the country away from conservatives during the first term of the Bush administration.

I'll share now is a more personal view of the last seven years on this road; what follows documents my experience from 2002-2005.

In 2002 I began blogging; I was disgusted by what had happened during the 2000 election, horrified by the events of 9/11 and the anthrax attacks resulting in curtailed rights and abuses, frustrated by the turn of the 2002 mid-terms, and fearful of the mounting pressure to go to an ill-advised and illegal war in Iraq. Except for the blogging part, many of us have traveled these events and emotions together. Blogging gave me an outlet I needed to vent about them.

I found while blogging that there were other folks who were just as frustrated and looking for solutions – like Markos Moulitsas and the folks at MoveOn and a host of other voices on the left. And I learned about Meetup.com, used to organize supporters by the new presidential campaign by a governor out of Vermont. The more I learned about the governor, the more I felt I needed to take the plunge and do something I'd never done before. I was going to meet complete strangers in person and see if I could do something to help Gov. Howard Dean become

president, and change the course of the country.

This was completely out of my comfort zone. I'm a privacy freak and meeting strange people with whom I had little but a single idea in common was disconcerting. But I was so bloody angry and frustrated I couldn't stay at home and do nothing. After signing up in Meetup and watching as things unfolded for a few weeks, I sucked it up and attended my first Meetup in late summer of 2003.

Everyone else at the event seemed as uncomfortably new at this as I was, which was a relief. And we were all of us very angry about the direction our country was headed. It was refreshing to be able to talk out loud with people who felt the same way I did. The person who launched the Meetup site and organized the event was a natural leader; after talking for an hour we were all committed to doing this again and doing more.

Over the course of the next several months we met more and more often, working on tasks together like writing letters to potential voters in other states. We felt more bonded as we worked together, had become an entity with a life of its own. We began to feel more joy than anger as we worked together, believing finally that yes, we did indeed have the power to take our country back.

As we neared the date of the primary, the Dean for America campaign sent organizers to work in our region. They were fresh-faced college boys that a volunteer offered to put up in his home for the couple of months they were going to work in our area. They began to assume leadership of our group; our assignments became more complicated, like trying to inveigle ourselves into local call-in radio programs and writing letters to the editors of multiple news organizations to plug key events.

But it became clear none of us knew what we were doing – not even these kids sent by the campaign. We needed lists of voters who were

likely to lean left, tended to vote Democratically. Who had these across a three-county area? How would we get a list of all voters from the county clerk, if this was even possible? Who were the key contacts in the local Democratic Party that would provide us with an assist?

Hell...there wasn't even a phone number or a website for the Dem Party in my county. As far as I could tell they didn't want to be found.

When I did finally locate folks, they acted like they'd never heard of Howard Dean. They wouldn't return phone calls; they acted like I was an alien from outer space when I asked questions about finding information we needed to organize and get out the vote. A neighboring county was written off altogether because we never found anybody who identified as a Democratic Party member there at all. The other county in the region was clearly sewn up by union folks who wanted either Gephardt or Kerry depending on which union they were affiliated with. They were polite but not particularly helpful.

Primary Day came; I remember working a particular polling place, my car covered with Dean signs and standing in the freezing cold handing out cookies I'd just baked to voters asking them to vote for Dean. At one point I was asked by a local party member if I could provide a ride for an elderly gentleman who lived at a nursing care facility. I discovered on arrival at the facility that he was a priest well into his 80s; I spent the next 20 minutes during our ride talking about the relative merits of John Kerry and Howard Dean, hoping I could persuade this one voter. It wasn't until I dropped him off at the polling place that I discovered the gent was a civil rights activist who was very well-known in the area and actually knew Kerry. So much for that vote.

And of course Dean lost the primary. We tried to rally on until he dropped out of the race, members gradually starting to peel away now that the impetus was gone. At some point later in the

summer Democracy for America began to form nebulously; as DFA firmed up, I decided I become an organizer for a local chapter, hosting a Meetup once a month.

(All these years later we still meet once a month.)

So what did I learn on this portion of the road?

– A substantive number of progressives who came together united by a few common issues were naive about politics, both local and national. They were united in their passions about key issues, but struggled to discuss local and state politics and how those were related to national races and their issues. They could be delaminated from the effort by fall outs over their personal passions.

– We knew little about the nuts and bolts of democratic process; most of us assumed that one just showed up and voted and that was it. We were rather clueless about the workings of local clerks' offices and the secretary of state's office. We assumed folks at national HQ were handling all the campaign finance filings and therefore learned nothing about them.

– We had not a clue in the world about the operations of the parties, whether Democratic or Republican or other. The Democratic Party had been on automatic pilot for years, making it harder for new activists to connect with it.

– Institutional knowledge would vaporize from election to election. There might be a handful of folks in a county that knew everything about the political and democratic process, but God help you if one of them died between now and the next election. There were a larger number of people who possessed pockets of specialized knowledge, but they frequently didn't share information out of some misguided sense of ownership or need to be a gatekeeper.

– Learning the rules and the limits has taken years; they aren't in any one place, they often aren't written or accessible, and just when you

think you've got it figured out, some fresh hell will pop up.

– And the media. They were opaque and they were biased and they sucked – same then as today, except we had very few skills to manage media.

– Skill sets across the loosely-knit organization were not identified and the information not well shared. If the organization needed a network or a website set up immediately, who to call? Good luck with rapid response.

– Don't even get me started on relationships. What a nightmare; between juggling advocacy groups and unions and political factions, local party and state party apparatus, it's a wonder anything gets done. And ego – oh my God, the egos.

– Robert's fucking rules of order. Need I say more? Yes? I can think of an organization which split in two simply because of Robert's rules of order.

But during this time I made lifelong, steadfast friends I'll cherish forever, people I would die for. They made slogging through what seemed like constant head-butting bearable. Who couldn't use a few more progressive friends to share a beer with when things get really rough?

And they did get rough. I'll discuss that in the next post.

Part Three of this series will post tomorrow.