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Grassroots mojo versus Big environmentalism

This essay is about the power, energy and the inspirational wallop that comes from small grassroots movements—and why it is important for large well funded environmental groups to jump on local bandwagons, instead of the other way around. Lots of large top down groups as well as their monied backers assume that small grassroots organizations are simply ones that have not yet learned how to be big. But in a culture of “more is better” and “supersized” sensibilities, there is a natural presumption that groups with lots of members and lots of money too, are just more significant and more effective than ones that lack either of those things. Sometimes these large organizations barely know that the grassroots exist—and at their high flying altitude they are probably correct. Grassroots thinking is usually so incompatible with the practical aims of most large environmental groups that they might as well not even exist in the same universe. Yet grassroots engagement is the foundation of the environmental justice movement even while I have rarely seen a large, well funded group take up environmental justice as its primary aim.

A true grassroots movement generally draws its strength, inspiration and vision from rank and file participants, and it also empowers the people and communities from which that same power and initiative flows. This basic notion is at odds with accepted notions in big well funded organizations that grassroots work is when larger groups reach out and proselytize to the unaffiliated general public. But unpaid local activists work in ways inverse to the sort of activism in larger funded movements where power and messaging flows from professionally devised messaging, focus groups, large corporate donors, wealthy foundations and other top down unilateral interests. Young people who care about the environment get out of college and are often drawn to the jobs that will pay them enough to retire their student loans. But grassroots activism is usually not a viable career choice for them. The other side of the coin is that good career opportunities do not always offer true activist potential.

Top down groups with salaried workers often have dues paying members who rarely influence the issues and priorities of the group but create a sense of citizen participation, but unpaid grassroots ones more often have active and engaged members who pay little or nothing to the group other than investing their sweat equity—but they usually control the priorities of the movement. This distinction is vital when it comes understanding how true community based activism works, and how it occasionally collides with institutionalized environmentalism just as eager to protect its sources of income and longevity. But if there is one thing of which I am certain, large top down movements need grassroots partners far more than the other way around. Big and funded environmentalism often needs local bandwagons to get things done. So how do we hold these larger and influential organizations more accountable for the quality and responsiveness of their local work? One way is to help people better understand how and why local activism deserves more respect and more credit for what it does. Want to lobby the entire US Congress?

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Grassroots causes have a rather stellar story to tell with an inspirational track record of successes. Community based activism is the raw motive force needed to change the world and make it better. Grassroots causes are inherently democratic, versatile, spirited, compassionate, equitable and empowering. The fact that such movements generally lack money is unimportant, as they more than make up for lack of cash with their zeal, ingenuity and passion. My own pantheon of grassroots heroes include people like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi and Jesus Christ. Nobody paid them lots of money to be change agents, and I have never seen anything that suggests that any of those distinguished activists ever considered that they could be making more money elsewhere!

So where top down groups often build coalitions around strategic messaging, grassroots troops do so around mutual self-interest and moral commitment. Grassroots activists are much more likely to be found fighting for what is right--as opposed to that which will raise money, or assure their influence or “branding” over a particular issue. To me grassroots style activism is the most basic form of civic empowerment and exercise of free speech with traditions so steeped in American values as to be nearly synonymous with apple pie. In fact, America’s founding fathers resorted to grassroots tactics to start a new nation. Rosa Parks who helped ignite the civil rights movement in America and was a grassroots activist both at heart and in spirit. Grassroots is powerful mojo with an deeply inspirational history of achievement and yet it is generally seen as subordinate to top down non-profit organizational business models because it cannot be controlled from the Board rooms, is very hard to fund, and even harder to mass produce.

That is not to say that larger well funded groups don’t do good work or even altruistic work but they more often do the sort of work that is readily funded, and in fact most fear getting roped into local work that can never be funded. Often enough money raising has become an end unto itself in such organizations and not always a means toward an end. So rather than adopt the cause of a local grassroots movement paid environmental causes are far more likely to try and adapt local causes for their own needs and priorities. As for those who argue: “who cares because don’t we all want the same things anyhow”? I dare anybody to demonstrate how strong community activism can be built solely around causes where everybody simply wants exactly the same things.

Actually, communities don’t usually band together simply because “everybody” wants clean air and water, they do so more forcefully because their sense of community or place is threatened by dirty air and water. The force and power generated by a movement borne out of necessity versus one borne out of idealism is an enormous gulf in terms of the different payloads it can deliver for real people within real communities in need. It is vital that we be wary of efforts that short circuit local empowerment movements by trying to assure that the bandwagon for change stays firmly focused solely on the very issues that wealthy donors and funders find attractive.

Local issues nearly always have a very different touch and feel than do global ones and mass movement simply don't do exactly the same work as do local ones.