

PL9-- JERRY BROWN INTERVIEW, "MOVING TOWARD THE ABYSS", SALON, 6/23/05

June 03, 1996 | jerry brown was once a man ahead of his time. Elected governor of the largest state in the union in 1974 at age 34, he was the first major liberal politician to advance positions that have today become conventional wisdom: the U.S. has entered an "era of limits" requiring increased environmental concern; government cannot solve all problems; the budget should be balanced; the country must invest in people and technological innovation, among others.

And then, the fall from power. Brown went from being the standard bearer of new liberalism and a serious presidential contender to being tagged "Governor Moonbeam." After losing a race for the U.S. Senate in 1982, he went into exile, making extended spiritual journeys to Japan and India. He returned to serve as chair of the California Democratic Party in 1989, later running a quixotic campaign for President in 1992.

As the mainstream moved closer to his 1970s thinking, Brown glided further away. Today he lives in a large, refurbished warehouse in Oakland, California with a small group of fellow travelers, trying to fan the populist flames with his "We The People" political organization and hosting a daily radio show. His thinking is as unconventional as it ever was.

As Jerry Brown's director of research in Sacramento between 1978 and 1982, I found the major perk of my job was spending time with the governor. As an administrator he could be infuriating, but he was always fascinating to talk with, sometimes dropping by my apartment after midnight (he recognized me as a fellow insomniac) to expound energetically on the driving issues of the day.

Since then, I've mainly followed him from afar, getting decidedly mixed views of my former boss. Folks who accompanied him on his visits to Japan and India, where he worked with Mother Teresa's charity, told me they were impressed with Brown's commitment to his spiritual work. But like many others, I was turned off by the anger he projected

during his 1992 presidential race -- his unrelievedly grim rants struck me as neither spiritually evolved nor politically effective. I had the general impression that he had gone off the deep end.

Meeting him again recently was thus a pleasant surprise. Love or hate him, Jerry Brown has pulled off one of life's more difficult feats: becoming a genuinely interesting person. He attacks his day with the same relentless energy, rising at 5:30 every morning to power-walk around Lake Merritt in downtown Oakland and then, after a communal breakfast at his warehouse home/headquarters, throwing himself into his various projects.

I am still repelled by all the anger -- it seems to me that this is a time to unite, not divide society. But a nagging doubt remains: what if Brown is proven right again? If the global catastrophe he predicts does occur after all, then it will be true that neither he, nor we, were angry enough.

What are you up to these days?

I'm working in Oakland, with an organization called "We The People" that sponsors a number of projects, one of which is a radio show that goes out to major cities in the country, every day for an hour. I conduct discussions with people ranging from Ivan Illich to Allen Ginsberg to Barbara Ehrenreich. We also run a school that teaches more sustainable ways of living and working together. We have a rooftop garden, and we're getting good at bio-intensive food production.

There is also a study group which has been focusing on the philosophy of Martin Buber. About 20 of us have been reading "I-Thou" together each Thursday evening. Martin Buber's "Paths and Utopia" describes the central question of our time: Will the state be called upon for more and more control of an anomic, disconnected group of people? Or will people form relationships in cellular-like communities, that will eventually form a community of communities, as the basis for organizing the world?

Other people articulate these ideas, but what makes this so intriguing is that you were once governor of California, one of the most powerful positions in American politics. Most people go from being radical while young to more conservative as they age, but you've reversed the process. How do you explain this?

I certainly was very much attracted to being governor. But I know more now. I learn, I study, I listen, I observe. I've traveled, I've talked to people. I've had the privilege of listening to Gregory Bateson, Mother Teresa, Ivan Illich, Gary Snyder and, more recently, Noam Chomsky. These people are not looking at society in the conventional way, but in a deeper and more honest way. And the insights from these very different people lead me to a critical position. We're living in an unsustainable situation that is taking us in the direction of catastrophe -- social, moral and ecological. And it is my interest, perhaps my vocation, to resist that, and to work with others to provide positive alternatives.

How do you feel about the choice the American public is facing between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole?

Essentially, what we're faced with is the evil of two lessers. Both Dole and Clinton are moving the country in the wrong direction, but they are doing so at a different pace.

But wouldn't you argue as a Democrat that Clinton is preferable to Dole, that otherwise the Republicans will take over the House, Senate and White House?

That's an argument that has weight. Dole, with his crime bill and his call for attacking Cuba and more B2 bombers, seems to be going off the deep end. Or he's playing conventional politics and going to the right. So he can adopt a more moderate view in the fall, which would then be just another case of corrupt politics.

On the other hand, Clinton has reneged on his commitment to revitalize American cities, he has a slavish adherence to global

business, and he's failed to deal with raising the family income -- and all this has been wrapped in such schmooze that a number of groups that should be more active are lulled to sleep. So all I can say at this point is it's a real mixed bag, and not one that calls for any great response.

Clinton is doing very well in the polls right now. If you were in a room with him and (White House image manager) Dick Morris, how would you argue with that success?

I wouldn't argue with those guys. They have a formula. And the formula is to run as a simulated version of George Bush, with a beefy smiling cover. But success? That's what the man said when he jumped off the Empire State Building and passed the 60th floor. Someone leaned out the window and asked, "How's it going?" The guy said, "So far, so good." I am more concerned with the well-being of the country than of the Clinton family.

Do you ever miss that kind of power you had as governor of the nation's biggest state?

As governor, I believed I could do certain things, as a person who sees more reality in ideas than some people do. It's a personality type. And so I was working at that level. One of the first things I did was create the California Conservation Corps, which was an embodiment of the Jesuit seminary, the kibbutz, the Marine Corps, and the utopian community, all in support of ecological values.

There were certain recurring themes (in my administration): "protect the earth", "explore the universe," "serve the people," "Spaceship Earth." This was the mid-1970s. It was the time of the Whole Earth Catalogue. I was dealing with people like Stewart Brand, Wendell Berry, Amory Lovins, Herman Kahn and Dick Baker from the Zen Center. I mean, it was a hotbed of ideas. And there was a sense that we were on the threshold of a new politics. We were building something new. It was very exciting.

You spent time in Japan and India between 1982, when you left the governorship, and 1989, when you returned to Democratic party politics. Did these experiences influence your views of politics?

The training of zazen aims at emptiness, emptiness being a space without illusion. Since politics is based on illusions, zazen definitely provides new insights for a politician. I then come back into the world of California and politics, with critical distance from some of my more comfortable assumptions.

The work with Mother Teresa is a world of generosity, of seeing the person in front of you -- the poor of Calcutta that show up at your doorstep -- as the embodiment of Jesus, of God. There's nothing more important. Politics is a power struggle to get to the top of the heap. Calcutta and Mother Teresa are about working with those who are at the bottom of the heap. And to see them as no different than yourself, and their needs as important as your needs. And you're there to serve them, and doing that you are attaining as great a state of being as you can.

People tend to associate spirituality with love. But many people were shocked at the contrast between your relatively good-humored demeanor as governor and how you reemerged in 1992 with so much anger, as sort of a grim reaper or prince of darkness. What was that about?

Well, when you try to change the rules, when you are assaulting the citadel, it's not anxiety-free. You become the skunk at the garden party. When they all want to talk about their little issues, which you know are just soundbites and diversionary distractions, and you say, "Wait a minute, guys, we've got to talk about the money. We ought to talk about how this process works. And what's really behind it."

You know, Senator Tom Harkin (Brown's 1992 Democratic presidential primary opponent) was playing the labor man, while his wife was making a couple hundred grand at a major lobbying firm in Washington representing the Seabrook nuclear power plant. And we're all campaigning up in New Hampshire (site of the Seabrook plant). I

mean, what's real here? And Bill Clinton is with the Democratic Leadership Council, which has among its membership tobacco lobbyists, who are in the business of killing people. Yeah, humor would be great, irony would be great. But how to wake people up in a relatively complacent age?

Do you feel as angry now in 1996 as you did then?

I don't know that I was angry enough. I think if we're talking about indignation at injustice and deception, I would say that I really haven't attained the level of anger appropriate to the evil that is engulfing the country and the world.

The politics of America today is about supporting the continuation of nuclear weaponry and testing, and genetic manipulation, the consequences of which we do not understand, and the continuing isolation of living, feeling human beings in inhuman structures, whether they be jobs or urban clusters. This is going to create an explosion.

And it is all masked by this deceptive, allegorical, political play called "minimum wage vs. gas tax reduction vs. Whitewater vs. balancing the budget" -- which is all so much sound and fury signifying nothing.

All the while, this great drift, the juggernaut, is moving us toward the abyss.

On the one hand, you say the environmental threats are accelerating. And on the other, you say our political system is so corrupt...

So sterile and so frozen, so static ...

So where do you find the sense of hope to keep slogging on?

I can't specify a rational basis for it, but I feel very hopeful. I can't explain why. I feel healthy. It's a beautiful day today. And I walked around Lake Merritt with some very nice people, so that disposes me to a more optimistic interpretation of reality. Maybe it's just hormonal

balance. A religious person would call it "stirrings of the Holy Spirit". A materialist would call it "animal spirits."

So hope springs eternal in the human breast despite all reason?

I guess that's what it is. Poetry. You need to be a poet.

I'm doing what I know how to do, and what I have the opportunity to do. It's part politician, part student, part activist, part seeker. I try to put all these parts together.

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About the writer

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