

# In Anticipation of the Next Leap of Faith: Rockford

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**T**he first time I was in Rockford was in March, 2007. I was really just passing through, on my way to the meditation center outside of town. I was thirty-three, I guess. But on my first visit to Detroit, I was only around three years old. My Dad re-tells the story of a particular moment from that family trip with some frequency. It was the late 70s; I was a tow-headed white kid sitting on my father's shoulders. We were out for a walk in a Belle Isle Park. We were the only white people in the busy park, so the story goes, and at some point I blurted out a question that made my father feel quite uncomfortable, "WHAT ARE ALL THESE BLLLLLLACK PEOPLE DOING HERE?" My father quickly lifted me down from my perch on his shoulders.

I wish these moments of acting outside of my bourgeois upbringing, perforating my ingrained sense of civility, were more common. While I might not be cute enough to get away with that anymore, there is something very good about being up front with your ignorance. There is something a lot less ignorant in it. Not to mention that it makes things more interesting and helps you learn to be less uptight about the eggshells sticking in the soles of your feet, living through that feeling of vulnerability. They are only shells after all and that's better than bone shards, which is what it can eventually lead to when you pretend you're not ignorant.

The second time I was in Rockford I was going to the meditation center again. The second time I was in Detroit must have been more than 30 years after that family trip. I went on a tour of the city lead by Rich Feldman, a wonderful organizer and node in the network of people remaking "The D"

from the grass-roots up, self-consciously creating ways to answer their needs on their terms, their own economic engines. This remaking was the focus of the tour.

He took us for a look at the abandoned and deteriorating Packard plant, which probably looked only slightly less post-apocalyptic when I was in Detroit in the late 70's—not that my family visited it. There, before that spectacle of decay, Rich said something about the auto unions that rang bells—church bells, alarm bells, bells of intuition, all of them—unions are in a sense too complacent to corporate structures and their government collaborators. They have largely been about maintaining the middle class, not capable of creating the changes for sustainable ways of living that are needed today. This was from someone who had spent much of his life deeply involved in union organizing. Though my exposure to him has admittedly only been momentary, it seems for Rich that the union organizing is almost a mere day job and his real passions, his most obstinate exuberance in the face of oppressive conditions—the socio-economic abandonment of the high-capitalist period of human history—seems best expressed in another, though not unrelated, part of his life.

I think it wasn't until the third, or fourth time, I was going to the meditation center that I took the time to poke around Rockford itself and began to get to know the town. The third time I was in Detroit I actually got to meet with Rich Feldman at the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership. This seems to be the real edge of Rich's work, not a day job, but a life's work. I also met Grace Lee Boggs. As brief as it has been, I consider my encounter with Rich, Grace, and the Boggs Center one of the great blessings of my life—up there with my time at the meditation center. But the meditation center really isn't that interesting. I mention it because it is what first brought me to Rockford, and it is part of what will keep bringing me back. I'll tell you why I keep bringing up Rockford in a minute.

The Boggs center, Grace, Rich, and everyone I've had the good fortune of meeting through it, is more interesting. The work of these folks in Detroit, the deteriorated, sputtering cradle of industrial, petro-fueled power, has been to re-imagine a place with human-scale need and desire as the primary economic metric—as opposed to profit and capital growth. The Boggs Center asks us to measure instead the ability of a community to fulfill the common need each of us has to contribute something, to work on something we care about and do so on terms that we have helped to create. This must become the measure of economic success and fulfillment. It makes sense to see this as an evolutionary step at this disorienting, chaotic, and painful moment in human history.

There are people all over the place who have arrived at the wisdom that this is what we need to strive for as communities, as a people, as a lot of peoples. However, it seems necessary to even arrive at the stage of basic

community building, and like everything I'm talking about, it can involve some difficulty. As far as community building goes, if you are feeling vulnerable, that means you're going in the right direction. Take heart in the fact that there is a profound human history behind this noble effort, that the knowledge is out there, but also that the knowledge is not specialized and many of us can pick it up with just a bit of effort. As an artist some of my most cherished projects and collaborations have been contributing to the creation of micro-climates and temporary group experiences of living in a world that works with the type of economy that the Boggs center and I are talking about—systems made by the homies, for the homies, you might say. Now, I want to do this in Rockford, with people in Rockford.

**Y**ou might ask why I would choose Rockford. I guess there are two sides to that answer. On one side, it's somewhat arbitrary. It's just some middle-American town. Then on the other side, it's an intuitive choice that seems to be where a number of irrational sign-posts in my life have pointed me. I have faith in that kind of sign-post, but I won't get into the specifics in this case. There may have been some divining practices.

On the shallow side of my motivations, there is the obstinate and contrary nature that drives me in particular as an artist and cultural worker. I see artists trying to move up in the hierarchy of cultural prestige by moving from a place like Chicago to New York or LA. I don't see that doing anything for me. I'm going the other way. I like the image, and maybe that's all it is. I'm doing the other thing! From Chicago to Rockford. Besides, if you're into that hierarchy, it's time to be a little more creative and take a little more risk. Think about Asia. That prestige is just a reflection of dominant economic power anyhow. You better learn Chinese (actually, it would be nice to learn Chinese either way).

But, in other immediate ways, the choice of Rockford is a choice about location in the sense that realtors talk about it. It's near Chicago, a place where I am socially entrenched, where my connections are too valuable for me to abandon. It's near the meditation center and it's what some people call affordable. Let me acknowledge, however, that that is an utterly subjective quality. That is, I intend to buy real estate, and there seem to be some bargains for someone in my financial position. Which is, to say in the language of bourgeois civility, a position of privilege and inherited advantage.

Speaking of real estate and inheritance, I can see on Wikipedia that Rockford is on land that was taken from Sauk and Meskwaki nations by way of the embattled Treaty of St. Louis, a treaty now largely considered fraudulent. Beattie Park in Downtown Rockford has ancient effigy mounds, so like many—perhaps all—seats of power, it has strata. Its power is ancient and appropriated. And it has deteriorated. Much like Detroit, the manufacturing

base has been outsourced. Capitalism is at a loss for how to put people to work here. It's got the highest unemployment in the state.

Rockford in a sense is also a return to my own heritage. Bringing me a step closer to the rural Midwest where my parents grew up and where my German and Scandinavian ancestors settled. The prairie lands of this region, plowed by settlers and farmed, gave cities like Rockford and Chicago their life-blood, and sometimes the most sacred land. We grow corn on obliterated burial mounds. Sign posts, strata, bone shards.

You might say that sounds depressing. Why would you want to go there? Again I am lucky and privileged. I have had the good fortune of being able to live in many different situations, some of them very outwardly idyllic. The fact is I can be depressed anywhere. Where I am, is not much of a factor in whether I am depressed or not. At the same time these depressing sounding things are common just about anywhere you go, if you're paying any attention.

There is a video clip on YouTube of Bill Moyers interviewing Grace Lee Boggs. In response to the question, "What is to be done?" her answer is simple: "Do something local and do something real." When I examine my life and the people who I admire, whose work is inspiring, also when I examine the most rewarding work I have been a part of, it all follows this simple directive. It is self-conscious of its place and its relationships, and it puts something on the line, takes risks. It is not fixed only in the conceptual, the virtual, as a mere amusement. It is fine and good to decorate your work with these things. In fact, I'll say it is incredibly important to have some fluency in these things. But it is a mistake to let yourself be trapped only in those things, because such work has no legs. There is no traction and no consequence if the work doesn't make itself vulnerable. I take this simple idea as my central directive; I take it with me to Rockford.

I take inspiration from many places and people. There are the obvious sources like Will Allen and Growing Power, an urban farm in Milwaukee. Growing Power employs dozens of people growing food, teaching people to grow food and make soil, as well as teaching understanding by undermining racial ignorance. The Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living in Pembroke, Illinois, is part of the same network. It is a rurally located education center that is "preparing people for an energy descent." I could list dozens of incredible places like these that all make explicit connections between how we answer our basic needs and the quality of our relationships with neighbors and community. They all have amazing groups of people behind them. They are historical and contemporary, near and far. There are other sources, more from my own left field.

I think of how Alfred Stieglitz funded the work of Georgia O'Keeffe, how he offered her the liberty to work on her painting. I think of van Gogh's ultimately tragic dream of a shared studio in south France, the yellow house, and

the loving generosity of his brother Theo. These images of people dreaming up and making many different homes and ways of living with each other are all dear to me.

I need to start slowly and be patient because I am starting with just about nothing. Well, nothing but my inherited advantages and the collaborative experiences of my self-education—let's not buy into the old bootstrap myth. What I want to make is a way of living for myself, I want to take this advantage and transform it into a self-determined way of living, and I want to find ways of extending that possibility to others. To put it in more familiar and more imperfect terms, I want to make a job for myself and I want to make jobs for other people. To work and to contribute on our own terms is a basic human need and should not be a privilege. There should be room for all of us to work as we choose to work, to experience the fulfillment, the feelings of confidence and camaraderie that arise from working to answer each other's needs and desires. Whether that means I will be making a business, some kind of experimental education center, a museum, a bed and breakfast, a skate park, gardens and greenhouses, an architecture or consulting firm, at this point I can't say. I think it will be a small, wily hybrid, difficult to pin down, a mercurial incubator. That's how it feels in my dreams at the moment, unclear and unsure. I think it should be that way because the main ingredient, some other people and their dreams, is still missing. What I mean is that the idea is to go live there and work to allow local conditions and the people I come in contact with to have a determining voice in the formation and growth of the project, of my education, of our living.

Of course, I take inspiration from Rich Feldman, too. I think the apparent contradiction in my image of Rich Feldman, someone who simultaneously dedicates a great deal of work to union organizing, while also expressing a searing view of the limitations of unions as we know them is the very noble paradox of our time. This is not a fatal contradiction, or hypocrisy; it is just life in transition. It is a *just* life in the process of active change, hybridization, and recombination. Rich's life in the unions, in this work-place, undoubtedly nourish and inform his work outside of those structures, where he is working on creating that system that is by the homies and for the homies. The impulse to simply dismiss (or legislate out of existence) hard won structures like unions is at best foolish and lazy, at it's worst, what we see among right-wing leadership, it is cynical, dishonest, and malevolent. Living a life in transition, we work to take the scenic route—the careful, reflective, slow route. When we alter long-standing structures we do so with a serious and deliberate volition, taking into account the many interests it affects. Heeding the hearts and minds of the many people involved, knowing that we're still only moving toward getting it right, working in humility. There is no need to toss out the unions, but there is a need to make more structures that can

imagine and accommodate broader bases of interest than any of these institutions can imagine. Beneath this economy, another economy. It's turtles all the way down.

Let's not toss out the unions. Let's not toss out religious and spiritual communities. Let's not toss out chambers of commerce. Let's not toss out cultural institutions. Let's not toss out schools. Let's not toss out neighborhood associations. Let's not toss out the P.T.A. Let's not toss out businesses. Let's not toss out legislatures or governors. Let's be honest and acknowledge that all of these structures are limited and full of all kinds of problems. Let's experiment instead. This is largely an experiment anyway. We can't predict where this is headed. Let's make knobby hybrids, let's squirm and snake our way through and between all of these things, and let's sing of what we love in them! Let's sing the praise of eating well and of fellowship! Let's sing of our love for the space and time to get to know our neighbors and ourselves! Let's see our rooms and houses and floors and plazas and places in a broad light, full of many different lives, with different sounds and songs, wheeling and dealing, sharing ideas and images, teaching and nurturing, playing and dancing, gathering and celebrating!

These places are not static and predetermined, and there might just be enough room here for about anything people can dream up. Along with this we will need to be ambitious about who our neighbors are. A neighbor is someone whose destiny is bound to ours, someone whose life is intertwined with ours whether we like it or not (it's better to like it). In this world, where at any given moment we may be speaking on the phone with a helper from India, wearing clothes made by a worker in China, using fuel and precious minerals that came to us from Angola or South Africa, where we are living on land that belongs to another people, our ties are far and wide and deep. They are as far and wide and deep as they have ever been in the history of people. Yet we are only beginning to learn how to imagine those connections and understand their depth. We are only starting to learn how to be neighborly with this rich spectrum of people we are related to. In that sense, it is a joyous project ahead. And I'm going to be working on it in Rockford. Please come and visit.