

BLUEPRINT FOR REVOLUTION



"With this wonderful book, Srdja Popovic is inspiring ordinary people facing injustice and oppression to use this toolkit to challenge their oppressors and create something much better."

—PETER GABRIEL

**SRDJA
POPOVIC**

**HOW TO USE
RICE PUDDING,
LEGO MEN, and
OTHER NONVIOLENT
TECHNIQUES to
GALVANIZE
COMMUNITIES,
OVERTHROW
DICTATORS,
or SIMPLY
CHANGE the
WORLD**

CHAPTER II

Dream Big, Start Small

Personally, I can't think of anything more revolting than cottage cheese. Forgive me, but I'm a Serb, and we live for a type of cream cheese called kajmak. The name might seem strange to Americans with that *j* floating in there, but it's pronounced "kai-mack" and it's amazing. It has a creamy, smooth texture that is something like yogurt. Our cream cheese is nothing like that prepackaged Philadelphia stuff you have in the States. It doesn't come from a factory and, like most Serbian food, kajmak is rich in both history and cholesterol. It's been said that countries with the most turbulent histories have the best dishes, and that might explain why we Serbs are perversely proud of the fact that, due to all of our lost wars and foreign invasions, you can find Turkish baklava as well as Austrian Sacher torte on the menu of any good Belgrade café. But for really bloody histories, it's hard to top the Middle East, and in few places are people so passionate about their food. And Israelis, God bless them, love cottage cheese. To me it's gross and lumpy, but to them it's essential. They gobble it up with scrambled eggs for breakfast and mix it into their salads for dinner. Yet by 2011 it was getting really expensive.

Now, this wasn't the only thing Israelis had noticed. For two decades, the formerly generous state had gone through a difficult process of privatization, and many social programs were cut. Tens of thousands of poor Israelis were scrambling to find apartments in an increasingly tight real estate market, which was controlled by a handful of powerful corporations eager to raze older buildings and replace them with shiny glass high-rises.

But as anyone who's dealt with a landlord can tell you, arguing for your right to an affordable rent is a hard battle to win. You'll probably just be sent to Craigslist and told to look somewhere else. And in every city and state, you'll always find lots of people who support gentrification and new development. So while less well-off Israelis tried to snag the scarce affordable housing they could find, plenty of other citizens did little but

shrug and admire the sleek new buildings sprouting up all over the place. Even as the people seeking affordable apartments resented the new class of insanely wealthy, politically connected men and women who were enjoying a lifestyle of private planes and private clubs, most Israelis kept telling themselves that, compared to the rest of the world, life in Israel was still pretty good. They could afford to shop at Ikea every weekend, buy the latest flat-screen TVs, and take nice trips abroad.

A few blowhards, the sort of humorless folks you'd politely try to ditch if you ever got stuck talking to one at a party, looked at all the new buildings and conspicuous consumption arising in Israeli society and cried out that a revolution was in order, that Israelis needed to get together and topple the system or, at the very least, the government. But nobody paid any attention. Just like us in Serbia, these grumpy Israelis had a clear vision of tomorrow that was based largely on their recent past. Even if nobody was listening, they still spoke about wanting to live in a country where a basic safety net existed to catch those who were down on their luck. They were still cool with the free market, and took pride in having created so many successful industries, particularly in high tech. What they hated—the term sprang up somewhere around 2010 and was soon on everyone's lips—was “piggish capitalism.” For the most part, though, they had no idea how to stop it.

This is where Itzik Alrov comes in. When Israelis think of their heroes, they imagine tanned and muscular warriors or beautiful models like Bar Rafaeli, not a scrawny ultra-Orthodox insurance salesman who makes ends meet by moonlighting as a singer in local synagogues. But this Alrov was a thoughtful and passionate man. Like all the others, he didn't like “piggish capitalism,” but he understood that for anything to change he needed to make the fight relevant to everyone, even those individuals who were relatively well-off. He knew that most people wouldn't join an effort to do something that sounded really daunting, like forcing the prime minister to resign or coming up with an alternative economic program. He knew instinctively that when you have a vision of tomorrow, you can't pick the big cataclysmic fight as your first confrontation. In the beginning, everybody is a nobody. And nobodies need to find the battles they can win. That's why in all those movies Batman goes after common thugs in the first few scenes. He starts by picking easy fights, building a reputation and a name. Only then does he take on the Joker. No matter how important the

big issues are to you, it's imperative to start with something manageable. And in Israel, Alrov knew he couldn't take on the entire economy right out of the gate. But he could do something about cottage cheese.

Like all Israelis, he was crazy for the stuff. And like all Israelis, he knew its story only too well. Realizing that the cheese was a fundamental part of most people's diet, the government had subsidized it as a staple, which meant that the price of one cup of cottage cheese couldn't go above a predetermined price. It kept cottage cheese affordable. In 2006, however, the government changed its mind. As it had done with so many other industries and resources, it decided to let the market run its course, so it removed the subsidies. The minister of finance, a chubby guy with a beard who looked like a sketchy version of Santa Claus, addressed the policy in an interview where he jovially laughed the whole thing off. Israelis had no reason to worry, he said. With the cottage cheese market now open to competition, products were bound to improve. In a sense, he was right: within four years, scores of new cottage-cheese-based products flooded the market, from artisanal cottage cheese to cottage cheese blended with yogurt and other cheeses. What the minister forgot to tell the people was that losing the subsidy came at a price. From four shekels, or approximately one dollar, in 2006, the price of cottage cheese spiked to double that by the time Alrov was looking for ways to protest the cost of living. And it didn't take him very long to realize that the uproar over cottage cheese was the perfect vehicle for change.

Alrov created a modestly designed Facebook page, using a snapshot of a dollop of cottage cheese. He gave his new social network group an awkward name: "Cottage cheese is such a basic product and now it costs nearly 8 shekels. We won't buy it for one month!!!" He advocated letting the cheese spoil on the shelves until prices were lowered. And in the apocalyptic language befitting a religious man, he opined that "if we don't overcome our desire to buy cottage cheese, we will never succeed in making it affordable again."

At first, only thirty-two people, most of them friends of Alrov's, joined his online petition. But Israel is a small country, and a local blogger, amused by the idea of a cottage cheese boycott, interviewed Alrov. The day after the interview ran, his petition had nine thousand signatures. The mainstream media soon reported for duty, reveling in the unlikely

working-class hero who had fallen into their hands. Before too long, Alrov's page had a hundred thousand followers, which in a country of only seven million people is a lot. Alrov had found an easy fight to pick, and since everybody wants to join a winning team, his following continued to grow.

The three or four companies who control Israel's dairy market did what big and powerful organizations—corporations, governments, dictators—always do. At first they ignored Alrov and his followers. As the cottage cheese protests gathered steam, Tnuva, the largest player in the market, announced a new product called Cottage Cheese Munchies, individually packaged tubes of cottage cheese with small compartments containing various toppings like fruit or chocolate chips. The new product, a Tnuva spokesman said in an official announcement, “allows Tnuva to further differentiate itself from its competitors, as it charges the consumer more money for its innovation.” It was a dumb statement, but in 2011 Tnuva felt so secure in its position of power that it didn't worry about it too much.

It was a mistake. Alrov realized that talking about cottage cheese was a cover for Israelis to talk about the economy, about injustice, and about national priorities. Most people don't really understand how the economy works—my wife and my bank manager will tell you that's very much the case for me as well—but everyone understands how infuriating it is when the one product you really can't live without gets progressively more expensive for no good reason except the greed of a few companies. People didn't want innovation; they wanted their cheap cheese. Moved by Alrov's call, more Israelis took the plunge and gave up their beloved cottage cheese. Tnuva's chairwoman sent a stern message through the press, saying she wouldn't lower prices. In doing so, she gave the cottage cheese protest just what it needed: a villain. Enraged with Tnuva's arrogance, Israelis vowed to punish the behemoth. They didn't stop at cottage cheese: now chocolate milk—*shoko*, the national addiction of Israeli children—gazed longingly from supermarket refrigerators as previously loyal consumers sneered while passing it by. Smoothies went unsipped. Swiss cheese grew moldy. Around water coolers in offices all over Israel, people boasted about their commitment to go dairy-free. It was the world's first case of politically motivated lactose intolerance.

And it worked. Within two weeks, the large supermarket chains,

panicking over a noticeable drop in profits, announced that they would place all cottage-cheese-related products on sale. Still, that only lowered the price so much; if consumers were to win the battle, Tnuva and the other dairy corporations had to bow down. Sensing the tremors, the milk mongers tried to play nice. Tnuva's chief, sounding much more welcoming than before, released another statement; she said that while she regretted not being able to reduce the price of cottage cheese, she promised not to raise it again until the end of the year. Most pundits expected this gambit to work, but they were underestimating the resolve of the cheese-addled masses. Alrov and the scores of activists who joined him were now sensing that they could win. They were like sharks who smelled blood in the water, and they pressed on. Five days later, Tnuva announced that it was reducing the price to just under six shekels. The protestors still wouldn't budge. For them, it was five shekels or bust. A few days later, victory was theirs. All of the dairy companies issued separate statements, each pledging low prices. Tnuva's chairwoman, under the scrutiny of her disapproving board, announced her resignation.

But the real victory of the cottage cheese protest wasn't just the triumphant return of the now affordable dairy product to the tables of hundreds of thousands of Israelis. Watching Alrov and his followers, a small group of young and idealistic Israelis had a bit of an epiphany. Unlike Alrov, whose main concern was being able to feed his family, they were college students who had spent their adolescence advocating for a host of causes related to social justice. They lived in communes, marched in demonstrations, read rousing literature, and wrote insightful blog posts. And they'd gotten nowhere. But now people were getting a better idea of how these protest movements could coalesce into something that actually achieves victories. They saw the importance of starting small, and doing what the American writer and activist Jonathan Kozol advises: "Pick battles big enough to matter, but small enough to win." By choosing such an easy target, Alrov gave them the missing piece of the puzzle. Now that they'd experienced a victory, people were emboldened and willing to pick bigger fights. Just a few weeks after the cottage cheese rebellion was won, these students too launched their own Facebook page, targeting the rising cost of housing. They invited people to join them in one of Tel Aviv's loveliest, leafiest boulevards, bearing tents. Until they were given options they could afford, they argued, they would live in the street. While before

the students were ignored, here were thousands of ordinary Israelis answering the call. If it worked for cottage cheese, went the thinking, why not for housing? Hundreds of thousands more showed up at a series of mass demonstrations. Like Tnuva, the government first ignored, then tried to deflect, then sought to appease, and finally capitulated. A committee was appointed, and many of its recommendations were signed into law. Because some random insurance salesman picked a fight over lumpy cheese, young Israelis were now much closer to achieving their seemingly impossible vision of tomorrow.

A big part of a movement's success will be determined by the battles it chooses to fight, and a lot of that has to do with how well it understands its opponent. Many centuries ago, Sun Tzu reflected on this idea when he told readers of *The Art of War* how important it is to always put your strong points against your enemy's weak points. Now, I don't know if Gandhi ever read Sun Tzu, but of all the nonviolent warriors I can think of, few have applied those ancient Chinese principles as well as Gandhi did.

That's because Gandhi understood from the beginning that military force was the strength of the British Empire. That's what they were good at. Even if he hadn't been a dedicated pacifist, Gandhi surely would have realized that the British soldiers, armed with the most modern weapons in the world, would never be defeated in an armed conflict. But out in India, the British nevertheless suffered from a critical weakness: a lack of numbers. In all of India, there were only 100,000 of their soldiers ruling over 350 million Indians. Still, if those Indians organized a military campaign, they'd be wiped out. But if they chose to act exclusively through peaceful means, the strongest card the British had—their fearsome military—wouldn't be played. If Gandhi could somehow unite all those millions of Indians under a single, nonviolent banner, the British would be overwhelmed.

In order for that to happen, though, he'd need a cause. He'd already called for the independence of India and spoken of self-determination for the Indian people, but that was a bit too abstract. Abstract ideals can mobilize a few like-minded revolutionary souls, but Gandhi needed an entire country. For that, he would have to find something concrete. He needed to champion a cause that was so simple and so uncontroversial that every Indian, regardless of politics or caste, couldn't help but flock to his

side. And in 1930, Gandhi found his answer: salt.

At the time, the British were taxing salt production in India, which meant that a fee had to be paid to the British crown if anybody in India wanted a commodity that is necessary for human life. You couldn't find a more basic or more crucial issue. Everybody needs salt. It's found in every kitchen, no matter how lavish or ramshackle the house may be. And it's something that really should be free. After all, India has around forty-three hundred miles of coastline. Traditionally, all Indians would need to do was go to the beach, take some seawater, and boil it. Voilà—you have salt. But under British rule, the colonial administrators insisted on levying a tax on it. So Gandhi, instead of taking on the full might of the British military and organizing an armed insurrection—which would have ended in disaster—gathered just seventy-seven followers and announced his intention to walk through towns and villages of India on a month-long march to the shore, where he and his fellow activists planned to extract salt from seawater and dare the British to stop them.

At first, the British viceroy didn't seem to be bothered by what seemed to him like a trifling matter. A few Indians in loincloths taking a stroll to the beach? So what? "At present," the viceroy wrote, "the prospect of a salt campaign does not keep me awake at night." But by the time the marchers arrived at the ocean, twelve thousand Indians had joined their ranks, motivated in part by their hatred of the unfair taxes and the daily humiliations that the British were inflicting on India. But mostly they were there because they wanted salt. Gandhi's march had touched a raw nerve, and, as he predicted, the British were reluctant to use their mighty military to suppress a peaceful protest over a biological necessity. After all, how would that look to the rest of the world? And—what was scarier for the British—how would that look to the tens of thousands of Gandhi's emboldened followers? As similar demonstrations began to take place throughout India, it became clear that the authorities had severely underestimated Gandhi's strategy. "As Britain lost America through tea," an American newspaper wrote, "it is about to lose India through salt."

Because salt was so basic and because the issue was so simple, the salt march gained followers of all creeds and castes for Gandhi's movement. The British, who were completely caught off guard, were forced to back down and let the Indians have their salt tax-free. When the colonizers

caved, Gandhi had scored a victory. And since Gandhi had proved that he could deliver the goods to the average Indian, he was able to leverage his salt success toward bigger and more important battles, namely, the ultimate expulsion of the British and the independence of India. Gandhi wanted to live in a free India, but he knew that he needed to start by picking the small battles, and it doesn't get much smaller than a grain of salt.

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This is why you see so many activists campaigning for better and healthier food. That's because no matter what a person's religion, skin color, or political belief may be, there isn't a single human being out there who doesn't need to eat. Everybody relates to food, and we're all affected by it. Whether you look at Sarah Kavanagh, the sixteen-year-old girl from Mississippi who convinced two hundred thousand people to sign her successful online petition asking Gatorade to remove a chemical used as a flame retardant from its orange thirst quencher, or Vani Hari and Lisa Leake, bloggers who led a similar campaign asking Kraft Foods to eliminate the bright yellow dyes from their macaroni and cheese, food has a special way of getting people to come together. People are biologically wired to relate to issues of health and nutrition, and that's a big part of the reason that Doug Johnson was able to win his fight against the way Nestlé marketed baby formula in the 1980s or why people today watch documentaries such as Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* and Robert Kenner's *Food, Inc.* Whether it's food or some other basic necessity, activists who can identify some everyday thing that speaks to as many people as possible will always have an advantage over those who cling to a much narrower platform.

Which brings us, of course, to Milk. Harvey Milk, that is. Apologies for the pun, but you may have heard about this pioneering politician who was the first openly gay public official in America. If you haven't, he is wonderfully portrayed by Sean Penn in an Academy Award-winning movie called *Milk* that you may want to check out. Milk's story is about many things: courage, conviction, and dedication. Most of all, it's about how important it is to start with the small stuff.

Nothing in the first four decades of Harvey Milk's life suggested that he would one day become an inspiration to anyone seriously interested in

human rights and equality. Born on Long Island to a conservative, middle-class Jewish family, he'd known he was gay from a very young age, but took great pains to cover up his true identity. He joined the Navy, fought in Korea, and then found work first as an insurance actuary and then as a researcher for a large Wall Street securities firm. This future icon of liberal America even campaigned for the archconservative Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Milk was hardly a revolutionary, and in fact he once broke off with a boyfriend he dearly loved because he felt the young man was too likely to challenge authority and get in trouble with the police. Milk was successful and respectable, with neatly cropped hair and a closetful of fine suits. He was also miserable, living a lie. Eventually he got fed up: in 1969, at the age of thirty-nine, he quit his job, got rid of the tie, let his hair grow, and moved west to San Francisco.

The city he found was one busy being reborn. By 1969, it had the largest gay population of any major metropolitan area in the United States. Neighborhoods like the Castro, where Milk eventually settled, were shedding their old residents—working-class Irish Catholics—and welcoming in new ones, young men and women who had come to San Francisco seeking tolerance, free love, and flower power. Here Milk felt liberated. Having spent a lifetime keeping his sexuality a secret, he was now accepted openly and wanted to help other gay men and women not to be ashamed of themselves. Milk, who ran a popular camera shop, soon became involved in local politics. His first stop was the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club, the most powerful—and only—gay political organization in town. Milk showed up, smiling widely and talking bravely. He was like so many other young, talented, and hugely passionate men and women who decide to make a difference: the way to victory, he and his closest friends believed, was to tell the truth, raise good points, offer sensible solutions, and count on good people to come out and vote for change.

But it wasn't so simple. Back then, even in San Francisco, homosexuality was still a taboo subject. Today, with the advance of gay marriage and the growing acceptance of homosexuality in American society, it's easy to forget how different the cultural landscape was when Harvey Milk ran for office. In the early 1970s, when Milk was first mobilizing, gay sex was still a felony in many places and a legitimate cause for eviction from rented apartments. As late as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association

categorized homosexuality as a mental disorder. Being gay wasn't something that people were comfortable with. So Milk was running a principled platform that confused, turned off, and even revolted plenty of ordinary voters.

His campaign was, of course, a disaster. Milk had no money, no staff, and no idea how to run an effective campaign. He did manage to get the support of some gay business owners tired of police harassment, and his personal charm helped win over a handful of converts, but when he finally ran for city supervisor in 1973, he came in tenth out of thirty-two candidates. But Milk persevered. He discovered a talent for rousing speeches and gave them frequently, talking about persecution and the injustices of anti-gay legislation. He wanted to represent his community, and thought the best way to do that was by organizing all the gays together as one political bloc with a few key allies.

Again he failed. While he had managed to go more mainstream, making inroads with labor unions and firemen and meeting with regular people at bus stops and movie theaters, it still wasn't enough. This time, although he came closer to victory with a seventh-place showing, a margin of four thousand voters still guaranteed that Milk would remain little more than a well-meaning and talented niche activist.

And he would have remained one had he not finally understood the all-important principle of finding the small, winnable battles. Starting out, Harvey Milk did what all of us who are passionate enough to get involved with one cause or another do, which is to talk bravely and expect people to listen. If you are reading this book, I assume you care at least a little bit about making a change for the better in the world. At one point or another in your life, you've probably tried to petition, organize, march, or do something else to raise people's awareness of some very important topic or another. Maybe you just tried to convince a friend or a parent that their politics were all wrong. I'm willing to bet you a scoop of Israeli cottage cheese that I know what happened: you spoke passionately about saving the endangered North Atlantic salmon or about buying iPhones for chronically sad Bulgarian orphans, but people just nodded politely.

I'm being cynical, of course, but only because I want to be absolutely clear about this very important principle of nonviolent activism: namely, that people, without exception and without fail, just don't give a damn.

This is not because they're bad. Most people are decent and kind and unassuming. They believe, in the immortal words of Liz Lemon from the television show *30 Rock*, that all anyone really wants in this life is to sit in peace and eat a sandwich. But they also have a lot on their minds, things like jobs and kids and big dreams and small grievances and favorite TV shows to keep up with and boxes filled with stuff they need to ship back to Amazon. You may think that these things are silly. You may accuse people who just care about taking it one day at a time and tending their own garden of being selfish or blind or even immoral. The worst activists I've ever seen did just that. They got nowhere, because it's unrealistic to expect people to care about more than what they already care about, and any attempt to make them do so is bound to fail. Benjamin Franklin is said to have remarked, "All mankind is divided into three classes: those that are unmovable, those that are movable, and those that move." I imagine you, the reader, are one who moves. Your task, then, is to find those who are movable and get them to join you.

As an activist, you have two choices. The first is to do what Harvey Milk started out doing and seek to rally the people who already more or less believe in what you have to say. This is a great way for coming in tenth at anything. You're always guaranteed a small and enthusiastic fan base—including your friends, your neighbors, and your grandma—who will support you no matter what. The beautiful thing about this method is that you always get to feel that you're right and just and pure and good. The downside is that you never win.

The other choice is much better and, surprisingly, not a lot more difficult. It requires listening and finding out what other people care about, and fighting your battles in that general vicinity. Milk, whose tenacity eventually got him elected to the San Francisco city council, realized that average straight people really didn't care too much about the homosexual struggle for equal rights. That fight wasn't going to be won on the merits of justice and equality alone. Milk needed to attack it from a different angle, and even though hard-core evangelical Christians across the country were using San Francisco's gay community as a stand-in for all that was evil in America, Milk sought to stand up for his community by focusing on something that all San Franciscans lived in fear of: dog shit.

Because Milk listened to the people of San Francisco, he learned that the

quality-of-life issue that most concerned the residents of the city had less to do with their souls and everything to do with their soles. Nearly all of them named the epidemic of uncollected dog poop sullyng the city's parks as the worst nuisance imaginable. It was public enemy number one. If Milk had seen the same poll just two or three years earlier, he most likely would have stormed the streets of the Castro with some great speech about how stepping in shit was not a real inconvenience when every day scores of gay Americans were harassed for no other reason but whom they loved. Milk, however, had grown smarter. And he understood the power of street theater and symbolic public events. That day, he asked the media to meet him in a lovely local park to discuss some new ideas for legislation. When the press showed up, Milk walked up to the cameras and then, as if by accident, stepped in a huge turd. He lifted his foot in the air and stared at it in mock horror. It seemed like a spontaneous moment, a good prop illustrating how the city was failing to meet the needs of its residents. But this was all planned. He'd arrived at the park an hour earlier, combed it for dog excrement, and mapped his route carefully. With his soiled shoe firmly in place, he gave a lighthearted little talk about how he, like all San Franciscans, was sick of this smelly nuisance but that he, Harvey Milk, was going to do something about it. He finally had found a cause everybody could identify with, and soon the fan mail flowed in.

After all his struggling, he had learned to fight the battles he could win. Struggling for gay rights in an apathetic straight city was hard. But cleaning up dog shit was easy. All you needed were plastic bags. From there on in, however, you would always be seen as the person who could back up talk with results, and everyone will listen to people who deliver. Now that Milk had a sympathetic and grateful audience, he was able to move on to the big issue of gay rights. When Milk finally marched into city hall in 1977, he linked his arm with his boyfriend's and gave a pretty good summary of an important principle. "You can stand around and throw bricks at Silly Hall," he said, "or you can take it over. Well, here we are." If you want to win, you need to pull people toward your movement and recognize that you can't win without them.

Once Milk found his platform and his grateful audience of average San Franciscans, he was able to get to work on his important issues. It took the national gay rights movement a few decades to catch on to Milk's strategy, but eventually they did. In the 1980s and 1990s, most of their efforts were

directed at organizing their own ranks as an insular political faction, and few people outside the gay community cared enough to join them in their marches or support their legislative efforts. Then, the movement had its Milk moment. It started thinking not in terms of moral absolutes but in terms of individual motivations. And the movement recognized that most people only get involved with issues when they feel directly connected to them. As experience had shown, the basic gay issues up until then didn't affect the everyday heterosexual American in any meaningful way. For most Americans, the crises affecting the gay community—from the deadly AIDS epidemic of the 1980s to the more recent efforts to end a host of legal discriminations—simply didn't register. Most people aren't gay, and so they had other things to worry about. But that all changed when the gay rights movement began to frame the issue in terms that made sense to straight people. To bring the heterosexual community to join its cause, the movement turned outward. It turned to the mothers and fathers and siblings and friends of gay people and invited them to come along and march. By mainstreaming the cause, the gay rights movement was no longer defined by slogans like “We're here! We're queer!” and parades that featured all the characters from the Village People wearing nipple clamps. Nowadays at a gay parade you're more likely to find middle-aged American dads with beer bellies marching with signs that say they support their kids and love them no matter what. And when even staunch Republicans like Dick Cheney publicly come out in favor of gay marriage because they love their lesbian daughters, you can tell that society is shifting.

All of this was the result of a simple strategic calculation, the same one that was made in the civil rights movement in the American South a few decades earlier. During the 1960s, James Lawson, a Methodist preacher, was an organizer of black and white activists in Nashville, Tennessee. Lawson understood that the white community of Nashville was opposed to civil rights because they were afraid of blacks, who they felt were little more than animals. He instructed his students to overcome this perception by maintaining a dress code and behaving as perfect ladies and gentlemen whenever they went out to protest. Lawson knew that the marchers could win over some of the whites if they could demonstrate to the whites that their fears were unfounded.

When Lawson's activists set out to occupy the segregated lunch counters

in the city, he urged them to react nonviolently to whatever threats came their way. After all, went the reasoning, if the activists fought back at the lunch counters when the police arrived to arrest them, it would validate whites' fears about black activists, and civil rights would remain nothing but a faraway dream. But if the activists maintained their dignity and composure as the whites beat them and threw milkshakes at their heads, it would be clear to the whole world which side was acting like a pack of animals, and that might force some neutral whites to reassess their opinions.

Lawson knew that in a nonviolent struggle, numbers are the only way to achieve a victory. You need to go where the numbers are. In order for Lawson and the civil rights protestors to succeed, they needed white support. And to do that they needed the majority of white Nashville to see blacks as ordinary people who basically resembled themselves. Likewise, the gay rights movement really took off when the straight public stopped seeing homosexuals as outsiders with short shorts and fishnet tops and began to view them as decent, hardworking Americans who deserve rights like everyone else. In the process, the gay rights movement became a lot less colorful but much more effective.

James Lawson also recognized that although the civil rights cause was just and its ultimate goals were honorable, the key to achieving victory was to take an incremental approach. He didn't shoot for the moon and fight for full and unconditional equality from the get-go. Instead, he picked the battles he could win. While giving instructions to one group of activists at his church about marching through the streets, he went out of his way to caution his listeners, "We don't want a white person with a negro of the opposite sex, because we don't want to fight that battle." It was a battle that needed to be fought, but not just yet. In the 1960s, desegregation was possible, but mixed-race relationships weren't. But they sure as hell would be—in time.

Back in my younger days, when everyone was running around Belgrade playing cat-and-mouse games with Milošević's goons, we spent a lot of time thinking about what small battles we could win and which were just a waste of our time and enthusiasm. For some of us, the idea of choosing easy battles to start with seemed a lot like trading in our principles for cheap and worthless victories. Others took the idea to its opposite extreme,

boasting that every battle they picked was, by definition, also a battle they could win. But neither of these stances is totally correct. First, assume that most people are disinterested, unmotivated, apathetic, or downright hostile. Then, take a piece of paper—even a napkin can do the job—and draw a line. Mark yourself on one side of it, and then try to think who could stand together with you. If the answer is just a few people, start over—no matter how committed you are to a cause, or how troubled you are by a problem—and try again. When you’ve managed to place yourself and your friends and just about the rest of the world on one side of the line and a handful of evil bastards on the other, you’ve won. Make sure that the “line of division”—the phrase was used by an Otpor! buddy of mine named Ivan Marovic—that separates you and the bad guys gives you as many allies as possible.

Remember, in a nonviolent struggle, the only weapon that you’re going to have is numbers. Itzik Alrov figured this out when he realized that everyone in Israel loved cottage cheese and hated paying a fortune for it. On his napkin, he managed to put seven million Israelis on one side of his imaginary “line of division” and just a handful of greedy executives on the other. Harvey Milk did something similar when he stopped talking and started listening to his neighbors. He had the whole town on his side and only a few dogs on the other.

I’ve seen this principle at play everywhere from Tbilisi to Harare, from Caracas to Rangoon. People and movements who know how to break their strategy into small, achievable tasks are more likely to succeed than those who shout platitudes and form drum circles. But knowing what minor battles you can win and how to get numbers to your side is only half the challenge. The other is ensuring that you can offer your newfound followers something that they can believe in. And for that, you’re going to need to develop your vision of tomorrow.