

Book Review

Democracy's Edge

Frances Moore Lappé

2006 Wiley & Sons, 317 pages.

By Denise Woods

For those of us whose spirits are lagging, who feel pessimistic that our democratic form of government can survive the assault by George W. Bush and his league of belligerent plutocrats, whose resilience is sinking with every news headline, whose capacity for alarm and outrage is exhausted by the parade of book with titles like: *Broken Government*; *Assault on Reason*; *Crimes Against Nature*; and *The Great Unraveling*,

Frances Moore Lappé has the antidote.

Ms. Lappé reminds us of the power of the people, the success that yet remains within our grasp, and the democratic achievements taking place every day by folks just like us. Then she gives us a glimpse of a future we could win for democracy in a "revolution of hope."

Ms. Lappé's thesis is that true democracy depends utterly on the engagement of its citizenry. Democracy was never meant to be run from the top down. It is to be run from the bottom up. Without our role as participants, advisors, directors, and personnel managers, democracy crumbles. But all we need to prevent this entropy is for citizens to recognize their own power, take an active role in public life, and run our own government to serve our own interests.

Ms. Lappé has not just written a frilly valentine for democracy, however. She argues that the far right and corporate interests are prying our democracy away from us. Their strategy is to make us doubt ourselves. If they succeed in making us doubt our own wisdom and strength and abandon our sense of community, they alienate us from each other. They succeed in shaking our 230 year old faith in self-government, and they chase us from the halls of power.

Into this power vacuum these anti-democratic forces then stride, smuggling decisions out of the public realm, where citizens have a voice, and transferring them to the unregulated market, where only money talks. We are in a battle " ... between those who believe in democracy - honest dialogue, basic fairness, mutual respect, inclusivity, and reciprocal responsibilities - and those who do not." It doesn't get more stark than that. And as power is transferred out of our hands, our own passivity has convinced us that we are helpless to stop it.

But after she has reviewed a catalogue of insults against our Constitution and our citizenry by corporate power and those who seek to overthrow our bedrock values, Ms. Lappé moves beyond them to the steps we can take to rescue our nation from the grip of paranoia and despair.

First, we must recognize our own power. Our power lies very simply in our own talents and our willingness to use them in the service of democracy. We are the experts of our own lives and what we need, and our job is to actively shape our own lives. Second, we must value the strength of our communities. Push back against the idea that greed and selfishness are virtues. Recognize, instead, our essentially social natures, exercise mutual respect and accountability, and forge new visions of how we want to live our lives and shape our futures. Third, we must find our voice and recapture the communications industry in service of that voice.

Fourth, we must get to work, and Ms. Lappé gives us a gallery of stellar examples of citizens making a difference every day, limiting corporate power, influencing legislators, and reconstructing communities to serve our needs. Some examples are obvious and simple: arranging chairs in circles for discussions rather than lectures. Some are bite-sized and concrete: pressuring local fast food restaurants to recycle their waste. Some restore our role in government: meeting with legislators in large numbers to magnify our voice. Some invest in our community and our future: going door to door to encourage people to write letters to their legislators, and integrating democratic principles and "habits of mind" in our local schools. Some find ways to counter the big money of corporate interests: forming large groups of small individual donors. Some directly reshape our economy: passing anti-corporate farming laws that lead to less poverty and unemployment, passing laws that resist the displacement of locally owned businesses by chains, and supporting local farmers' markets. Some are personal: investing only in socially responsible corporations. Some took place in Ohio: restructuring prisons and organizing community anti-crime efforts. They are all examples of rediscovering our own strength by flexing our atrophied social muscles and overcoming an inferiority complex imposed on us by those who wish to dominate, intimidate, and exploit us. The stories of hard work, determination, and persistence are impressive. Democracy is not for the faint of heart.

Neither is it for the complacent. Ms. Lappé reminds us that vigilance is the price of liberty and that our job in the defense of democracy is never done. "Democracy can easily be lost, but is never fully won." She reminds us that democracy is not something that we simply have, but it is something that we do, and we must do it every day, integrate it into all our social institutions, to foster and nurture our instincts of self-respect, self-determination, and community spirit necessary to sustain our "Living Democracy."

But even as she calls us to the hard work of democracy, Ms. Lappé reminds us that it is the natural stuff of life, both challenging and transformational. Rediscovering the spirit of community, restoring our self-confidence, and enhancing our self-determination restores the joy of living that we are in danger of losing. Rather than passively accepting the role imposed on us by corporations and the right wing politicians as weak, obedient followers of the wealthy and powerful experts who know what is best for us, citizens who form community bonds to engage in public action feel motivated, exhilarated, and hopeful.

Finally, Ms. Lappé entices us to glimpse the possible. She believes great things lie ahead if we rescue our democracy and then take it to a new level of civic participation that "fulfills our deep needs for meaning and community and for meaning in community." She imparts a confidence that we are capable of rescuing, restoring, and re-enforcing our democratic form of government, and that in the process, we can achieve ever greater things.

"To save the democracy we thought we had, we must take democracy to where it has never been."

Watch a PBS interview with the author:

<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/lappe.html>