

How To Build Utopia in Only Minutes a Day In The Privacy of Your Own Home

Don Futterman

Part I

for David z"l

Silent Marty Samuelson and I swore eternal loyalty to each other at age twelve, the day I wanted to leave Jewish summer camp six weeks early to go home. He talked me into staying with the simple promise that he would be my best friend.

We became inseparable. We played—basketball mostly, but we did a lot of hanging around also, day-dreaming together, not talking about what we were thinking. Marty didn't like to talk, so we didn't talk much. We were dreaming privately but next to each other. "Dreaming in parallel" you could call it.

We went back to camp every summer, all the way through high school.

The best thing about camp was that there were no parents and no dating. You didn't have to call girls up to ask them out, find a way to pay, or borrow somebody's car, because there was no telephone, there was no money, and there was no place to go. All you did was take a girl's hand and walk down to the Delaware River together and let your awkward passion get caught up in the rush of the water.

We called summer camp "Real Life." Every summer we had two months of "Real Life."

Our summer camp was part of Young Judaea, the largest Zionist Youth movement in America. Neither of us was a member of Young Judaea but I missed camp so much that I convinced silent Marty to join with me. That's when I discovered ideology.

The first principle of Young Judaea was peer leadership, which meant that just like in camp, there were no adults around. We decided what to do with ourselves, following the subtle guidance of our *madrichim*, our "leaders." They were only three years our senior, but in the compressed life span of the movement, an entire generation ahead of us. At times they created the illusion

that we really made everything happen without their help, and at times we created the illusion that we could not have had our programs without them.

The second basic principle was *dugma isbit*, setting a personal example. As a true leader you must embody all the principles of the movement within yourself, and your example will show the way. I took this very seriously. I knew if my life was not different from other people in an exemplary way, I was selling out to the seductions of suburbia or—as my more sophisticated and more indoctrinated socialist Zionist friends used to call it—the narcissistic oppression of bourgeois life.

By the end of my junior year of high school, Marty was the president and I was the programmer of Queens Region of Young Judaea. It's not that Marty was more popular or more successful than me. I wanted to be programmer. I liked deciding what everyone was going to do, and I loved having all the power with none of the responsibility.

My job was planning the conventions, our four-day retreats. Pedestrian programmers would schedule a film strip or invite a speaker. I was more interested in creating events, participatory adventures on the order of naval war games.

In my senior year of high school I found my cause and I staged my masterpiece. I was obsessed with the idea of chosenness—that the Jewish people was chosen. Not that we were superior but that we were obligated, that we were supposed to set an example for the whole world. The Jews were supposed to be a light to the nations. That's what the prophet Isaiah had said. We had to be a shining light, an example for other people to follow, a personal example.

But what kind of example were we setting for anybody? Suburban homes with manicured lawns, successful professional careers dependent on eighty-seven-hour work weeks, enough security fences and insurance to shield us from the pain not only of disasters but of any experience at all, emotional catharses and financial contributions summoned on cue by the slightest mention of the Holocaust or the State of Israel coupled with an ignorance of Jewish sources so complete as to seem conspiratorial. And

Don Futterman is a writer, performer, and commentator for public radio living in San Francisco. This essay is adapted from an autobiographical performance piece.

that was the best there was. With all the confidence of my sixteen-year-old self-righteousness, I was dead certain that this plasticland of despair masquerading as decorum was not what the prophet was talking about.

I decided to put the Jews on trial.

I made up a program; a trial with a judge, a jury, a prosecuting attorney, a defense attorney, the whole works.

I would charge the Jewish People with failing to be a light to the nations.

For the judge I chose my mentor, my Young Judaea group leader. Like me he was from Queens, but he had fought for Israel in the Yom Kippur War. In other words, he was a living hero. I was the prosecuting attorney and I assigned our administrative vice president to be counsel for the defense. To Silent Marty Samuelson I gave the non-speaking part of bailiff. He could keep us on schedule without having to address the crowd.

The members of our region would be the jury. Queens Young Judaea would judge the Jewish people.

I took all sixty-seven members to Kaplan's, a rickety hotel in the Borscht belt. I set up a courtroom in the old Galaxy Ballroom. And there for four days I called up witnesses and I introduced evidence. And at the end of four days they had to vote—guilty, or not guilty.

Of course, I had written the script. We thrashed our way through Jewish history, finding failures under every stone. We even displayed our disdain for prettified Zionism with a scathing report on the social problems of Israel. But I saved my clincher, the *pièce de résistance* for Saturday night. To reveal the depths and banality to which American Jewish life had sunk, I staged a bar mitzvah. Everybody who came got bar mitzvahed, and afterwards we had a reception, complete with a bar mitzvah band and cocktail franks. The evidence was overwhelming.

Sunday morning, the sixty-seven members of the jury were called upon to pronounce judgment. They had been arguing in small groups all weekend, debating the evidence. Now, one by one, each person had to stand up and in full view of the entire court declare his or her decision. There was a gravity in that room that none of us were used to. Voices cracked in giddy anxiety. Loud declarations of condemnation were followed by defiant pleas of innocence. The votes were cast and the judge counted them and we waited.

And just before the verdict was announced, suddenly Silent Marty the bailiff ad-libbed a line. He said, "Will the defendant please rise."

The defendant?

Who was the defendant?

There was a spontaneous movement throughout the room. The members of the jury were rising to their feet.

Everyone was standing. And without a word they moved forward and formed a circle. We were all part of the Jewish people. And the judge, he was Jewish too, so he stepped down from the judge's bench and he came and stood next to us.

The best thing about camp was that there were no parents and no dating. You just took a girl's hand and walked down to the Delaware River.

And as we joined hands, standing there in a big circle, we felt united, and I was so impassioned, so breathless and excited, I felt our fate really would be decided when the judge announced the verdict.

And we were standing there, feeling very guilty.

And that was as far as I had planned the program.

And just before the moment collapsed into embarrassment, the judge, my living hero, stepped into the circle and proclaimed:

"You are the ones who will change the world. For once in 2,000 years we have our own country. Do not miss the moment. The Jews of the world are asleep so we will wake them up. We'll start with ourselves and then we'll set an example to the world of what a country can be. We'll be a light. A light to the nations!"

As he talked, it was very clear that he was speaking only to me.

I was going to change the world. I would set an example. But what could I do?

That year, my senior year of high school, I traveled all over New York showing a slide show to different Young Judaea clubs. The show was about a kibbutz that had just been started in the Arava by people from Young Judaea. Night after night I would go to elementary school and high school groups with my projector and give my spiel about the new world that this group was trying to build. And as I watched the slides again and again, I learned to do my talk on automatic, and I became hypnotized by the images I was looking at. There was one slide that became imprinted on my soul.

Twenty young American Jews were standing in the desert in front of a corrugated tin hut, the site of an army outpost. They were in a big circle, squinting in the bright sun, and they were receiving a folded Israeli flag from the army. This handoff of the flag meant that the kibbutz now belonged to the group. It was their commu-

nity. Their own little world. To start from scratch. They could do what they wanted with it.

I would build a community. A model community. A living model for other people—for other communities to imitate.

It was the most exciting, absolutely compelling idea I'd ever had. It was original, new, and mine.

I knew my community would be in Israel. But I didn't know what kind of community it would be. I had no specifics. I started to read about the kibbutz movement, about an early kibbutz, a small group of people who settled on a hilltop in the Galilee in the 1920s, an embryonic kibbutz called Bittania. They were going to remake themselves through manual labor and unflinching honest intimacy.

I imagined my friends and me living on Bittania.

There was Silent Marty. There was my friend Arthur. And there was the girl I secretly loved, Alison. And there were fifteen of my other friends. Every morning we would go out and pull rocks out of the ground for ten hours. In the afternoon we would climb fruit trees, trees we had planted the year before, picking apples and oranges and bananas that were growing in incredibly dense clusters all in the same tree, and the whole time we would be singing anti-war songs, Phil Ochs, "I ain't marching anymore!" and Israeli folk songs we had learned in summer camp, and we'd keep working and singing, drunk, not on wine but on our new selves, our bodies reforged in the Israeli sun, the sun that never bothered us because we were protected by our dark brown sun-drenched leathery skin, our souls cleansed by the pinpoint singular focus of our lives, working and singing every day from dawn until six o'clock when the winds kicked up and we'd stop working—not because we were tired, we never got tired—at six o'clock we'd stop so we'd have enough time to read Kierkegaard before dinner.

After dinner the real life started. That's when we would get together and we would talk—about everything. We already shared our food and our clothing. Now we shared our innermost feelings. As the night wore on, we got more intense and more honest.

And emboldened by this honesty I finally declared my love to Alison. Simply and truly, with no jokes and no games. And she told me she loved me too. And the two of us fell to the ground in a desperate embrace. We started to make love right in the middle of the group, and everyone else came around and we were all one big tangle of arms and legs and lips and nipples and thighs all making love with each other. And then we started making love with the ground, with the earth.

And in the morning we woke up. Refreshed.

And we went out singing to start our new day.

When I graduated from high school I went to Israel to see what kibbutz life was really like. I went to a kibbutz in the Galilee. An archaeologist had declared this kibbutz to be on the actual site of the original Garden of Eden.

Kibbutz Garden of Eden was a gorgeous green, with manicured lawns, exotic trees, and a view from the mountaintop down past a Crusader fortress into a spectacular valley. It was a country club with crops.

Only the houses were disappointing. They were ugly little pre-fab boxes set six yards apart, a drab expression of equality and an aesthetic disaster. But you didn't need much in your house; no real kitchen, no real dining room, no laundry room or even kids' rooms. Because you ate in the communal dining room, dumped your dirty clothes in the communal laundry chutes, and only yanked your kids out of the communal children's house when you had your daily children's hours generously allocated just to spend with them.

The people were also disappointing. I got tired of visiting my adopted kibbutz parents. We drank tea and ate cake and tried to talk in Hebrew but the Hebrew was hard and the men were tight-lipped and intimidating and I couldn't find anything to talk about.

I kept waiting for when I could take part in one of those emotional truth marathons when everything was going to come out. If only they'd let me in on one of those all-night discussions, I would find that passion that keeps a community alive. I wanted to feel ALIVE!

Then they told me that they didn't have truth-telling sessions on kibbutz anymore. They had discovered that if you spend six hours a night spilling your guts it doesn't make for a very stable environment.

"So what holds this community together?"

Manual labor!

Well, all right. They haven't lost manual labor. I realized that it was not a new idea. The early pioneers had tried to shed their overintellectualized bourgeois diaspora selves through physical work. But so be it! I cried. Let me remake myself through manual labor!

So they put me to work.

I washed dishes.

I sorted nuts and bolts.

I picked onions.

I stuffed chickens into cages, sending them off to their deaths while they scratched my arms and pissed and crapped all over me.

I even pulled rocks out of the ground.

And I began to yearn for anything that would engage my mind and make the endless hours speed up until my transformation was complete.

Then they told me I would get to drive a tractor. That was more like it. A pioneering farmer, masterfully guiding the tractor through its treacherous maneuvers, high

in the saddle, the tractor cried out for the new man I was becoming.

Actually it was not a normal tractor—it was a caterpillar. A caterpillar is like a tank without a turret. It has treads instead of wheels, and it's called a caterpillar because of the way it moves. It doesn't roll; it crawls.

My job was to drive the caterpillar on top of a huge pile of grass, grass stacked up twenty feet high between concrete supporting walls. The caterpillar would crush out the oxygen so the grass wouldn't rot and could be stored for the winter. This had to be done day and night without a break, they explained to me, so the oxygen wouldn't come rushing back in. My friend Barry and I had the night shift.

All night we rode, each of us on his own two-ton caterpillar—crawling up a pile of grass, twenty yards forward, up to the top of the hill, tilt slowly, crawl twenty yards down, turn around, and up again, twenty yards forward, twenty yards back. The engine was so loud it drowned out a transistor radio I had strapped to my head and the only light came from the single glaring makeshift headlight dangling off the front of each caterpillar. The one thing keeping me awake—a very effective stimulant—was my fear that I would run into Barry on his caterpillar.

The boredom was driving Barry nuts. One night he disappeared and I heard later that he had been steamrolling the flower beds in front of the houses on the kibbutz. Then he drove his caterpillar along the top edge of the supporting wall, risking a twenty foot drop, and chewing up the tread. He told me it was the only way he could keep the monotony at bay. I went to the work coordinator and made up a story about an accident to explain the tread damage, but hinted that a catastrophe was not unlikely, and finally the work coordinator agreed that the following week he would transfer us.

It was our last night of grass crushing. I tried to keep my eye on Barry, but around 4 a.m. he disappeared again. I couldn't see very well as I trudged up to the top of that pile, trying to catch sight of him in my single beam. I turned off my engine to listen for him, expecting to hear a rumble across some distant quadrant of the kibbutz, but Barry roared out suddenly, behind me, climbing the grass mountain with his headlight dark, heading straight for my caterpillar. I restarted my engine, pummeling the gas pedal but before I could get away I felt my tractor tipping up into the air. I looked back, frantically trying to get Barry's attention but I couldn't see anything, just shadows, and I imagined Barry staring through me at nothing. His caterpillar was mounting mine. The two machines were mating, and I hung on to my seat, praying I wouldn't fall out, until his caterpillar slammed down, his tread

locked inside the tread of my caterpillar. Inseparably linked, they spun together and crashed into the supporting wall, cracking it but not destroying it and ending our days of piloting tractors forever.

And I knew kibbutz was not the answer.

I had to find something else but I was very confused. Kibbutz had made so much sense in the books. But when I thought back on the caterpillars, I knew kibbutz was crushing my soul, that I had been happy to hit that wall, and the only pleasurable moment in the whole experience was when I told Barry the story of my love life while we waited for the dawn and for the mechanics to wake up so they could come fix our mess.

I went to college, the next step after my year in Israel. But the university was the loneliest place in my life. I didn't fit in at all. I was so Jewish. I was looking for a better world, and other students were reaching for those golden rings of success, or retreating into academic niches. Finding myself so alone for so long, I became more convinced than ever that the answer was community. That old ally, the family, was something I had been drilled to leave behind but the world was too big to face alone.

I spent my senior year of college reviewing the errors of kibbutz instead of planning for a career. I survived college with two powerful convictions:

One person could not change anything but a community had unlimited potential power. And manual labor was not the way to build the new man and woman. Some regular, structured, communal baring of those souls—this was crucial to keep a community on the edge, to make life the unending adventure it was supposed to be. The old kibbutz world had abandoned this practice and they had been swallowed by the drudgery of physical work.

But they had not given up public soul-searching arbitrarily. It was difficult, unsettling, and it frightened people. Secrets could be revealed. Marriages could crumble. When all was said and done, the kibbutz preferred an even keel in public life and perhaps still believed in the bourgeois family.

If I ever did succeed in gathering a group around me, we could not start by casually pouring out our secret passions. I would have to be patient, wait for the right moment, and try to guide us to our group catharsis only once we were ready. But when the time came we would face our passions and our demons and we would be free.

And now that I was free of school, it was time to complete my new vision so I could gather my group together. I tried to visualize my community into existence through sheer force of will but it was foolish and impossible to do all the imagining on my own. I needed to see a more complete picture. To build a community, I needed a team of visionaries. □

End of Part I. To be continued.