
Richard Grossman, consummate corporate personhood slayer, 1943-2011

Contributed by Charles Komanoff
20 December 2011

Publisher's note: Richard Grossman, researcher, author, teacher and activist, was one of the greats I was fortunate enough to meet and communicate with. He rated as high as possible as a visionary, dedicated organizer, and supporter of kindred environmentalists for social justice. We first met when I heard him speak around 1990 at a Student Environmental Action Coalition conference, and I got his attention by criticizing "the commercial culture." My limited understanding in those days paled in comparison with Richard's. He was of the top echelon of all activists I have known or read about -- at least in terms of my value system.

So you can imagine how gratified I was when Richard Grossman would actually donate to Culture Change.

If only he had lived longer than 68 years old, which was his age when he died last month. Charles Komanoff, our mutual friend, gives us his reminiscence of Richard. First, a bit more on Richard's background:

Richard was the one who methodically first spearheaded the anti-corporate-personhood movement starting over two decades ago. The organization he co-founded, and that spawned or inspired many others, was the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy. But as busy as he was, Richard kept in touch and followed our Auto-Free Times and the adventures of our Alliance for a Paving Moratorium. Before I met him I heard he had been executive director of Greenpeace, but in the same breath it was added that he was probably replaced for being "too radical." He had been Director of Environmentalists for Full Employment from 1976-1985. He co-authored Taking Care of Business: Citizenship and the Charter of Incorporation and Fear at Work: Job Blackmail, Labor and the Environment.

When I heard the news that the world lost Richard Grossman, I wrote to Charles Komanoff, who like Richard was an anti-nuclear activist. His reply prompted me to ask him if Culture Change could publish it. Thankfully, he said yes a few days ago, and provided the photos here. I'm sure Charlie and many of Richard's friends and associates would agree that the Occupy movement owes something to Richard for getting a big, difficult ball rolling in the right direction: clipping the wings or abolishing institutions that do no serve well the people or the Earth.

I don't recall what Richard's reaction to Culture Change might have been, other than to send encouragement. His brother Larry said, "[Richard] said it would take generations to change our culture and inject new ideas into society. I thought Richard was a dreamer, a voice in the wilderness." In the several years since Richard and I last communicated, I seem to have made him look less like a dreamer, and more practical, as I increasingly saw the likelihood of more rapid culture change.

I didn't work with Richard directly, but he certainly opened my eyes. I told him in 1996, after his triumphant speech in Eugene for the annual E-LAW conference, that he could be the anti-corporate Messiah. He replied, perhaps modestly, that he didn't want to be. He wanted deep social change, not personal attention. Richard was doing enough then and never stopped. - Jan Lundberg

* * *

Dear Jan,

Thank you for your note prompted by the news of Richard's death last month. I appreciated what you said about Richard and his work.

I was surprised (and pleased) to see that you knew Richard and I were friends. I had many connections to him, beginning in the mid-1970s when I read his prophetic article in *Environmental Action*, "Being Right Is Not Enough," describing how the anti-nukers' tunnel-vision and tone-deafness allowed the nuclear power industry to co-opt labor and bury the nuke-shutdown Proposition 15 in California. Our paths crossed and our work intersected many times after that.

Several themes were sounded repeatedly at the memorial celebration for Richard on Dec. 10 in Woodstock, near his home in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. One was his gift, though at times it could seem a mixed blessing, for walking several steps ahead of the rest of us. Richard was a true radical, in the original sense of the word, which as you know is from the Latin *radix*, for root. He was always going after the root causes of things. This meant delving ever deeper into history, law, movements, human nature, and nature itself. Keeping up with him was hard work. Though at times he could seem impatient (indeed, at the memorial I learned I wasn't alone in my fear that I might be disappointing Richard), in retrospect it's amazing he wasn't more so. "Why can't you see what I now see?," he could have hurled back at us, but didn't.

Another theme was Richard's bestowing on each of us the book, the reference, the article he had uncovered, that could spring our work forward. Everyone told stories of getting books, articles, notes in the mail that spoke to exactly what we were (or should have been) working on, in a new and richer way. Two books Richard sent me stand out: For Love of the Automobile, Wolfgang Sachs' revelatory history of the resistance to automobilization in Germany in the early 20th Century, which I wrote about for World Carfree Network. And famed lawyer Arthur Kinoy's autobiography, *Rights on Trial: Odyssey of a People's Lawyer*, which drove home the lesson that movements arise from people's thirst for justice, not from the knowledge of supposed experts. Both books were just what I needed.

The time I felt most in tune with Richard's radicalism was in the late eighties and early nineties, when I was spearheading bicycle activism in NYC. He appreciated that I was grounding this work in a larger ecological context, which may seem obvious now but was transgressive to prevailing bicycle politics at the time. He also validated the effort I was investing in trying to organize everyone who rode a bike, especially bicycle messengers, whom the mainstream media stereotyped as outlaws but whom we both identified as working-class cyclists toiling in "the sweatshop of the streets." That work paid off big-time when the messengers became the backbone of the mass mobilization that beat back a mayoral edict banning biking in midtown Manhattan. If not for Richard's advice, which was rooted in his consciousness-raising at the organization he founded, Environmentalists for Full Employment, and, later, via his book with Rich Kazis, *Fear at Work*, I could easily have distanced "commuter cyclists" from the messengers and missed out on what turned out to be an unstoppable alliance.

Later, I shifted my work to ideas – carbon taxes and congestion pricing – that aren't as suited to mass mobilizing. Richard was rethinking his own work and setting off on the path he took for his last 20 years: defining and resisting corporate sovereignty in its manifold manifestations in U.S. jurisprudence, tradition and culture. I was one of close to a thousand (I'd guess) activists and organizers who participated in Richard's seminal "Rethinking the Corporation" workshops in the 1990s and his "Democracy Schools" circa 2005-2007. I'm still absorbing those lessons, and, I'd say, so are the rest of us. But the import of Richard's thinking and organizing can be seen in the language, focus and sheer existence of "Occupy" encampments all over the U.S. The occupier with the iconic sign, "I'll believe a corporation is a person when Texas executes one," is just one of thousands who have learned from Richard Grossman.

I last spoke to Richard in 2007. I think I kept my distance after then out of worry he would regard my work on congestion pricing as overly technocratic and not radical enough. Now that he's gone, I see how stupid that was – not least because it's likely Richard would have provoked me, not criticized me, and inspired me, not deflated me.

These thoughts don't do justice to Richard's sense of humor, love of literature, flair for the dramatic and inventiveness with language. A classic example was Richard's recasting of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" as an hilarious philippic against corporate growth-mongers: "I saw the best bottom lines of my generation destroyed by madness, by elitist no-growth

public interest extremists ...,” Richard proclaimed to a rapt audience of fellow activists celebrating New Year’s Eve in Washington, DC in 1978. (Alas, the nearly-thousand word “Fowl” isn’t in print.) Or to his connection to nature and devotion to family and friends. He was no big thinker with his head in the clouds, but a person tethered to community and captivated by the granularity of everyday experience.

In the summer of 1992, we bicycled around northern Vermont for the better part of a week. I remember vividly arriving at a rundown state park on Lake Champlain and flopping down on the rocks for some much-needed rest. The view of the lake and the distant Adirondack Mountains was majestic enough, but the shoreline was smeared with litter. Richard got up and began picking up the crud in front of us and sticking it in a bag. I joined him, of course, astounded that this implacable foe of corporate poisoning was bagging its trash. I can’t recall what Richard said while we worked. He probably said nothing, but just did it, which was his way.

Evidently Richard was diagnosed with melanoma in 2010. While coping with his cancer, he helped found an organization committed to criminalizing fracking, the Sovereign People’s Action Network (SPAN). Richard and his wife Mary MacArthur regularly visited (digitally, via Skype) their daughter Alyssa in Sweden, where she lives, before and after she gave birth to their grandson Milo on Oct. 22, 2011. Shortly after, Richard’s condition worsened, and he died on Nov. 22.

The Dec. 10 memorial in Woodstock was cheerful yet obviously tempered by the knowledge that this “earthling,” as the commemorative pamphlet described Richard (along with “historian,” “counter-lawyer,” “nemesis,” “ally,” “jammer,” and dozens of other sobriquets), left us far too soon. The memorial program concludes with this note:

To add your memories, photos, audio segments, videos, interviews, etc., and to record your contributions of actions you are participating in honor of Richard, go to: RichardGrossman.wordpress.com.

* * * * *

Background on the work and life of Richard Grossman:

The Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy (POCLAD), co-founded by Richard Grossman, maintains the website poclad.org

POCLAD is a group of 11 people instigating democratic conversations and actions that contest the authority of corporations to govern. Our analysis evolves through historical and legal research, writing, public speaking, and working with organizations to develop new strategies that assert people’s rights over property interests.

By What Authority (ISSN: 524-1106) is published regularly. The title is English for *quo warranto*, a legal phrase that questions illegitimate exercise of privilege and power. We the people and our federal and state officials have long been giving giant business corporations illegitimate authority. Today, a minority directing giant corporations and backed by police, courts, and the military, define our culture, govern our nation, and plunder the earth. By What Authority reflects an unabashed assertion of the right of the sovereign people to govern themselves.

BWA is a tool for democracy proponents to rethink and reframe their work. To that end we encourage readers to engage

us with comments, questions, and suggestions.

POCLAD

P.O. Box 246

South Yarmouth , MA 02664-0246

508-398-1145; 508-398-1552 (fax)

people@poclad.org; www.poclad.org

Richard Grossman's "An Act to Criminalize Chartered, Incorporated Business Entities" and "The Friendly Critique of Occupy": tucradio.org

The text of Taking Care of Business (out of print) is on TUC Radio's site along with the mp3 links to two 29 minute programs: tucradio.org

E-LAW: Richard Grossman spoke to an electrified crowd at the "E-LAW" conference, formally the Land Air Water group at the University of Oregon School of Law, 1996. See the conference brochure for that year.

An informative report:

Richard L. Grossman, organizer who sought to curtail corporate power, has died - Washington Post

[Richard Grossman - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)

[Richard Grossman - Wikipedia](#)

About Charles Komanoff: Like Richard, Charles was an anti-nuclear activist. He appeared on Culture Change as a contest winner for supporters of our move to Santa Cruz: see [Culture Change](#).