

TRY ANARCHISM FOR LIFE: PREVIEW

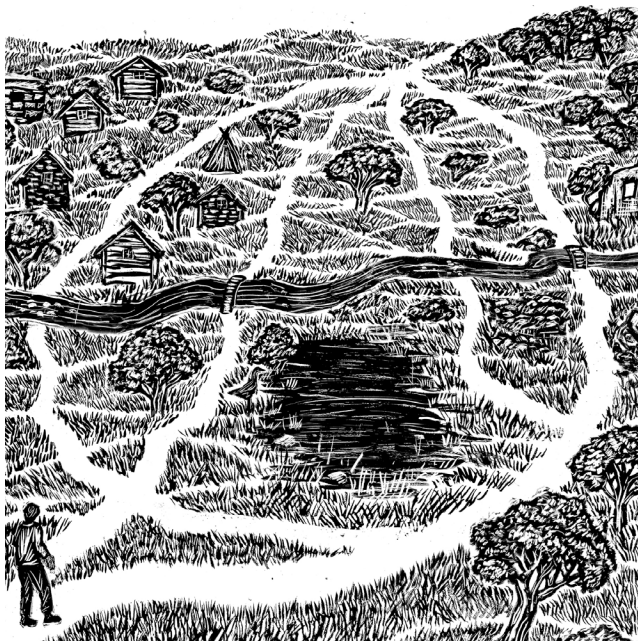


CINDY BARUKH MILSTEIN

PROLOGUE: TRY ANARCHISM FOR LIFE

This book started as a walk.

In hindsight, that seems fitting. As you'll find when you wander through these pages with me, anarchism is a journey. It is the process of continually striving toward that place called freedom, vigilantly yet valiantly, by acting as if we're already there, and perpetually widening our understandings of what that "destination" could and should look like. Which is to say, it's a hard road that demands much of us, and always will. What too often gets lost, though, is the abundance of beauty along the way. We make countless paths toward utopia not by reaching some illusory end point where all is static perfection. Rather, "anarchism" is what happens when we steadfastly venture forth, accompanying each



Circle A by Erik Ruin

other side by side with collective care through perils and potholes as well as stunning vistas and way stations of possibilities.

That means trying anarchism for life.

Anarchism, of course, has as many poetic definitions as there are anarchists, which in itself gets at some of its expansive description. For an anarchism's fundamental antagonism to all forms of power-over, even the power over circumscribing the term, and exuberant openness to self-determination mean that the word must stay dynamic, able to flexibly embrace all sorts of liberatory ethics and practices. It can no more be contained than can all the innumerable ways that humans and the nonhuman world engage routinely in forms of mutual aid to not only survive but also thrive. Anarchism is a persistent yearning for and rebellious unfolding toward forms of freedom, which will always be (you guessed it) a journey.

So what Try Anarchism for Life revolves around is, in essence, a thought experiment: What are some of the many beautiful dimensions

of anarchism? In response, this book plays on the double meaning bundled in for life.

My not-so-secret agenda here is equally double edged. I want to heartily encourage you, dear reader, to become and then stay an anarchist for the rest of your life, warmly stretching out your hands to generations of rebels past and future. At the same time, I want you to do so in service of—and with love for—dignified, bountiful, and livable lives for all, in stark contrast to the cold and calculating death machines we're up against on a daily basis.

Indeed, I'd assert that being for life is a sacred obligation if we take seriously the inherent worth of all beings, our shared ecosystems, and this planet, our one and only home. Being for life binds us to do good for and with each other by humbly yet doggedly aspiring toward and cultivating ever-greater forms of wholeness, of messy beauty, in the here and now. Hence the emphasis on try, meaning imaginative experimentation. Meaning to strive for wins such as upsurges of social solidarity,

time-spaces of self-governance, and all other ephemeral yet joyous moments of everyday anarchism. Meaning always, as both duty and pleasure, as (and for) life, to try, try, try again.

But I've strayed a bit from the walk that led me to this book. For those of you who "follow" my frequent dérives via my Instagrammed picture-prose of what I see, this isn't a surprise. I stroll not to get to the "somewhere" of, say, capitalism or the state. I ramble at cross-purposes with the world as it is, thereby freeing up my mind and heart to notice all the "cracks in the pavement" and what's already blossoming in them. That, in turn, is generative of all sorts of flights of fancy about the world that could be, particularly if we build on actually existing forms of anarchistic praxis. Many times—thanks perhaps to some of you, my good troublemaking readers—I stumble on and take photos of street art, and then borrow that image as muse for the words in my posts.

One fine day, on one fine aimless walk, I saw my umpteenth circle A spray painted across a wall. Like pretty much all the others, it looked

hastily done, with little eye for aesthetics. I snapped a photo, because no matter how scrappily scrawled, seeing a circle A feels like running into an old friend.

Yet for some reason, this time it got me thinking about why I'd rarely, if ever, seen a beautiful circle A tagged illicitly across the stolen landscape. Nor for that matter, why I'd rarely seen any street art that portrays the kinds of beautiful social relations and social organization anarchism actually conceives of and/or already models. "All cops are bad," yes, but what tangibly makes for "autonomous communities are beautiful"? Why is it so difficult for anarchists to depict what we are for, what we desire, and in ways that resonate, visually and verbally, with people who see a circle A sticker on a lamp post or stencil on a sidewalk, and either have no idea what it means or only pejorative caricatures in their head?

And so began the second step of this book's travels. That evening's picture-prose on my Instagram offered up a game, or what might better be labeled a friendly anarchist challenge. I asked folks to illustrate the

beauty of what anarchism means to them by weaving their vision directly into a circle A, then sharing the artwork with me, and I'd then share it on my social media. Slowly but surely—and eagerly—anarchists sent me their creations. But many of them got stuck on sketching what we're against, with drawings of things being smashed, set on fire, or otherwise turned to rubble. I marveled again at how tough it is, even for us anarchists who can imagine worlds without police or prisons, communities without colonialism or commodification, to artfully and accessibly express our aspirations.

This tendency to lean into critique is partly a product of this era, in which so many horizons have shrunk or disappeared, including that of a future, at least for us human beings. “Apocalypse” is far more imaginable now than the “other possible worlds” proclaimed by movements a mere twenty years ago, with each morning bringing fresh new disasters and more to rage against. We are keenly aware of the toll that these myriad catastrophes take and at whose doorstep the systemic fault lies, yet in a

time when fascistic inclinations have more attraction and influence than anarchist ones, all that gets largely erased by conspiracy theories and false news.

It's no wonder, then, that we feel an extra sense of responsibility to point out all that's so deeply, horribly, murderously wrong, including because we too are reeling from the collective traumas and immense losses ripping the globe apart. Sadly, that's pushed anarchism into a more reactive corner, or almost a standstill, where we seem to invisibilize our greatest strength: all the proactive ways that we already shape and participate in life-giving alternatives. Meanwhile, those on the Far Right have been busily shaping and participating in their own "alternatives," especially by providing people with tangible communities of care, albeit ones that "care" for select few types of bodies and hate all of ours—to a genocidal degree.

What these white Christian patriarchal supremacists and their allies know—and we anarchists seem to have forgotten—is that supplying

what people need and desire, or at least telling them powerful stories about being able to do that, actually does draw folks to your side. And fascistic forces are, in particular, exceptionally good storytellers and propagandists, even if their tales repel us. They understand the power of symbols to win hearts and minds, and in their case, foot soldiers. For people won't give up what they have, even if it's miserable, unless they are moved by narratives that make them think it's worth the gamble.

Why is it so hard for us to paint gorgeous pictures of anarchism? To show glimpses, vibrant and varied, of the many ways we create spaces in which people feel more alive and whole than ever before? Do we think it's somehow self-evident, without having to actually make it clear that such do-it-ourselves beauty takes voluntary "work"? Even if, or particularly if,

there truly is no future for our species, we anarchists are, after all, busy making whatever time we have left as good as possible, and for as many as possible, so why do we find it so difficult to portray this to oth-

ers? Do we not have enough faith or trust in our own visions, or what we put into motion? Are we too weary and dispirited? Too cool or too scared? Do we take security culture too far, masking all the good we do? Is it a lack of ingenuity, or because we're also so broken by the social order that we can't think outside its box?

Why, by and large, have we anarchists lost the art of storytelling? Our anarchist ancestors, or at least far more of them, used to be so much better at finding a balance between the urge to critique and destroy and the urge to be visionary and create, which I'd contend is what most makes anarchism so otherworldly marvelous. They conjured up fantastic panoramas of potentialities, lavishly articulated in everything from their manifestos, artworks, books, newspapers, and soap box speeches, to theatrical productions, dances and music, humor, inventive ways of living, and celebratory gatherings, among many other examples. They captured the popular imagination and sparked larger, bolder, more solidaristic movements by freely handing people a compass. They aided them in dis-

covering not merely the absences, whether of states or bosses, but also the presence of already-existent lifeways that they believed could take the place of hierarchy and domination, even when they felt disillusioned or exhausted, frightened or hurt. When I walk, I imagine that they are walking alongside me in their well worn shoes.

Ah, but I've taken a detour again. Let me circle back to my Instagram prompt.

Like all good cooperative games, I took myself up on my own challenge. I decided to stroll off social media and jump headlong into this book-as-journey, pushing anarchic artists and myself to unequivocally illuminate that anarchism is in fact remarkably beautiful. First I put out a “call” for artwork and was overwhelmed with the number that I received—all of them fabulous. Still, I had to narrow down the amount to make for a doable book, and in part, picked ones that felt like they'd be good muses for what I wanted to say in these essays. While I definitely riffed off the circle As, I realized that ultimately all the words and ideas

would be my own, so I asked each artsy anarchist to give me one sentence about the impulse behind their creation; you'll find those, with short bios for each person, below their piece.

As with most of my meanderings, especially during an interminable pandemic, the route became ever-more circuitous and rocky, and I wasn't sure I could finish this project. But a strange thing happened along the way: the more I immersed myself in trying to craft the prose herein, the more I stopped seeing the present only in the negative. I was able to see anew our contemporary anarchistic successes, if indeed life is our measure. For a funny thing occurs when we nudge ourselves to spell out the goodness within anarchism: we can't help but be revived and, dare I say, believe in our collective selves. It's no exaggeration to say that in this time of widespread abandonment, we anarchists refuse to leave people's sides. We leap into the fray armed with a diversity of tactics and self-organized first-aid kits overflowing with communal care, mutual aid, and fierce love to tend to any and all wounded by this world, including each other and the earth.

Time and again we demonstrate through our actions, large and small, that all is not lost, that whole other ways of being and living are already here.

The book you now hold in your hands is intended to inspire and delight you, my companionable readers, with picture-prose ranging from the playful and sweet to the magical realist and dreamy transportive. It aims to encourage those of us who are anarchists to notice and expand on our prefigurative practices, especially against the backdrop of a period when so much feels impossible. Yet it's also geared to be fun, friendly, and inviting for your biological as well as chosen family and friends who don't quite get (yet) why you are an anarchist, or those many people who are curious about or new to anarchism, or all those many others who are already "doing anarchism" without knowing there's a name for it. And it's meant to counter the too-enduring allure of authoritarian communist, social democratic, and liberal sensibilities with the appeal and relevance of anarchism. Mostly it's a gift to, I hope, warm your ailing heart and offer tender succor, with my love.

Try Anarchism for Life is, however, a never-ending effort. I encourage you to continue the “game” long after you’ve ambled through the pages of this book. Make enlarged photocopies of your favorite circle As here, for instance, and cut stencils from them in order to redecorate your city. Better yet, create your own beautiful circle As and put them to good use, whether to bedeck T-shirts or bedazzle walls. Or apply your anarchist art—from the

arts of printing and writing, to those of educating, agitating, and organizing—to putting the beauty of anarchism into the world for all to see, even and especially amid all the loss, trauma, and sorrow of these days.

It’s up to us, with like-minded heretics, misfits, and other queerly beautiful accomplices, to realize the impossibly beautiful, and smack dab in the middle of the many paths that we’re traversing together now.

For if we don’t keep the beautiful ideas of liberation and freedom alive, who will?



Circle A by momo

INTERVIEW

Try Anarchism for Life: The Beauty of Our Circle is currently out for preorder.

Cindy Baruhk Milstein uses they/they pronouns and is a queer, diasporic Jewish anarchist.

This is a pared down version of a longer interview. It has been edited for readability and to be a standalone zine. The whole interview can be listened to on the Strangers In a Tangled Wilderness podcast.

Inmn Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself and your work?

Milstein My name is Cindy Baruhk Milstein. Any or all of those names are fine with me. What I do broadly is a lot of organizing against all the stuff we hate, like fascists, cops, prisons, evictions, and state repression. I also try to focus on all sorts of prefigurative organizing, or experimenting

with the things we want the world to look like, and the ways we want to be in the world, and do that in collective ways that involve, hopefully, deep forms of solidarity and collective care and mutual aid. For me, a lot of that prefigurative space is about space making. Prefigurative organizing is about making spaces that allow us to try to be the people and the communities and worlds we want. Some of those spaces are physical, some emotional around grief and care, others relate to ritual, and also books. I feel like the last two to three years I'm just trying especially hard to be there for friends – and folks who hopefully will become friends – when people are really going through tough times. Because more than ever I really think we really are all we have.

Inmn What do prefigurative spaces look like to you?

Milstein I'll probably bring this in a lot to our conversation, but my Jewishness makes my anarchism feel so much more whole, and part of Jewishness is this idea that we're always trying to practice the world to come,

the world we want to be, to live it. And so prefiguring is not waiting until some distant, supposedly perfect world which we will never reach, but constantly trying to figure out how to do things in the here and now, the way we hoped they would be. To me, I think of it as sort of the highest form of direct action – or the most qualitative, most anarchistic form of direct action – when we directly act in the ways we want now as much as we can, and try to sort of push out spaces and practices and relationships in the here and now.

Prefigured, it's not modeling, not experimenting with, but living. To come back to Judaism again: within Judaism – the way I understand it as an anarchist – for instance, once a week we do 25 hours of Shabbat, and the whole point of Shabbat is to try to remove yourself from the world of work, and the mundane, and all the things you don't want to do, and focus on the communal things like eating together and being together and studying together and talking together and walking together, having all these ways in which we practice what we would want the world to be,

because we're not good at it. So refiguring also means trying again and again and again to understand what that would be.

Inmn It's funny to hear concepts that are very familiar to you, but that you don't have words that you associate with them. That concept feels so inherent to anarchist spaces I've occupied and yet I've never heard that word.

Milstein That's true. Maybe we don't need a word. It's just life. Most of the world we're fighting against is trying to kill us in one way or another, so maybe it's just life.

I use it also against this kind of overly romanticized notion that there's going to be this revolutionary moment, or an uprising, or some moment where suddenly all the police cars will be overturned and set on fire, and there'll be this new world that emerges from the ruins. And yes, yes, of course, things will emerge from the ruins of this world; there's no other place they could emerge from, they have to emerge from what's in

the here and now. But to have this idea that there's going to be one moment, it really sets us up for heartache and failure. And so really thinking about how everything we do is trying to actually show how things could and should be, it really transformed how I experienced every moment of life.

Inmn I'm having this strange connection right now. I grew up Catholic. I know there's probably really wonderfully anarchistic versions of Catholicism out there, but it's not what I grew up with. There's very much this belief the world is going to end, and that's what everyone's just waiting around for, and then things will be better. I've never really made that connection with how some spaces I've been in do think about anarchist organizing in those ways as well. It was just a weird, little, interesting connection in my head where I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I don't like that." I don't like that kind of mentality; waiting for this thing, this promised day that's never going to happen.

Milstein We're facing white Christian supremacy, and as for Christian fascism, they're naming it themselves. There is something distinct for them about that 1492 moment as materially transforming the world. Not all Catholics are bad, but Christianity has imposed a way of thinking about calendars and time, and gender, and basically tried to make everything conform around it. It's deeply entrenched in our thinking. For more of us to de-assimilate from it and decolonize it through our own traditions is really important because in a lot of our traditions we find far more rebellious and different understandings. I don't think that's accidental.

Anarchists can pretend it's like 'no gods, no masters.' We grew up in a society that's so deeply shaped by a white Christian hegemony that it shapes our thinking about where utopia happens, or where the beautiful world happens. You can have all sorts of forms of horrific Judaism, so I don't want to emphasize Judaism either, but fundamental to a lot of visions of it is that we're continually journeying toward liberation, and the only way to get there is to constantly practice it. The way you practice is

sort of in a diasporic sense because mostly Judaism has been practiced in diasporic frameworks, which to me means being scattered, but it also means scattering seeds. How do we practice in the here and now? Because that's all we have, we're not looking for some afterlife where things will be better, we're looking in the here and now. So which stories do we choose? And which we do follow makes a huge difference in how we act in this world.

Inmn Why do we need to tell stories?

Milstein Storytelling doesn't heal, but it helps us make a little bit more sense of life, and lighten the burden, and somehow feel a collective strength around us that makes us feel able to better hold something that we'll never be able to integrate or accept. It reminds us that these things are happening here and now. People can share their own experiences of what sort of work didn't work, or the messiness of it, or the beauty of it.

This moment is so horrifying, you know? It's not a contest with other moments in human history, but the existential violence we're facing, the loss of our species, our ecosystem, the massive loss due to what capitalism and militarism is doing to the climate, and fascism. It's so much more than our little meager bodies can bear on a daily basis. And so this book for me was an interesting mental health or wellness activity. I just want to talk about the power of storytelling in that way too, to remember our story isn't just a story of despair, and collapse, and apocalypse, and horror, and violence, and fear. We can feel this other way, which actually does then transform my practice and being able to see cracks, and possibilities in things in the here and now, to come back to the things we can try to push out to prefigure in better ways. I hope the stories end up inspiring other people to sit around campfires and make stories or just tell each other oral stories. That's been the bulk of how humans have passed along their wisdom, and their care, and their communal wellness, is storytelling.

I'll come back to the story that has been told since 1492 by those who have become dominant: the story has been increasingly narrowed and flattened and homogenized, and it's been a story of domination and hierarchy, and a very narrow view, especially in the last 100 years. That story has collapsed so much with all the mass murder that happened under it, whether it's under the name of fascism, or Bolshevism, or Maoism, or Capitalism, or Statism, the last 100 years have just been an incredible horror-prelude up to the kind of horror we're seeing now.

The story that gets told in the polls has to be challenged, and has to be undone. A friend of mine said, "You know what's brilliant about Trump? Like all good fascists that gain power and charisma, he's a good storyteller. And their stories may seem absurd to us, and awful, and deadly. But they capture the imagination. He didn't create fascism. He didn't create what's going on with white Christian fascism right now. But he's one good storyteller who tells stories of conspiracy theories that are, you know, anti-black, and anti-Semitic, and anti-trans and those stories are

killing a lot of us.” So why do we need to tell stories? Because we need to make sure fewer of us die and fewer of us suffer, and more people feel like there’s other ways to live, and other stories.

I did a book called *Taking Sides*, which came out of the Ferguson uprising in the Bay Area. People were acting in ridiculous ways of non-solidarity with each other. So we started handing out zines. People kept coming back to us going, “Oh, my God, this story changed how we think about solidarity.” Then they started acting differently in the street: not pointing people out to the cops, which they were doing before. And so that book came out of putting stories together.

Stories are used as a weapon both against what we don’t like and also a weapon for what we want. I did another book called *Rebellious Mourning* which is stories of loss, grief, and resistance. I ended up doing about 150 different grief circles, and opened up space for people in different communities to tell their stories about loss, grief, and resistance. So many of them are just remarkable, and memorable and beautiful, and

involve trouble. Almost in every case people told stories to each other about some major forms of loss that were going on in their community. Almost always people said, “Wow, we’ve never actually talked about this together.” Afterward, people were like, “Wow, this has made such a difference in what we feel we can do now, and what’s possible in our connections to each other.” It wasn’t me. It was the people telling each other stories. I’m just really struck by the power of it to transform us so we can begin to better transform the world.

Inmn So why should people try anarchism?

Milstein I say this a lot, but to me the goal isn’t to create a world just full of anarchists or an anarchist rule, but to be anarchistic. I always then keep coming back to the folks that are pretty rigorously committed to rooting out all forms of hierarchy, and domination, and who are trying to practice the opposite: they tend to be anarchists, or at least anarchism has been a placeholder for that. Whether the word anarchism disappears or not is fine. An-

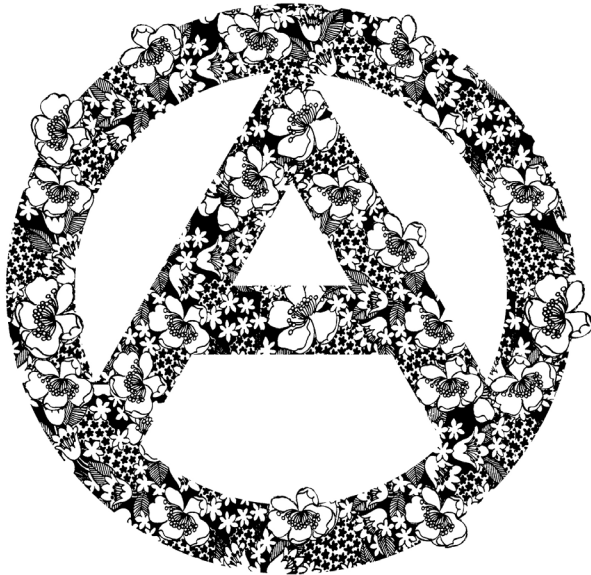
anarchism kind-of defies a definition because once it's defined, it almost isn't anarchism anymore; it's always this growing openness to what new forms of non-hierarchy, and egalitarian, and liberation, and freedom look like.

I think this book, *Try Anarchism For Life*, is trying to get at the constellation of ways of being involved: voluntary association, and voluntary disassociation with accountability in both cases; collective care; social solidarity with an emphasis on transforming both social relationships and forms of social organization toward forms of self organization; and self governance.

Coming back to storytelling: Do we tell stories that are about wanting to change and transform the world? Right now, I think we really also need to be telling each other stories about how we've been feeling the past three years and speculate on what's been happening because none of us really know yet what's been happening to us.

I hope people do give anarchism a try. There are very few sensibilities right now asking us, what if we live life in a way that really empha-

sizes collective care, and social solidarity, and love that's chosen, and not about biology and gender, but about being there for each other in communal life ways? And anarchism? Who cares about that word, ultimately? Even though I also feel proud to be an anarchist, I'm proud to be a carrier of that tradition, the tradition of anarchists, who ran around the world constantly telling stories to each other on soap boxes, in the labor halls, in factories, and all sorts of other places. The anarchists have always run around talking to each other and telling stories. Forget the name. These forms of life ways have been there since the beginning of human time, since before humans, in forms of cooperation and mutual aid and taking care of each other and sociability. It's been increasingly crushed out of us, that's why try we have to try doing this. Who cares what language we use?

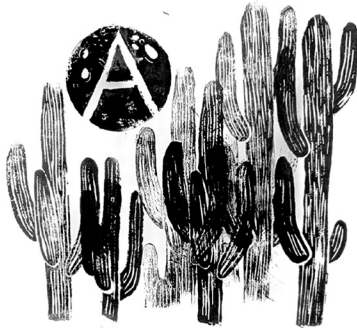


Circle A by Landon Sheely

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