CHAPTER III

STANDING UP FOR THE UNDERDOG:

YOU CAN’T BE NEUTRAL ON A MOVING TRAIN

Howard Zinn was an American political reformist and an activist whose concern for the morality of wars is the governing idea in this rather polemic work. This memoir underlines the necessity to raise voices of protest against political decision that impinge on the freedom of people wherever they may live or whatever their skin colour is. More than military and political might it is the conscience of the nation that should be kept alive. After referring to seven years he spent in the South he tells us in the preface to the memoir:

What did I learn? That small acts of resistance to authority, if persisted in, may lead to large social movements. That ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts of courage. That those in power who confidently say ‘never’ to the possibility of change may live to be embarrassed by those words. That the world of social struggle is full of surprises, as the common moral sense of people germinates invisibly, bubbles up, and at certain points in history brings about victories that may be small, but carry large promise (x).

The book is an attempt by the author to share his experiences so that it would encourage others to protest when acts of moral impropriety are perpetrated by institutions of authority. Among the three memoirs analyzed Zinn’s captures most the national events and undercurrents that come to have a bearing on the conscience of the individuals. “You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train serves as a window into some of the most important moments of twentieth-century history
and the form, the perspective of the ‘little people’ that helped to create those big names.” (http://craccum.ausa.auckland.ac.nz/) Zinn’s faith in collective will and action is tremendous as his strong pronouncements show. His is a multifaceted personality: author, playwright, historian, academic and activist. He lived a life that demonstrated how it is essential for a thinker and academic to acquaint himself actively with public life even while engaged in an academic career. His anti war stance assumes special significance when it is known that he was a bombardier in the Second World War, a war supposed to have been a good one.

Zinn takes strong exceptions to prejudices and stereotypes. In the beginning of the memoir itself he makes his intention clear by referring to his statements in an earlier work *A People’s History of the United States*.

Ten years earlier, in the very first pages of my book ... I had written about Columbus in a way that startled the readers. They, like me, had learned in elementary school (an account never contradicted, however far their education continued) that Columbus was one of the great heroes of world history, to be admired for his daring feat of imagination and courage. In my account, I acknowledged that he was an intrepid sailor, but also pointed out (based on his own journal and the reports of many eyewitnesses) that he was vicious in his treatment of the gentle Arawak Indians who greeted his arrival in this hemisphere. He enslaved them, tortured them, murdered them—all in the pursuit of wealth. He represented, I suggested, the worst values of Western civilization: greed, violence, exploitation, racism, conquest ... (1-2).
It is interesting to note what another academician-turned-activist has to say about Zinn. Noam Chomsky pays a tribute worthy of a visionary and a reformer. “I can't think of anyone who had such a powerful and benign influence. His historical work changed the way millions of people saw the past. The happy thing about Howard was that in the last years he could gain satisfaction that his contributions were so impressive and recognized." (www.huffingtonpost.com)

Chomsky is dead right for, the influence of Zinn has been such that on November 21, 2014 actors including Viggo Mortensen, Peter Sarsgaard and Kelly Macdonald gathered at New York for a reading of *Voices of a People’s History of the United States* based on Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*. The event was held to mark the 10th anniversary of publication of *Voices* which was edited by Zinn and Anthony Arnove. (www.democracynow.org)

The Second World War brought about a turning point in his life. Researching on the places he had bombarded he was shocked to find the number of innocent, civilian casualties the bombing had caused. The moral shock defined what he was to do in his career. It was a moment of awakening of painful conscience to learn that the bombings were ordered mostly for the purpose of career advancement. Caryl Rivers, Professor of Journalism, Boston University says of Zinn: “He had a deep sense of fairness and justice for the underdog. But he always kept his sense of humor. He was a happy warrior” (en.m.wikipedia.org). There is no doubt that Zinn offers the sensitive, accommodative and understanding moral face of democracy.

Zinn resolved to lead a life that would enable others to wake up and comprehend their conditions without the jaundiced outlook designed and fabricated by those in authority. He had seen the atrocities committed under the
banner of righteous war. He decided to share his experiences and the truths he found out with people in general so that the next time mind blunting propaganda was directed at them they will be ready to call the bluff. A democracy will not be a genuine one if the citizens are not informed enough to perceive the designs of politicians and policy makers. The way he felt betrayed and let down during the war had left deep scars that would render his conscience ever awake. He particularly felt that he was lucky to survive the war. Lofty constructs declined to become willful and mindless destruction. Instead of being the protector and upholder of justice and fairness he became a perpetrator of mass destruction. But the frustrating experience gave him the resolve to help people find reasons for living rather than destroying lives in the name of nation and false, manufactured ideals. Zinn is categorical about this in his memoir. “People respect feelings but still want reasons. Reasons for going on, for not surrendering, for not retreating into private luxury or private desperation” (12). To give people reasons is no easy task and it takes courage, openness, perseverance and empathy for the underdog—traits we witness in the personality of Zinn, the intellectual virtuoso.

Born on 24 August, 1922 in Brooklyn, New York City to immigrant parents (Jewish), Zinn was brought up in poor conditions but their parents made sure that their son received proper education. He had the good fortune to possess the twenty volumes of Charles Dickens’ Collected Works made possible by his parents sending 10 cents and a coupon to each of the volume to New York Post. Before joining the US Air force as bombardier, he studied creative writing at Thomas Jefferson High School in a special program. These explain the origin of his literary sensibilities. It is a valid guess that they also influenced his perception of the happenings on the warfront.
Zinn deals with events and incidents that rewrote the intellectual, political and cultural tenor of America, an aspect best captured in the subtitle of the memoir *A Personal History of our Times*. The facts and what ever gets described in the memoir demonstrate how they were instrumental in bringing about a new, fresh intellectual and political cartography. It is reasonable to claim that the events captured in the book have already changed the course of American history.

The book is divided into three parts—‘The South and the Movement,’ ‘War’ and ‘Scenes and changes.’ Zinn was very clear on his intention of opposing the war from his early years to his last when America was engaged in a war against Afghanistan. He didn’t accept any of the justifications given for killing of innocent people on both the sides. The Afghan war was an offshoot of the September 11 incident. But fighting terrorism with another form of the same can never be the solution in Zinn’s opinion, Citing a report in the *Boston Globe* on a ten year old Afghan boy wounded in American bombing he questions the reason behind the act in the Preface.

The moral question was clear. One boy now without hands and eyes. There was no possible connection between him and the events of September 11 in New York. There was no possibility that the crippling of his face and body, or that any of the bombs dropped for months on Afghanistan, would reduce or eliminate terrorism (viii).

The traits of logical reasoning and impartiality can be seen here in Zinn. Also seen is the refusal to follow the herd. His compassion for all those who suffer irrespective of nationality and a sense of uniform justice for all are evident in this declaration.
It requires exceptional courage and moral correctness to try to dispel national myths that have strong roots in the American Consciousness. He is absolutely forthright in giving expression to his views however controversial they might be. He is governed by an intense desire to get at the truth at whatever cost. His belief that American history has been projected wrongly carries a lot of conviction. As in the case of Columbus, he does not spare the founding fathers and the Presidents for the injustices they indulged in. In the words of a reviewer of *A People’s History* Zinn’s views constituted “a reversal of perspective, a reshuffling of heroes and villains.” He is unsparing in his depiction.

The Founding Fathers were not just ingenious organizers of a new nation (though they were certainly that) but also rich white slaveholders, merchants, bondholders, fearful of lower-class rebellion, or as James Madison put it, of ‘an equal division of property.’ Our military heroes—Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt—were racists, Indian-killers, imperialists. Our liberal presidents—Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy—were more concerned with political power and national aggrandizement than with the rights of nonwhite people (2).

Zinn’s views are almost tantamount to debunking national myths. Besides, there is the possibility that it smacks of sensationalism. But as a professor of history Zinn knows the facts and the evidence to support his arguments. Moreover, such arguments also run the risk of being branded as attempts at gaining a feeling of moral superiority. Hence, these views speak for Zinn’s strong will, determination and willingness to stand for truth whatever the risk may be. We should remember in the context of history that courage such as this got people burnt at the stake.
An unthinking adherence to myths and stereotypes can definitely lead to a skewed perception of one’s own self and demonizing whatever is considered as the other. Speaking the truth in the face of attracting adverse results is a trait we can call moral fortitude, an exceptional quality in any individual.

Zinn conceives of a much greater role for teachers and historians. The conventional idea holds them as people assigned the task of imparting the required instruction. But this is a very limited view according to Zinn who thinks that they have the all important role of ensuring that civilization keeps on progressing. They are the people who design thinking minds that later become the wellsprings of liberating thoughts. Zinn admits that “there was something unpatriotic, subversive, dangerous, in my criticism of so much that went on in this society.” He tells us of the response of a schoolgirl when he had gone there to give a talk on the Gulf War of 1991. She asked in an angry tone:”Why do you live in this country?”

I felt a pang. It was a question I knew people often had, even when it went unspoken. It was the issue of patriotism, of loyalty to one’s country, which arises again and again, whether someone is criticizing foreign policy, or evading military service, or refusing to pledge allegiance to the flag.

I tried to explain that my love was for the country, for the people, not for whatever government happened to be in power. To believe in democracy was to believe in the principles of Declaration of Independence—that government is an artificial creation, established by the people to defend the equal rights of everyone to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I interpreted ‘everyone’ to include
men, women, and children all over the world, who have a right to
life not to be taken away by their own government or by ours (3).

Zinn here fits Cattell’s category of social boldness, one of the sixteen prime factors. His reply to the girl’s question is also indicative of his empathic nature. Unlike most other reformists he is not instinctively dismissive and demonstrates the ability to take the perspective of people who are offended by his rather radical views. He can easily understand the emotional make up of others and come out with responses appropriate to the emotional reactions of others. And we see Zinn doing exactly that in his reply to the girl’s question.

Optimism is a dominant trait in Zinn. His hopeful stance had surprised many who wondered how he could remain so optimistic in a world which could more readily offer evidence to the contrary. He recalls one such question: “What gives you hope?”

I attempted to answer. I said I could understand being depressed by the state of the world, but the questioner had caught my mood accurately. To him and others, mine seemed an absurdly cheerful approach to a violent and unjust world. But to me what is often disdained as romantic idealism, as wishful thinking, is justified if it prompts action to fulfill those wishes, to bring to life those ideals (4).

This is a trait associated with idealists but the difference with Zinn is that he is at the same time practical about it. A purely rational approach to ideals is invariably counterproductive. The ability to balance between feeling and reason is considered the hallmark of a fully developed personality and an important component of emotional intelligence. His optimism is not unfounded if we look at what Zinn has to say in this regard. “Individual people are the necessary elements, and my life
has been full of such people, ordinary and extraordinary, whose very existence has
given me hope” (5). It would be unrealistic to pin one’s hopes on the arrival of a
superman to deliver us from the crises. Zinn’s faith is pragmatic in that he lays
store by the individual collective. A collection of small acts of courage by
ordinary people can go a long way in finding solutions to the problems afflicting
humanity. Relevant perception and understanding in people are bound to usher in
the necessary changes. Zinn’s concept of education is also interesting. If education
is a process of socialization then it needs to involve social action. This attitude
shows in his decision to move to the South to teach. He makes a list of things he
would have to tell us about. And one such is

... about getting my Ph.D. from Columbia and first real teaching job
(I had a number of unreal teaching jobs), going to live and teach in a
black community in the Deep South for seven years. And about the
students at Spelman College who one day decided to climb over a
symbolic and actual stone wall surrounding the campus to make
history in the early years of the civil rights movement (6).

The trait of being proactive is evident here. He is in contrast to the usual
academics who prefer to keep their activities within the campus concentrating on
subject knowledge and research skills. Among the big five factors of personality
openness to experience, conscientiousness and extraversion are most visible in
Zinn.

Zinn’s ability to use his personal experiences to understand the plight of
others emerges while he is at Spelman College. Zinn had read the poem by
Countee Cullen titled “Incident.” He was nineteen when he read the poem and the
content of it had moved him. “What I had known in my head about race prejudice
now touched my heart.” He, for a moment, became the eight-year-old boy of the poem who was hurt by being called a nigger.

Perhaps we respond so quickly to injustice against children because we remember the helpless innocence of our own childhood, when we are all especially vulnerable to humiliation. My students’ stories of their own early experiences affected me the same way.

The events of my life, growing up poor, working in a shipyard, being in a war, had nurtured an indignation against the bullies of the world, those who used wealth or military might or social status to keep others down. And now I was in the midst of a situation where human beings, by accident of birth, because of their skin color, were being treated as inferior beings. I knew that it was wrong for me, a white teacher, to lead the way. But I was open to anything my students wanted to do, refusing to accept the idea that a teacher should confine his teaching to the classroom when so much was at stake outside it (20-21).

The ability to move from intrapersonal domain to interpersonal domain determines one’s social skills. We see the process in action in Zinn. He uses his response to the poem to understand the pain racial prejudice is capable of causing. This added to his experience of growing up in poverty makes the empathic identification complete.

As in the case of the protagonists of the other memoirs selected for study Zinn too believes in teaching by revealing his personality, by letting the students know what kind of a human being they are dealing with, with what views, predilections, ideas, emotions and allegiances.
When I became a teacher I could not possibly keep out of the classroom my own experiences. I have often wondered how so many teachers manage to spend a year with a group of students and never reveal who they are, what kind of lives they have led, where their ideas come from, what they believe in, or what they want themselves, for their students, and for the world (7).

Like the other two protagonists Zinn too is against a teacher presenting himself as an impersonal construct. To avoid this, the teacher has to involve himself fully as a caring, understanding individual with whom students can endearingly identify. Concepts and ideas which the teacher expounds will have to be seen in action in the personality of the teacher. Then they have the opportunity to witness those concepts and ideas as living principles in a person and in turn become alive and sensitive to the subtler aspects of life. In other words the living personality of a teacher lends authenticity to learning. Zinn’s role in the campaign against segregation in Atlanta’s libraries is an instance of such involvement by a teacher. It is an educational process for the white as well as the coloured. The former becomes more sensitized and the latter goes up in self-assertion and self-esteem. And Zinn deserves the credit for facilitating this significant process.

To give the reader an impression of how it was to be black in the American South, Zinn talks about the episode involving Dr. Otis Smith who was a physician. He had accepted an offer from Georgia’s Board of Regents as per which he would receive money to pay for his last year at the medical school and in return spend a term of fifteen months in rural Georgia. Fort Valley was the place and soon he started his practice. When he had to attend a black woman in labour pains the white nurses would have nothing to do with it. Once he was interrupted by a white
woman when talking to a patient on phone. When the white woman told him “Get off the phone, nigger” he retorted “Get off the phone yourself, you bitch” (25).

He was arrested and sentenced to eight months in prison. He was later offered release on the condition he leave Fort Valley. This is just a sample of what the black people suffered in the South and also explains why Zinn came to have the kind of sympathies he has. As a historian Zinn is perceptive of the impact isolated incidents such as this would have in the long run.

In Georgia, as all over the South, in the ‘quiet’ years before the eruption of the sit-ins there were individual acts—obscure, unrecorded, sometimes seemingly futile—which kept the spirit of defiance alive. They were often bitter experiences, but they nurtured the anger that would one day become a great force and change the South forever (25).

Zinn’s perception here brings out the talent to remain cognitively alert to contexts in history. This foresight or ability to see the potential early is a trait every teacher would be proud to have. It would be relevant to recall here Zinn’s declaration that his hope is based on individuals. He is keenly aware that the failed acts of today are what assure future success.

The chapter ‘Young Ladies Who Can Picket’ provides a good account of the effective sit-ins organized by students and Zinn. The extreme of racial prejudice is best exemplified by the remark of the policeman who arrests Zinn and Roslyn Pope for disorderly conduct. When Zinn queries as to the meaning of the charge this is the response he gets. “You sitting in a car with a nigger gal and asking me what’s disorderly conduct?” (27). To carry on the war against racial segregation they targeted the restaurants next. The response of the authorities was
as usual preposterous, a symptom of a system refusing to learn and accommodate change.

The students were released on bail, charged with multiple counts of conspiracy, breaching the peace, intimidating restaurant owners, and refusing to leave the premises. The possible prison sentences for each added up to ninety years. But the rush of events in Atlanta and the South overwhelmed the system, and their cases were never brought to trial (29).

In this instance we see the prime factor of reasoning that includes abstract thinking, greater mental capacity and fast learning. The fantastic quantum of likely sentence is expected to put fear into the protestors but Zinn can see the weakness inherent in such an overblown response. He is always level headed and never fooled by the attraction of the stereotypes. As an activist involved in fighting for the rights of the blacks in the South it is quite easy to consider the supposedly enlightened North as being good. But the trait of self questioning keeps him away from such traps.

Living in Atlanta those seven tumultuous years, I learned not to trust the Northern stereotype of white Southerners as incorrigible racists. Yankee self righteousness ignored the depth of race hatred in places like Boston or New York. And everyone is capable of change as circumstances change. The change might only be in response to self-interest, but that is a beginning, leading to deeper changes in thought and behavior (31).

The passage underlines the qualities of self awareness and self regulation included in the five point category of emotional intelligence by Goleman. When a person is
effective in these two areas then it possible for him guard against that facile
de-humanizer, self righteousness. We go evil only when we think us right and
holy. That is when the Lucifer effect takes over. The Lucifer Effect is a book by
Philip Zimbardo that tells us of the Stanford Prison Experiment, a study conducted
in 1971. The students who were assigned the role of guards became so brutal that
the study originally scheduled for two weeks had to be abandoned in six days
(www.lucifereffect.com) Another instance of such extreme can be seen in
Angelo, a character in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure. This has relevance to
the idea of “otherizing,” much used in postcolonial and subaltern studies. Zinn is
down to earth and absolutely realistic, a state very difficult to maintain especially
when one happens to be a passionate activist.

Any change that does not have its origin in thought cannot sustain itself.
Zinn can be seen to target people's thoughts. We never see him condemning
individuals and what is faulted is the system and its malfunctioning. This stance
prevents nurturing hatred or ill feelings towards any particular group or
community. The inhuman prejudices of the whites are rather presented as cultural
conditioning from which they too need to be released. This also explains why Zinn
is so interested in ideas.

The power of a bold idea uttered publicly in defiance of dominant
opinion cannot be easily measured. Those special people who speak
out in such a way as to shake up not only the self-assurance of their
enemies, but the complacency of friends, are precious catalysts for
change (33).

It is interesting to see the difference between Zinn and the usual social protestors.
In most revolutions the fight is between the good and the bad and the victor calls
himself the good. Such a progression of history has never been a balanced one. But Zinn finds a way out of that trap by making both the self assurance of the enemies and the complacency of the friends targets for attack. Zinn strikes us an effective communicator and fulfills the customary requirements of one. He can communicate who he is, project his personality, what he knows and what qualifies him to stand in front of his audience and telling them what to do. These combine with leadership qualities like caring towards team members, ability to motivate and empower and the desire to make leaders out of young people to give us a picture of preferable behavior model.

Taking up public causes takes its toll and Zinn’s case is no exception. Spelman had no campus freedom to offer and this oppression was keenly felt by the students. Girl students that were arrested came back to the campus and since they have been changed by the experience “they were in no mood to accept what they had accepted before.” Zinn recalls the allegory written by Herschelle Sullivan, a star student, in which the one of the figures was a lion “guarding the gate, not allowing young people to explore the world beyond” (37). The president of the college Manley was a typical bureaucrat and reprimanded the student. Zinn felt responsible for what had happened.

After the incident with Herschelle Sullivan, I felt she needed support and that I should not remain silent if one of my students, perhaps influenced by my classes, spoke her mind freely about what troubled her on the campus. I wrote a long letter to Dr. Manley, saying that in my classes in American history and Western civilization I had been stressing the need for independent thought, for courage in the face of repression, and that any administrative
effort to discourage freedom of expression was a blow at all the values crucial to liberal arts education (38).

But Zinn and five others who wrote receive no reply. The administration is determined to thwart all the attempts by the students to make their point. Repressive measures follow. Lana Taylor, a student leader is deprived of her scholarship. Zinn does understand the condition Manley is in but his sympathy for the students is greater. The mood in the campus is well captured by what a student has to say about the college. “Spelman is like a coffin. You have to fit it exactly by stretching or shrinking. But nothing must stick out—not a toe, not a hand, not a hair” (41). The campus becomes the proverbial procrustean bed.

Zinn’s support for the students’ cause earns him a dismissal. Though the law is on his side and everyone says he will win, Zinn thinks otherwise. He had a tenure and the American Association of University Professors promised to investigate.

But by this time I was acutely conscious of the gap between law and justice. I knew that the letter of the law was not as important as who held the power in any real-life situation. I could sue, but the suit would take several years and money I didn’t have. The A.A.U.P. would investigate, and some years later would issue a report citing Spelman College for violating my academic freedom, but this would mean little. I soon concluded that I did not want to tie up my life with this fight. In doing so, I was reluctantly bowing to reality. ‘The rule of law’ in such cases usually means that whoever can afford to pay lawyers and can afford to wait is the winner, and ‘justice’ does not much matter (43).
Zinn receives support from a lot of people which includes Alice Walker who was to bloom as one of America’s great novelists. What is interesting about Zinn’s decision is that where as he shows great commitment to public causes, in personal matters he wonders whether it is worth wasting time in order to win a case. Maybe time can be spent more productively for other causes which would give him moral satisfaction, something that is of special concern to him as we see him in many situations.

Zinn rounds off his stay at Spelman College with the following observation which is not without wistfulness.

It was those students and so many others who made the Spelman years, with all that turmoil—even with being fired—such a loving, wonderful time. Watching them change in those few years, seeing their spirit of defiance to established authority, off and on the campus, suggested the extraordinary possibilities in all human beings, of any race, in any time (45).

Here again we observe in Zinn a trait that is common both to teachers and leaders, the eagerness to grow more leaders. His witnessing the growth of students gives him hope for entire humanity. Such defiance of authority and independent thinking are what have kept the wheels of civilization moving all these thousands of years. This subtle developmental aspect of human beings is not missed by Zinn. It is probable that his knowledge of history keeps him looking at human life in a continuum.

The situation seems no different as far as campuses are concerned. Zinn is telling us of the absence of freedom in the campus in the late fifties and early sixties. He goes to the extent of losing his job in order to create an ambience...
of freedom of thought in Spelman College. “Surveillance, paternalism, authoritarianism” are the inhibitors of intellectual development of the students in Zinn’s time. Things do not seem to have changed much as far as intellectual freedom is concerned. William Deresiewicz’s observations on the state of affairs in the top universities make an interesting reading. The growth of minds still runs into obstacles.

Our system of elite education manufactures young people who are smart and talented and driven ... but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of prestige, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it...

The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think. That doesn’t simply mean developing the mental skills particular to individual disciplines. College is an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family life and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance.

Learning how to think is only the beginning though. There’s something in particular you need to think about: building a self. The notion may sound strange. ‘We’ve taught them,’ David Foster Wallace once said, ‘that a self is something you just have.’ But it is only through the act of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. The job of college is to assist
you to begin to do that. Books, ideas, works of art and thought, the pressure of the minds around you that are looking for their own answers in their own ways (www.newrepublic.com)

The concerns of higher education have more or less remained the same. Then and now the required attention has not been given to the development of self. Education in the final analysis is about a state of mind conducive to independent thought and intellectual freedom. If deprivation in Zinn’s time was owing to racial and social prejudices, in the present scenario it is the accepted notions of what good education is. In both the scenarios the casualty is the sense of the self because of the prevailing conceptions of learning as equipping oneself for a successful career. Zinn gives priority to exploring the inner self and is aware of its implications for a holistic understanding of the human lot that will go a long way in providing answers for questions which have persisted. Like a plant needs space, water and air to grow, the mind too needs the necessary freedom to achieve intellectual growth, In the absence of freedom, productive thoughts are precluded. Zinn’s foresight is evident when we take his views on intellectual freedom in the light of the observations of Deresiewicz more than half a century later. We seem to be paying the price for neglecting liberal arts education as complaints about absence of people, soft and self skills resound in the halls of not only the academia but the corporate as well.

After leaving Spelman College we see Zinn mostly as an activist and journalist. There is a series of instances of racial violence in its worst form. Zinn is also seen with people like Martin Luther King and James Baldwin. Young black people who take active interest in protests and sit-ins later become successful and
prominent personalities. Zinn points out the long term potential of movements that fail in the short term.

Social movements may have many ‘defeats’—failing to achieve objectives in the short run—but in the course of the struggle the strength of the old order begins to erode, the minds of people begin to change; the protesters are momentarily defeated but not crushed, and have been lifted, heartened, by their ability to fight back ...

The white population could not possibly be unaffected by those events—some whites perhaps more stubborn in their defense of segregation, but others beginning to think in different ways. And the black population was certainly transformed, having risen up in mass action for the first time, feeling its power, knowing that if the old order could be shaken, it could be toppled (54).

In Albany, Alabama and Mississippi, Zinn takes us through the struggles of people with accounts of persistence and calm courage. The black people are unrelenting in their fight for voting rights. They retain their calm even when the most unjust violence is unleashed against them. At Selma, Alabama atrocities are committed against peaceful protesters even though the law is not against what they are doing. The FBI who could have come to their rescue lawfully were mere mute spectators to the happenings. But these notwithstanding, encouraging signs do emerge. Zinn gives an account of such a change he perceives in an airport cafeteria. Zinn is in the company of Whitney Young, a black activist.

The woman who came to wait on our table looked us over. She was not happy. I saw that on her apron she wore a huge button with the one word that had become the defiant slogan of the segregationists:
NEVER! But something had changed in Alabama, because she brought us our coffee. Obviously, although the marcher’s song was not quite true (‘Freedom’s coming and it won’t be long’), the claim on the button was now certainly false (68).

Zinn’s social perceptiveness is exceptional. It can also be seen that he never lets go an opportunity to observe details relevant to his purpose. His social analysis is a reminder of his commitment and constant concern for the cause he fights for. There is in him a readiness to listen to others, an instinctive understanding of another’s point of view. Zinn does not demonize the white even when they are at their most unjust and violent because he treats them as suffering from a psychological condition that does not allow them to take the perspective of the black people. “Empathy is the prime inhibitor of human cruelty: withholding our natural inclination to feel with another allows us to treat the other as an it” (Goleman 2006, 117). The whites who are indifferent to the feelings and rights of the blacks do so because they are short on empathy. Zinn is very well aware that the changes they are fighting to bring about will be a long drawn out process and has to be looked at from historical time.

Part I of the memoir ends with an incident at the Hattiesburg Municipal Court. Courts usually had separate sides for the coloured and the white. The trial was for obstructing the traffic by standing on the sidewalk and the man to be tried was Robert Moses.

We had decided in advance that we would ‘integrate’ the courtroom, although every previous attempt at that had met with arrests. I sat on the ‘colored’ side with about ten other whites, and an equal number of blacks sat on the ‘white’ side (79-80).
Judge Mildred W. Norris entered and seeing the scene said: “I will ask you to please move to the side of the courtroom where you belong, or leave. If you do not, you will be held in contempt of court and placed under arrest.” Zinn calmly raises his hand and expresses his wish to make a statement. He is allowed and he cites a ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States that makes segregation in the courtroom unconstitutional. The atmosphere in the court is transformed and a recess is sought by the movement attorney John Pratt. It is a moment of suspense for everyone present. There is absolute silence. The judge surveys the situation and declares.

We have in Mississippi have had our way of life for hundreds of years, and I obey the laws of Mississippi. I have asked that you sit segregated or leave or be placed under arrest. We would have appreciated your complying ... But since you do not, we will allow you to remain as you are, providing you do not create a disturbance (80).

This incident brings to the fore the deep rootedness of the racial prejudice very much obvious in the Judge’s remark that they “have had [their] way of life for hundreds of years.” There is definitely a strong note of condescension in the remark despite the fact segregation is unconstitutional. It is in fact a defiance of the spirit and laws of federalism.

As a historian Zinn seems to be aware of the kind of timeline changes in racial attitude would require. This explains the absence of the bravado, passionate declarations and predictions usually associated with conscientious protestors with radical intent. Zinn’s abstinence from these is complete and what we see in him in this respect is the discipline of a researcher and academician. If the Judge cannot change because of thinking and habits picked up over hundreds of years then it
may be said that it is only reasonable and logical to wait for hundreds of years for them to subside and disappear. We are reminded of Zinn’s pragmatism and foresight in the light of the aftermath of the verdict in the Michael Brown shooting case. On August 9, 2014 Brown, an eighteen year old African American youth was shot dead by Mr. Wilson, a police officer at Ferguson, Missouri supposedly in self defence. But the autopsy results and eyewitnesses pointed to the fact that excessive force had been used especially against an unarmed youth. The verdict not to indict the officer delivered on November 24, 2014 has created a furore, inflaming passions. Reacting to the appeal for calm the mother of the boy said: “Everybody want me to be calm. Do you know how them bullets hit my son? What they did to his body? Ain’t nobody had to live through what I had to live through.” The reaction of a man who refused to give his name is also quite revealing of how deep seated the malady of racial prejudice is. “This is something they’ve always done. I’m 63 years old I have seen this back in the days with Martin Luther King. They never change and they ain’t going to never change (The Hindu, 12). The newspaper report is a stunning throwback to the times described by Zinn in his memoir. It is made evident especially by the remark of the man who remembers the things that happened “back in the days with Martin Luther King.” The Rodney King episode in 1992 still remains fresh in the public memory. Being evangelical is a negative aspect no doubt but difficult to resist. Writing meant for popular audiences do intersperse doses of this potion to fulfill reader expectation. A lay reader would definitely be disappointed by the absence of it in Zinn. It is a tribute to the writer that his work became a best seller without such aids. The pragmatism and the dispassionate objectivity of a historian makes Zinn understand the issue at hand without any romantic illusions though he is
someone who would say yes to romantic ideals if they are given energy by an individual collective. The Ferguson incident warns us against the lurking prejudices underneath the conscious waiting to pounce if the opportunity arises. And Zinn was absolutely right in not anticipating dramatic and easy change of heart. Looking at his work in retrospect from the Ferguson incident Zinn’s memoir promises to establish itself as an important social and historical document and the man who comes through the memoir suggests the kind of long term intellectual, moral and spiritual stamina needed to keep up the attempts at not only true liberation for the oppressed but also liberation of the minds of the oppressors from deep seated, violent prejudices.

Part II starts with Zinn joining the armed forces and the training he undergoes. It also deals with his meeting Roslyn, their courtship and finally their marriage. While in service he has his encounter with racial prejudice. He does throw his weight as a lieutenant to silence an insulting sergeant in favour of a black. This is one of the defining moments in his life. I learned something from that little incident, later reinforced in my years in the South: that most racists have something they care about more than racial segregation, and the problem is to locate what that is (92).

The incident also introduces us to Zinn’s trait of standing up for what he feels is right. We are here witness to the inner directedness of the character of Zinn. Whatever the situation or whichever the person involved Zinn will not hesitate to put up a fight. This is an enduring quality that we see in Zinn throughout the memoir.
Initially, Zinn is fascinated by the war because he thinks it is a good war fought against fascist forces. But as the war progresses he is not so sure. His first doubts form when he listens to a gunner with whom he has developed friendship. The gunner tells Zinn:

You know, this is not a war against fascism. It’s a war for empire. England, the United States, the Soviet Union—they are all corrupt states, not morally concerned about Hitlerism, just wanting to run the world themselves. It’s an imperialist war (94).

The idea takes hold in Zinn’s mind though he is not initially convinced of the argument. “At the time I wasn’t convinced by what he said, but I was troubled by it and never forgot it” (95). Once Zinn learns of the politics behind the so called military decisions, his attitude undergoes a drastic change. There were two incidents that influenced Zinn. First was his participation in the bombing of Royan as a bombardier and second America dropping atom bombs to bring the war to an end. He comes to learn later on that America could have ended the war easily without opting for the atom bomb.

Then why was it done? The research of an American scholar, Gar Alperiwitz, pointed to a political motive: to beat the Russians to the punch in defeating Japan and to demonstrate to them our strength, because they were about to enter the Pacific war.

My experiences with Royan suggested additional reasons: the powerful momentum of a military machine which has been built up and is bursting with energy; the disinclination to ‘waste’ a project into which huge amounts of time and money and talent have been expended; the desire to demonstrate a new weapon; the cold
disregard for human life which develops in the course of a war; the
acceptance of any means, however horrible, once you have entered a
war with a belief in the total nobility of your cause (96).

When Zinn and his wife Roz visit Royan and talk to the people there his
suspicions about the war are further confirmed. After interviewing people and
going through records he is convinced that the bombing was totally unnecessary.
The decision to bomb was only to have victory for the French and the American
military. This inhuman indifference to the loss of human lives makes Zinn a
staunch opposer of wars in any form. He is reminded of reading Joseph Heller’s
*Catch 22* an anti war satire, especially the line “the enemy is whoever wants to get
you killed, whichever side they’re on.” When a country that is on your side,
sometimes your own country, is interested in killing for political gain then the
definition of ‘enemy’ takes on an entirely new dimension.

The reading and research done by Zinn after the war changes his outlook.
“By the 1960s, my old belief in a ‘just war’ was falling apart. I was concluding
that while there are certainly vicious enemies of liberty and human rights in the
world, war itself is the most vicious of enemies” (98-99). Nobody went to war out
of compassion or empathy. It was done only to protect national and political
interests. “The hands of Hitler were filthy, but those of the United States were not
clean” (99). This sentence captures the essence of Zinn’s ideological
transformation. His understanding gels further.

War is not inevitable, however persistent it is, however long a
history it has in human affairs. It does not come out of some
instinctive human need. It is manufactured by political leaders, who
then must make a tremendous effort—by enticement, by propaganda,
by coercion—to mobilize a normally reluctant population to go to war (101).

Zinn remembers the United States Government sending 75,000 lecturers to convince people of the necessity of taking part in World War I. The idea of fighting a just war has always fascinated human minds in the past. Fighting to protect has an essential component of the tradition of chivalry in earlier times. The romantic conception of war continued but things changed in the twentieth century. The impersonal, inhuman aspects of war struck humanity in its face. This change in thinking regarding war is exemplified in Zinn’s changed perception.

The next phenomenon Zinn throws himself into is the Vietnam War. With what he has learnt from his reading and research he quickly grasps the machinations behind. The premise for the war was a false one—it was based upon a lie. Though the American government maintained that Vietnam was the aggressor Zinn is not willing to buy the argument. He knew that the American destroyers were in Vietnam waters and Vietnam, a insignificant naval power, was in no position to go on the offensive.

History can come in handy. If you were born yesterday, with no knowledge of the past, you might easily accept whatever the government tells you. But knowing a bit of history—while it would not absolutely prove the government was lying in a given instance—might make you skeptical, lead you to ask questions, make it more likely that you would find out the truth (105).

Zinn has the attitude of looking at personal problems from a social perspective and social problems from a personal perspective. This helps in keeping himself safe from arrogance and superficiality. He is good in perception and metaperception.
Sensitive and alert to people’s thinking and contexts, he is not only a keen perceiver but also alive to how others perceive him. This is an exceptional trait in Zinn responsible for the effectiveness he is able to bring to bear upon his actions.

The ability to intuit how people see us is what enables us authentically connect to others and to reap the deep satisfaction that comes with those ties. We can never be fly on the wall to our personality dissections, watching as people pick us apart after meeting us. Hence we are left to rely on the accuracy of what the psychologists call the ‘metaperceptions’—the ideas we have about others’ ideas about us (www.psychologytoday.com)

Zinn’s acumen in the metaperceptive realm makes him an expert reader of people and situations. We often see him tide over difficult situations using his knowledge of how people read him. Added to this is his ability to use knowledge of history to understand present happenings. These qualities make his actions and behavior authentic as seen in the way he is accepted by his black students and friends.

The memoir then moves onto give us a detailed account of the anti war movements Zinn participates in and also his trip to Japan where he speaks at various places. The anti war movement picks up momentum and a lot of people start seeing the point made by people like Zinn. Reports of desertions from the front begin to trickle in encouraging the youth to resist being enlisted. The government becomes apprehensive and measures like tapping the phone are resorted to. But Zinn continues his efforts undaunted and with a calm, composed demeanor. He gives us cases like Philip Supia’s. Supia, a student of Zinn, is summoned to a preinduction physical. But he writes to his draft board: “I have absolutely no intention to report for that exam or for induction, or to aid in any
way the American war effort against the people of Vietnam” (114). Zinn tells us
that Supina quoted the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno: “Sometimes to be
Silent is to Lie,” a quote which echoes the line in Dante’s *Inferno*, “The darkest
places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral
crisis.” But Zinn and his fellow activists speak, write and organize protests to
create awareness so that such neutrality is neutralized.

As the book progresses the pages are crowded with events, incidents and
organized protests. Never for a moment does Zinn waver honouring all his
commitments. He readily obliges by undertaking difficult tasks and agreeing to
travel to foreign countries at short notice. At heart he remains a teacher. He is
invited to speak at various institutions and places. His appearance as a speaker is
objected to on quite a few occasions. One such incident is when he is invited to
Newton North High School, Massachusetts. He is the students’ choice and there
are all out efforts stage managed by the school authorities and conservative parents
to prevent him to speak. These attempts at ostracizing fail and the speech is big
hit. It would be apt to read his account of the incident.

By this time I had spoken against the war at hundreds of situations
around the country—teach-ins, rallies, debates. But nowhere did an
invitation to speak bring such a violent reaction as did the one from
Newton North High School. I learned something from this: that the
high school years must be the most important years in shaping the
social consciousness of young people, because at no other level do
parents and school officials become more hysterical at the possibility
that the students will be exposed to ideas which challenge the authority
of government, of school administrations, of parents (119).
Adolescence is the most difficult and complex phase in everyone’s life. What we end up as in our lives, experts say, is determined during this phase. Whatever distractions his activism might throw up he retains his teacher identity as we see in this instance. Destinies—individual as well as collective—are designed here. The speech made that day is remembered by those present there. Zinn tells us of young people running into him and telling him that they will “never forget that day.” Zinn introspects: “It confirmed what I learned from my Spelman years, that education becomes most rich and alive when it confronts the reality of moral conflict in the world” (120). The incident also brings out Zinn’s attitude of readily accepting challenges, a trait seen in effective leaders. Zinn understands the importance of instilling critical thinking skills in youth especially in the moral domain. Critical thinking is a self rectifying phenomenon and is the true liberating force in education. These observations were made by the Expert Panel of the American Philosophical Association in 1987. After having taught not as just a professional but also as a socially sensitive individual believing in social action, Zinn too suggests the importance of critical thinking skills. A generation of youth inclined to be critical in the moral domain is the greatest asset any nation can possess.

Zinn continues active participation. His role gets adventurous from the time he comes into contact Dan Berrigan, the priest who goes to risky lengths to defy the authorities and to keep up the tempo of the movement intended by them to keep the conscience of the American nation. The pages dealing with Berrigan read like that of a thriller with him giving the slip to the authorities on quite a few occasions. The indomitable spirit of the priest is a source of great inspiration to those in the movement. Finally he is arrested because of the trust wrongly placed
in an FBI informant. Zinn’s comments on the photograph of an arrested Berrigan are interesting and humorous.

... they arrested him and took him on a motor launch to the mainland. The sea was rough, and the FBI men with him got sick.

There is a funny photograph of Dan handcuffed, an FBI man on either side of him, arriving on the mainland. The captured fugitive has a broad smile on his face; his captors look quite miserable (138).

The inherent humour apart, the picture also illustrates who is on the side of the moral and the right here. This is a very subtle depiction of the situation. The FBI has been hunting but on succeeding they can feel only embarrassment where as for the supposedly defeated it is moral victory to be proudly celebrated.

Zinn too has his encounters with police and the law and spends a night in jail. He is critical of the legal system as well.

I have taught classes in several prisons. I am convinced that imprisonment is a way of pretending to solve the problem of crime. It does nothing for the victims of crime, but perpetuates the idea of retribution, thus maintaining the endless cycle of violence in our culture. It is a crucial and useless substitute for the elimination of those conditions—poverty, unemployment, homelessness, desperation, racism, greed—which are at the root of most punished crime.

The crimes of the rich and powerful go mostly unpunished (150).

Zinn wants to go to the roots of crime. From the passage it is clear that the prevailing legal systems end up with punishing the symptoms. The concept of justice does not come into the picture at all. Punishing the offender is insufficient to do justice to the victim. He has only come across cases being decided on
technicalities and intricacies of established laws without any consideration of the spirit behind them. In the case of conscientious breakers of law the judges do not take into account the “moral anguish” that prompted them to that action. Zinn is the expert witness in the case involving the Milwaukee Fourteen who were arrested for burning government documents in symbolic protest. Judge Larsen’s response to Zinn explaining the principles of civil disobedience and how it becomes justifiable as Thoreau’s act in 1846 is rather revealing. “You can’t discuss that. This is getting to the heart of the matter” (152). Heart of the matter does not count in giving verdicts but only the technicalities of laws. In such a scenario justice cannot help being sidelined. But Zinn does not give up. His tendency to persist against all odds pays dividends finally. “As I testified in a number of these trials, I was encouraged. Where judges allowed juries to hear the full reasons for acts of civil disobedience, were willing to let witnesses get to ‘the heart of the matter,’ juries often gave surprising verdicts” (162). Whatever the case it is ultimately a heart filled with feelings of fairness and justice that can facilitate getting to the heart of the matter.

Towards the end of the memoir Zinn offers us an account of his growing up during the depression years. “We four boys grew together—sleeping two or three to a bed, in rooms dark and uninviting” (168). Then follows the details about his reading—Dickens, Marx, Engels, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck and books on Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. He also talks about what he calls his liberal and communist years. The shaping influences are there for us to understand demonstrating yet another significant trait in Zinn—taking a perspective. It is possible for one to learn from this account how an intellectual is made through circumstances, habits and inclinations.
The chapter “A Yellow Rubber Chicken: Battles at Boston University” gives us a detailed picture of campus politics specifically illustrating the suffocating impact of bureaucracy on the intellectual climate in a university. The President of the university, John Silber, is a bureaucrat in the classical mould determined to stamp out free thinking and its proponents from the campus. Zinn tells us that his two chief examples of teachers who “poison the well of academe” are Zinn and Chomsky. Silver makes himself an obstacle to deserving people getting tenure and is prejudiced against women. But he is defeated in his attempts by Julia Brown who is granted $200,000 and a tenure by the court, yet another instance of persistence paying off. The courts hitherto have not interfered in such matters but this time it decides to go to the heart of the matter. The change probably is owing to what Zinn calls “vulnerability to new thoughts, new attitudes.” He declares: “And while such vulnerability creates all sorts of possibilities, both good and bad, its very existence is exciting. It means that no human being should be written off, no change in thinking deemed impossible” (182). Another refreshing quality about Zinn is his avoiding triumphalism. Many a time do we see him winning fights but the chest beating that follows in most such cases is welcomingly absent in Zinn. A good example is his thoughts after Julia Brown winning the case.

For so many of us who worked at Boston University, it was often discouraging to see how a tyrannical president could hold on to power for so long. But the administration, though it had its admirers, never won the affection of the campus community. And it never succeeded in beating down those students and faculty who were determined to speak their mind, to honor the idea that a
university should provide a free and humane atmosphere for humane learning (196).

This is an accurate and a stunningly realistic depiction of the existing conditions in the university campuses. Maybe this situation is paradoxical. For resistance to remain alive the obstacles may be a precondition. The tension between the opposites is what leads to creativity and Zinn’s philosophical reflection seems to reiterate this idea. As an academician he gives an insightful observation on education.

I had always insisted that a good education was a synthesis of book learning and involvement in social action, that each enriched the other. I wanted my students to know that the accumulation of knowledge, while fascinating in itself, is not sufficient as long as so many people in the world have no opportunity to experience that education (203).

The academia at the present is very concerned about the book world not meeting the real one and Zinn gives us the idea in his characteristic manner emphasizing the role of education in social sensitization. And of course, the altruism and conscientiousness are hard to miss.

Zinn closes his memoir on an optimistic note. In fact the trait of optimism is consistently seen in Zinn from the beginning. The optimism is backed by an intense and precise understanding of contexts, situations, events and of course the most important of them all, people. Citing the revisionism regarding Columbus, Zinn says, “[i]t is this change in consciousness that encourages me.” He warns against pessimism: “It is the long term change that I think we must see if we are not to lose hope, pessimism becomes a self fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces
itself by crippling our willingness to act” (207). That his optimism is well
grounded is made clear in the following statements by Zinn.

Revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment ...
but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zig-zag towards a
more decent society.

We don’t have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in
the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of
people, can transform the world. (207)

Zinn’s thinking and actions are based on long term perspectives. The enormity of
the mission he has undertaken is well understood by him. The idea that change
starts with individuals and incrementally gathers momentum is based on sound
reason. The closing sentence of the memoir celebrates a special potential of human
beings. “The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we
think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a
marvelous victory” (208). His optimism is firmly rooted in the present and so, all
the more convincing.