The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

Memory and Identity in the Time of the Internet
An Autoethnography
Mémoire et identité à l'ère d'internet
Une auto-ethnograhie

Carole Roy

Volume 36, Number 2, November 2024

Embracing Change: Conversations about Adult Education and Activism through Autoethnography

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115583ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v36i02.5770

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

ISSN

0835-4944 (print)
1925-993X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Roy, C. (2024). Memory and Identity in the Time of the Internet: An Autoethnography. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education / La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*, *36*(2), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v36i02.5770

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Volume 36 Issue 2

cjsae
the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
rcééa

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The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
Special Edition Editors: Dr. Carole Roy and Dr. Cindy Hanson
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

36,2 November/novembre 2024, 5–14
ISSN1925-993X (online)

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Carole Roy
St. Francis Xavier University

Abstract

There are moments that define one's life, and while we never forget them, reflection can lead to new perspectives. In the early 1980s I was part of a long peace march for nuclear disarmament. In 2020, an Internet search for information about this peace march found some documents that provided an impetus for reflection on memory and identity. This autoethnography suggests that unexpected events can provide impetus for critical self-reflection, reflection that honours the search for threads that weave our identity from past to present. This exploration may provide support for future transitions. It also suggests that social movements can be inclusive of a range of people with different levels of knowledge. Finally, it proposes that engagement itself is a source of learning, the impact of which may be understood decades later.

Résumé

Il survient des moments qui définissent une vie et, bien qu'on ne les oublie jamais, y réfléchir peut ouvrir de nouvelles perspectives. Au début des années 1980, j'ai participé à une longue marche pour la paix pour le désarmement nucléaire. En 2020, une recherche Internet pour trouver des informations sur cette marche pour la paix a repéré des documents qui ont servi d'incitation à des réflexions sur la mémoire et l'identité. Cette auto-ethnographie suggère que des évènements imprévus peuvent stimuler une autoréflexion critique, une réflexion qui honore la recherche de fils qui tissent notre identité du passé jusqu'au moment présent. Cette exploration pourrait fournir un soutien pour de futures transitions. Elle suggère aussi que les mouvements sociaux peuvent inclure une variété de personnes dont les niveaux de connaissances diffèrent. Enfin, elle propose que l'engagement constitue en soi une source d'apprentissage dont l'incidence peut prendre des décennies à comprendre.

Keywords:

Activism; autoethnography; reflective practice; social movement learning

There are moments that define one's life, and while we never forget them, reflection can lead to new perspectives. In 1982, I was part of a long peace march for nuclear disarmament

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ISSN1925-993X (online)

from New Orleans to New York. In 2020, the first item of an Internet search for information about this peace march was titled "Historic Images." While I immediately recognized my then partner holding one side of the banner, it took a moment to recognize myself as the other person holding the banner! It was a strange moment, coming face to face with myself almost 40 years later. As surprising as this was, it led to an even more astonishing discovery on the Internet the next day: a detailed diary of our peace march by Andy Rector (2012), another core member of the march. This was an amazing gift across the years, because Andy had died in 1994. His friends had typed his 500-page handwritten diary when he had returned home in 1982, and in 2012 they made a pilgrimage in his memory from New Orleans to New York and published his diary on the Internet. Here I was, in 2020, reading a diary I had not known about by a diarist who had died decades earlier.

The discovery of photograph and diary provoked questions about memory and identity and presented an opportunity to reassess personal motivation and perspectives on my engagement in one significant action, which also provided insights into social movements. This autoethnography is also a response to Butterwick's (2016) call to document the stories of Canadian women adult educators and our experiences with activism and social change, a legacy that has only recently received attention (Clover et al., 2016). This study suggests that spontaneous events can provide impetus for critical self-reflection. Also, artifacts can trigger reflection on the threads that weave memories and identity—who we have been, what we have done, who we are becoming—and may provide support for future change. In addition, this study suggests that social movements can be inclusive of a range of people with different levels of knowledge, and that engagement itself is a source of learning. In this case, that learning required reflection decades later in order to identify some of the impacts of participating in this peace march.

Memory and Identity

The autoethnography methodology is intrinsically bound to the question of identity, which is significantly impacted by memory. We only need to think of the effects of amnesia to realize the importance of memory for personal identity, as memories provide continuity and a sense of self (Benson, 2001). Jiménez (2019) wrote that "the concepts of identity and memory are strongly related, to the point that they cannot be easily studied separately" (p. 129). McDowell (2016) suggested that memory is related not only to individual identity but also to a collective sense of identity: "Without memory, a sense of self, identity, culture and heritage is lost" (p. 42). McDowell's comment offered support for Butterwick's (2016) call to record the stories of Canadian women activists, an impetus for this study. Remembering involves the selection of events and experiences that may validate, or not, one's identity, given that "who you are is a function of where you are, of where you have been and of where you hope to arrive" (Benson, 2001, p. 4). Benson's understanding, combined with Flood's (2014) statement that "in pausing to reflect upon the recorded events of my life…I begin to transform the stories into ideas and questions of identity and memory" (p. 5), provided support for this autoethnography. Looking back to the past meant I was not only mentally reliving certain experiences. I also had an opportunity to discover new dimensions and insights that were not apparent to me at an earlier time: "There were times when insight and understanding came from experiences that initially did not seem particularly relevant" (Flood, 2014, p. 25). For example, Flood pointed out that even "in the early stages" of her

research she "was not so able to…articulate significant events in terms of the processes and thoughts…previously experienced" (p. 26). In this study, Flood's words resonated as memories of past events gained new meaning.

Excavating memories allowed the uncovering of new perspectives "through the process of writing…[about] lived experience" (Custer, 2021, p. 341). In a reflective process, we "seek understanding and meaning through the telling and retelling of events" (Flood, 2014, p. 16). Looking "for patterns, for order, and for coherence in past events" provides support for changes in personal values but also in "social, economic, and cultural values" (Foote, 1998, cited in McDowell, 2016, p. 42). The creation of a narrative "is intrinsically linked to the… integration of self" (Benson, 2001, p. 57). Recalling memories can be stimulated through the analysis of artifacts like photos, diaries/journals, and artworks. There are social approaches to remembering; for example, conversations and analyses of transcripts with critical friends are ways to foster the excavation of stored memories (Ratman, 2018). Memories contribute to a sense of identity. In an aging population, the relation of memory and identity becomes even more relevant.

Background

On January 1, 1982, I joined the World Peace March for Nuclear Disarmament from New Orleans to New York, a five-and-a-half-month, approximately 2,500 km walking journey. Japanese Buddhist monks instigated the peace march in support of the United Nations' Second Special Session on Disarmament, initiated by non-aligned countries. We relied on hospitality provided by people welcoming us into their homes, churches, schools, and community centres. It was an intense and transformative experience. The World Peace March for Nuclear Disarmament included six of us who started in New Orleans, ten walkers who had left from San Francisco, and ten who had left from Los Angeles. About four and a half months after we left New Orleans, we reached Washington, D.C., where we joined with the Los Angeles group and continued on to New York. The core group of six from New Orleans included three Japanese monks; Andy, an American man from the War Resister League; and my German partner and me, a Quebecois with French as my first language, both of us recent English speakers. Aside from walking, carrying the banner, beating hand drums, and chanting a prayer for peace (we did not chitchat as we walked), we met local people. After walking all day, our intensely physical activity immediately turned into equally intense social activity as we attended meetings and took all opportunities to meet people. We usually took a 15-minute break from walking midmorning, another midafternoon, and 45 to 60 minutes for lunch at noon wherever we were, regardless of weather. We had a day off every three weeks. We also had to pledge to rely on the generosity of citizens along the way for food and lodging, an approach that was meant to publicize the peace march and its aim of nuclear disarmament, as well as to encourage participation by a wider circle of people who could not abandon their daily responsibilities and join us on the road. This way, they could participate by providing lodging, food, and transportation of our minimal personal effects to the next stop, as well as organizing meetings with concerned citizens or those simply curious.

On the final day in New York City on June 12, 1982, we were 1 million people, the largest peace gathering in the United States to that time. This peace march supported the then new Nuclear Freeze Movement, which demanded a stop to the testing, production, and

deployment of nuclear weapons. A few years later, Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Soviet Union, and Ronald Regan, president of the United States, met in Geneva (1985) and Reykjavik (1986), which led to the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, followed by the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed by Gorbachev and U.S. president George Bush (Arms Control Association: *Strategic*, n.d.). A New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was signed on April 8, 2010, by U.S. president Barack Obama and Russian president Dmitry Medvedev (Arms Control Association: *Timeline*, n.d.). These treaties came about because of activism, and the 1982 peace march was part of those efforts. My discovery of Andy's diary nearly 20 years later gave me a unique opportunity to consider different perspectives and highlighted the importance of documenting our lives and our activism.

Research Methodology

I selected autoethnography methodology as it allowed for the exploration of self-awareness. Autoethnography can help uncover "multiple layers of consciousness to understand self or some aspect of life lived in context…[where] there is always a look inward at the vulnerable self that is moved, refracted, and resisted during the process" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 24). Given that the subject was deeply personal, it called for a methodology that allowed freedom "from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer" and made it possible to explore personal memories (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). Feminist writers suggested that research should start with one's own experience (Ellis, 2004). Wall (2006) wrote that autoethnography "allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon" and that it fosters space for "nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression" (p. 146). Wall also suggested that autoethnography can make room

> for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to…create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned…. [T]he relentless nudging of autoethnography… says that what I know matters. (p. 148)

Similarly, Douglass and Moustakas (1985) suggested that autoethnography "affirms imagination, intuition, self-reflection, and the tacit dimension as valid ways in the search for knowledge and understanding" (p. 40). According to Custer (2014), autoethnography involves "a process of reaching into memory to reveal new ways of looking at events in the present and gaining insight about and re-storying the future" (p. 2). This methodology then weaves past experiences and present understanding.

In addition to the diary written by Andy Rector, data collection involved gathering photographs from my personal collection and Internet searches for photographs and media reports of the 1982 World Peace March for Nuclear Disarmament and the demonstration in New York City on June 12, 1982. It also involved autobiographical reconstruction: I first wrote some recollections I had of the peace march, which included significant incidents and lessons learned. I then read Andy's diary and reflected on incidents described. In addition, I shared the diary with my ex-partner and got some of his brief reactions. I also shared the

diary with a close friend who was involved with the civil rights movement in the U.S. south, and we had a long discussion on Zoom with her responses and questions. Through the analysis of the diary, media reports and photographs, and conversations with two people either involved in the same peace march or familiar with the socio-political context of the U.S. south, I identified some key learnings and new insights from my participation in this peace march.

Findings: New Perspectives

Reading Andy's diary was a wonderful experience. It made me laugh out loud, provided humbling moments, and was immensely welcome as it offered new perspectives. Even though the core group of six people had spent five and a half months in close daily proximity, walking and living together, I discovered new aspects of Andy through his diary. I gained greater knowledge of myself through critical self-reflection, and a new understanding of the historical and socio-political context of the peace march. Had Andy been alive, I would have flown to North Carolina to meet him and enjoy his very fine spirit, and to thank him for his generous gift across decades.

Motivation: Family History

Provoked by Andy's diary, I reflected on my motivation to join the movement against nuclear disarmament and realized its origin was rooted in my family's history. I grew up in a French-speaking family in a small town in southeast Quebec. In the early 1960s, a cousin of the same age who lived nearby died within one month of the onset of acute leukemia. I remember the grief of his mother, his siblings, my mother, and us cousins. Shortly after his death, my mother asked the doctor if leukemia was hereditary, since her three older sisters had lost one or two children to leukemia. The doctor did not believe it was hereditary; he thought it had to do with experiments in the atmosphere, but he did not know exactly what caused it. A few years later, as a college student, I learned that wind patterns carried pollution, including emissions from nuclear plants, from the eastern United States directly over southeast Quebec. I also learned that low-level radiation from nuclear energy could result in leukemia. Because I had witnessed my cousin's suffering and the grief of relatives who had lost children to leukemia, nothing could convince me that nuclear energy and nuclear arms should be used if they caused leukemia in current and future children and adults. In the early 1980s, I became very concerned about the nuclear arms race, and I welcomed the opportunity to join the 1982 peace march in order to stand up for something I believed in, as I was free and in search of purpose and adventure.

As I read Andy's detailed diary, I was immensely surprised that while I was intrinsically part of this march, I did not remember many of the events he wrote about, although I could see they were believable. How was it possible to read about things I said and did, and yet have no memory of them? At times I came across as very creative and daring, while at other times I seemed naïve and seemed to lack understanding of the larger socio-political context of the U.S. Deep South, where the peace march began. For example, a few days after the peace march started, a local organizer asked for volunteers to do radio interviews. Here is an excerpt from Andy's diary:

> Carole said she would go, but that she would talk about something "positive" like meditation or vegetarian diet. She would not talk about

> nuclear weapons because this would create "negative energy" in the universe and thus help to bring on a nuclear war. Lorie looked at me, and I [Andy] volunteered to do the afternoon program. (Rector, 2012, p. 15, para 41)

It is humbling to read how naïve I was. Upon reflection, I realized that the history of leukemia in my family motivated me, and that I compensated for my deficiency of knowledge of facts with enthusiasm, perseverance, a belief in peace, and a friendly willingness to approach anyone about the need for a world free of nuclear arms. While we walked during the day, evenings were for prayer services, presentations, and meetings. It took me a long time to appreciate why the monks insisted on exhibiting painful photos of the victims of Hiroshima/Nagasaki, which I could hardly look at. One evening, sitting kitty-corner to a monk, I saw his jaw tighten when they showed those horrible images. I realized that he must have found it just as difficult to look at those photos, but he used that pain to strengthen his resolve and commitment. This realization provided me with a bridge to my relatives' suffering and strengthened my own resolve.

I remember a strong sense of purpose that inhabited my days as we walked and prayed. We found ways to make the march more inclusive. For example, my partner and I initiated holding hands in a circle and singing some simple songs just before walking for the day, so everyone who was joining us that day had a moment of feeling together. Initially, the monks clearly disliked the idea and refused to hold hands. However, one day the senior monk came to me and said, "Carole, sing, sing!" a recognition that our intuitive ways also had some merit. More than four months later, a few hours before we were to join the much larger Los Angeles peace march in Washington, DC, the senior monk asked that we spend time together, holding hands and singing, as this would be the last time the monks would be able to participate! As far as Andy was concerned, we were the only march that tried to make decisions democratically, which changed when we merged with the other group in Washington. There is no denying that the monks gave credibility to this peace march in a way that few of us could, and we were grateful for their generosity and example of dedication and perseverance.

Historical and Socio-Political Context

While Andy's memories are detailed and factual, mine were not. When I think about the peace march, I think about what I learned. My partner and I were recent English speakers and had never been to university. By contrast, Andy had been a member of Students for a Democratic Society and held a master's degree in social work. After working as a social worker for the government, he grew disillusioned with the bureaucratic nature of his work and the assertion by the government agency he worked for that nuclear war was a possibility to prepare for within the next few years. He had an analysis of the connection between the arms race and social issues, including poverty and racism, as he knew the historical context of the region. He wrote that the region we were walking through was known for people opposed to the idea emblazoned on our banner. He was informed about labour and civil rights movements. In his diary he commented on the dangers we faced, most of which I had forgotten. For example, we walked in towns where the Ku Klux Khan had recently paraded in their white robes. Sometimes we heard gunshots; once a balloon full of water was thrown from a passing motorcycle. It hit me and I fell to the ground. Andy's diary detailed the

serious concerns of the logistics organizer from the Fellowship of Reconciliation in Atlanta, who believed that the monks would have been hurt, and possibly not survived, had they been alone. She also acknowledged that the FBI had been "protecting" us. Although we never saw their presence, they apparently were around.

Later, I understood that our vulnerability and need for daily assistance allowed people to extend themselves to support us and thus participate in some way. Had we efficiently provided for our own lodging and food, there would have been little opportunity for others to get involved with the peace march. Given our reliance on hospitality, others were welcomed into, and needed by, this peace march, even if only for a short term. The idea that vulnerability is key to social change has stayed with me.

The best part of walking in the Deep South was meeting African Americans for the first time. I recall the warm hospitality people gave us, which affirmed my faith in humanity. Because we were foreigners and did not speak English that well at the time, neither my partner nor I knew much about the 1960s civil rights movement. Three incidents during the peace march stood out. In Selma, Alabama, we were invited to the Brown Chapel, and I remember feeling a great sense of intensity in that chapel as well as from the people who attended the service and wished us well at the end. We then learned of the significance of the chapel to the 1960s civil rights movement, as it had provided space for meetings, even after injunctions banned meetings in Black churches. This was a place of intense courage.

In Camden, New Jersey, African Americans welcomed us along the route and offered unusual delicacies to our group, made up of 50 walkers by then, even though there were only a few jobs in this disaffected Rust Belt neighbourhood of 80,000 people living in dilapidated buildings. The residents welcomed us with grace and kindness and offered tickets to a play by Walt Whitman. The next day, at the end of the church service, they called each walker to the front and gave each of us a loaf of bread baked by women of the community, a gesture to keep us strong. The reception in that community was the warmest hospitality, along with one in Alabama, in the fifth-poorest county in the United States, where African Americans offered a fabulous meal, while some brought their own mattresses for us to sleep on in the church hall.

Later, while walking through a very poor neighbourhood in Philadelphia where there were no trees, no regular garbage collection, and buildings in disrepair, the quiet stares of residents made my partner and me feel our racial privilege, although we did not know that term at the time. My partner said that while we were walking for peace, the bomb had already fallen, economically, on this community. Nuclear arms seemed remote from the daily survival in this neighbourhood, but yet they were linked, something Andy understood. I had been to so-called developing countries before the march, and I've been to more since, but it is in the United States that I saw the worst poverty.

Gender and Future Impetus for Research

I was the only woman for the first two and a half months of the march. I was enthusiastic and easily took initiative. However, I felt that because I was a woman, I was not invited to speak publicly, even though there were usually more women than men in the audience. I felt we should reach out to them. As we approached Atlanta, Georgia, where we had been invited to speak at Emory University, there was a meeting to discuss the program, and the senior monk asked all the male marchers to prepare a speech, but not me. It was not

that I felt I had something so important to say, but I felt it was respectful to provide a woman's perspective. Besides, I was marching, just like the men. After seeing my reaction to being left out, the senior monk asked me to prepare a "small, small, small speech." I felt terribly oppressed. After the meeting, we were invited to watch a film about the creation of the United Nations. As I watched, I saw men mining minerals for weapons, men making weapons, men fighting with weapons, men directing other men with weapons, and then more men discussing the alternative to war, the United Nations (UN). As the camera panned across the newly created UN assembly, I saw that most, if not all, representatives were men! In that moment it seemed obvious that women were missing from this whole enterprise. I understood, viscerally, that the oppression I had been feeling as a woman in the walking group was somehow connected to women being ignored in the larger political peace process. Like all other walkers, I prepared a very brief speech and was last to speak at Emory University.

Although the senior monk initially dismissed me as a speaker, when we joined the much larger march from Los Angeles and the senior monks of the joined march were asked to send speakers to different organizations along the route, they often asked three of us from the New Orleans march to go out and speak: another woman, a Japanese monk who had been very supportive of our attempts at democratic decision making, and me. We usually came back with many donations that supported the march. While our efforts to respond to the audience and take a more participatory and democratic approach were not totally in vain, reading Andy's diary entry, where he mentioned my early comment that I would not speak about nuclear arms in order to not bring negative energy, gave me a new perspective on why the senior monk was initially not thrilled to have me speak. Interestingly, it was only through writing this autoethnography that I became aware of, and could reconsider, my long-held perspective on being ignored as a speaker by the senior monk. I could also recognize my own determination to find a voice, which clearly required speaking about more than vegetarianism and meditation, and also led to my future academic work. Until writing this autoethnography, I had never seen the connection so clearly between the peace march and my choice of topic for research when I entered university studies a decade later: my interest quickly settled, and remained for many years, on women's courageous and creative collective resistance to oppression and injustice, and their activist efforts to create solutions.

Conclusion

I joined other peace marches: from Bonn to Vienna with German Women for Peace (Women for Peace, n.d.), and the Central America Peace March from Panama to Mexico with Norwegian Women for Peace (Becker, 2004). I organized a small five-day peace walk from Victoria to Nanoose Bay, British Columbia. In Nanoose Bay, I was later involved in the first civil disobedience Motherpeace Action (McBride, 1986) against the US Navy's use of Nanoose Bay for research on underwater weapons that could later be fitted with nuclear arms. This brought into Canadian waters U.S. warships and submarines that may have carried nuclear reactors and/or weapons. However, I realized that I could not work on all issues, and I turned to international exchanges organized by Canada World Youth (CWY), which encouraged youth to live with purpose and a sense of possibilities. I was also stimulated by the cross-cultural context. During a break from CWY, I took university courses and started to ask about women activists in the past. I had met many women

activists, but what about women before our generation? It was exhilarating to discover the many ignored threads in a mosaic of women's collective acts of resistance with creativity and perseverance. It became the heart of my academic work and led to a doctoral thesis on a group of creative and courageous activists, the Raging Grannies, which was published in a book (Roy, 2004).

I could not have predicted that feeling oppressed by monks, as well as the absence of women in the film on the creation of the UN, would have led a decade later to my academic work on women's activism—and the realization of this connection happened only through the writing of this article. Andy's diary raised questions of identity. Where was that young, naïve but determined, unafraid, and daring woman who challenged sexist comments and negotiated on behalf of the group with many American police officers during the peace march? Post-secondary education gave me a framework for understanding my experiences; yet despite my limited knowledge during the peace march, my visceral experiences gave me a sense of purpose, a trust in my ability to analyze situations on my feet and identify creative approaches to unexpected problems. There was freedom in living in the moment. Education has given me knowledge and skills to understand the larger context, but I wonder if education and/or age have eroded the courage I had to walk through other countries for peace and against nuclear arms, and the faith in humanity on a daily basis. Andy's detailed diary is remarkable, and I wish I had also recorded my experiences at the time, as I now so much want to recapture memories that seem gone. The passage of time is enriching, yet memories vanish quickly. But memory has different aspects, from recalling detailed scenes and facts to distilling the learning and insights that come from such events. Andy kept an excellent record of the detailed events, while I have internalized the meanings these events had.

Activism and academic work required different skills and orientations, yet activism led me, unsuspecting, to academic work, which now allows me to consider that earlier activism from a different perspective, understanding that the peace march took place within an important historical and socio-political context that clearly linked the nuclear arms race to social issues of poverty and racism, which have become only more pressing. Yet even with imperfect understanding at the time, I could participate in an action that allowed space for different motivations and helped lead to the concrete results of various treaties. In this there may be a lesson for social movements: to welcome people to join as they are, knowing that in joining collective actions, we do learn, and we do not need to know it all before uniting with others. The willingness to engage and to be vulnerable is also a contribution to social movements. Small groups with a clear purpose and intense focus brought one million people together and demanded changes, which supported a larger Freeze Movement and led to treaties, however limited they are. A quote I found about that 1982 World Peace March for Nuclear Disarmament illustrates these findings: "It is hardly hyperbole to say that 30 years ago today, we, peaceful demonstrators, citizen agitators, members of the human race, played an incalculably important role in saving ourselves from ourselves" (Daley, 2012, n.p.). Sometimes small steps can go a long way, physically and metaphorically.

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