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April 22, 2008: The Power to Change the World

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Title: The Power to Change the World

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4/22/2008--From where does the power to change the world come? There is a glimpse of that power in the enthusiasm of the young for Senator Barack Obama. But he is a politician. It is rare that a politician can sustain that kind of enthusiasm. Or really be deserving of it. In a remarkable essay in Harper's Magazine (May 8, 2008), the novelist Marilynne Robinson reminds us of the strange power and goodness of the abolitionist colleges founded in the American Midwest, inspired by the Great Awakening. These schools linked "popular religion and high intellectual achievement...religious enthusiasm and generous and transformative change." Even Robinson betrays some secular surprise that religion could be so great: "Many of these colleges were racially integrated and integrated by gender...before the Civil War. ...These schools were radical despite the fact that an intense, if to us rather mysterious, piety was cultivated by them." No, not "despite"—because of their piety. The power of radical transformation lies in the knowledge that there exists in reality power for good apart from human intention. We see it again and again. In Pope John Paul II in Poland, the monks in Myanmar and Tibet, Bishop Romero, Martin Luther King, Gandhi—the list is endless. When will secularism wake up from its ignorant hostility to religion? Granted, we secularists cannot be religious in someone else's way. But we had better find our own way to be religious. Otherwise, we will never be able to challenge the increasingly dark status quo. On this Earth Day, the need for power to change the world--without violence--has never been obvious.