

# Personal Anarchy

*Written by Michael Ziesing for The Voluntaryist, August 1991.*

Tell people you're an anarchist and you'll probably get a reaction. Maybe they'll back away and/or run in sheer terror. (You may have a bomb and know how to use it, after all!) Or maybe they'll spit in your eye and/or try to lock you up. What I get most is a whole lot of questions. And the ones most often asked, by far, are these: In a statist world – one controlled by government – isn't being an anarchist sort of Utopian, even phony? Do anarchists *really* believe that we could have a world without government? Many anarchists have tried to answer these questions. They've spent much time and thought considering how anarchy would solve this problem or deal with that issue. In other words, *if* anarchy were the "rule" in the world, how would it work? Personally, I've never been particularly interested in that line of thought. What I am interested in is anarchy and the world in which I live and act and speak. When people ask me the top-of-the-list question, I want to talk about anarchy *now*. I want to talk about anarchy *in the first person*. I want to say there or here is my view. I have no intention or desire to speak for the anarchist community, if there even is such a thing. By definition, all anarchists speak for themselves. And what this anarchist wants to talk about is *personal anarchy*.

All governments – from Iraq to Israel, from China to the U.S.A. – all governments, are based on coercion and force. If you don't want to do what the government says, they will either make you do it, lock you up, take your property, torture you, or kill you. Coercion is exercising force to bring about compliance. *All* governments do it. Whether the coercion is an effort to bring about things we agree with (e.g., reducing littering, stopping sexism or racism in hiring or housing) or things that we don't agree with (e.g., being taxed, drafted, driving 55 miles an hour). The point is that force – naked power – is used to bring about compliance. That's a given, and it seems to me an indisputable fact. Don't do what the government says. Pay the price. Period.

Because no government is willing to admit that it governs solely on the basis of naked power, *all* governments claim to have authority. That is, they claim to be legitimate. They claim to have the *RIGHT* to rule. Over the relatively small period of human history where there have been governments (a *tiny, tiny* fraction of human history indeed) all sorts of reasons have been put forward for why a particular government was the legitimate government. Among those "justifications" have been that it was a mandate from heaven, that it was the will of the majority, the will of "superior" people, and so forth. In actual fact, there is no such thing as a legitimate government in any ordinary language sense of the word. People have a right to be and do as they please, so long as they don't initiate force against others. My goal is to be as free as I can in this world – in the here and now. I'd also

like to help others be as free as they can be. That I'm not absolutely free and others are not is certainly true. Because freedom is an open-ended concept, no person or group can ever be totally free. The point is to try to live our lives as a movement toward freedom, away from coercion, and as a process involving openness – i.e., choice. If we operate on that principle, we are living in the spirit of anarchy. Whenever we try through coercion, threat, or violence to force people to do things our way we are opposing the spirit of anarchy. Everything in opposition to the spirit of anarchy is anti-freedom. *Everything!*

One of the most obvious ways that people abdicate their freedom – and consequently the freedom of others – is by empowering government. The more empowered a government is the more legitimate it seems. Any time the government is asked for anything, it is an infusion of power and legitimacy. From shelters for the homeless to medicare, from national defense to police and fire “protection” – the more we ask for and/or the more we take, the more we are empowering government. Empowering government is diametrically opposed to the spirit of anarchy. I try my very best to ask the government for nothing and to take as little as possible. When I do take something I try very hard to be aware that it has the stench of statism. Here are a few things that I haven't done or supported because they empowered the government.

1. I don't vote.
2. I don't sign petitions asking the government for anything. (I do sign petitions demanding that they *stop* some things.)
3. I oppose government “solutions,” even in areas where I agree with the goal because I don't think government solves anything – although it often gives the illusion that something is being done. For example, I oppose the ERA, civil rights legislation, bottle bills, food stamps, socialized medicine and so forth. I oppose these things because they make the government look good while not really doing *anything*. For example, it gives the illusion that something is being done about racism and sexism while nothing really is. It makes people think that there is a quick fix to everything – simply pass a law and pollution, sexual harassment, job discrimination, etc. will end.
4. In those places where I have power (whether I want it or not), I try to practice the spirit of anarchy by minimizing my role and giving others options. Two places where this frequently comes up is in my role as a parent and my role as a teacher. I try to always ask my sons or people in my classes to do things and give them the maximum amount of latitude for alternatives.
5. Where I see problems, I try to support non-statist solutions to them. For example, I totally oppose the statist campaigns of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers – not because I favor drunk driving, but because it empowers the government. I oppose drunk driving by wholeheartedly supporting and endorsing safe ride programs. They are totally voluntary, non-statist, and they work.
6. I try to support in every way I can, victims of statism and other forms of power and

coercion. This includes support of prisoners, mental patients, the poor and homeless and other outsiders. I try to show this support in personal ways (e.g., moral support, friendship, letters) and through working at and helping financially activities that are non-statist (e.g., church soup kitchens).

In these and other ways, I try to practice anarchy. (After all, everything needs practice.) I do these things not because I think any of them are going to change the world, but because I think they are right. I try to be conscious of whether my actions are limiting, confining, and anti-freedom, or open, option-creating, and freedom-producing. Among other things, this allows me to be involved with non-anarchists and not live a life endlessly judging of others. What I try to keep before my mind is whether what I am doing is dedicated to the spirit of anarchy. That makes anarchy personal, subjective and living, instead of a dead set of facts that I go around trying to apply to other people or situations. It helps terrifically in minimizing the frustration that all anarchists feel as the result of living in a statist world.

Don't misunderstand me. I think we should combat the State in every way we , as individuals, can – short of martyring ourselves. I think we should witness for anarchy. The best way to do that is to live as free as we can. To be an example of freedom. One of the very best times to witness for anarchy is when someone asks a question: Why don't you vote? You mean you're saying *I can* decide what to do? Why don't you support the ERA – I thought you said you hated sexism? This is the way I witness my vegetarianism too – not by pointing fingers and calling meat-eaters murderers. I eat vegetarian food wherever I go and sooner or later most people will ask me why. In nearly twenty years of being a vegetarian, many people I know have become vegetarians or near vegetarians – *not because of me*, but because of themselves. I also know a fair number of people who have become anarchists, or have radically changed their views about government. I think that trying to be a decent human being, emphasizing toleration and love, works far better than being a judgmental witch hunter and proclaimer of heresies. In addition to that, I think it fits into the spirit of anarchy much better. After all, there does seem to be something inconsistent about coercing people into being anarchists.