

# MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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## **ABE OSHEROFF**

*"One Foot in the Grave  
The Other Still Dancing"*

### Transcript

**Text on Screen:** Abe Osheroff was born into a movement in history in which fascism, socialism, and capitalism were locked in a struggle for the world. He threw himself into those battles, always on the side of liberation. At times he picked up a gun, but more often his weapons were energy as an organizer and eloquence as a philosopher. From the Spanish Civil War to the contemporary antiwar movement in the United States, Osheroff has been on the front lines trying to change the world in the face of the greed and violence of the powerful. But those experiences also changed Osheroff over the years. With every activist endeavor, Osheroff sharpened his analysis and deepened his sense of the world. In his 90's, with "one foot in the grave and the other still dancing," as he puts it, Abe Osheroff speaks from the heart and with humility about an amazing life in a crucial time in history.

### **Title Screen:**

Abe Osheroff  
"One Foot in the Grave  
The Other Still Dancing"

**Osheroff:** Tell me what you want. You do whatever you think is better. To me what becomes important is what impact I have on those who now have to pick up the fight in my internal world. I have to deal all the time with how to be more alive. More alive. Because living is a pleasure. It is. So how do 'stay more alive' becomes center? And I personally as a being cannot be more alive. The opposite is happening to me. The only way I can stay more alive is through you, is through that young person. It's through other people. Without that I'm just going to be a bag of ashes.

**Osheroff from 'Dreams and Nightmares':** I was born in a Brooklyn ghetto. My father a house painter, my mother a sweatshop seamstress. If the immigrant dream of streets with gold existed, my parents had landed in the wrong country. Luxuries were very few. They were for the people uptown, foreigners to us. We were surrounded by other foreigners: Italianism, Poles, and Irish, all trying to make it in a new country. The only things we shared with them, beside poverty, were destruct and hatred. It was worth your ass to cross the boundary lines. In our neighborhood, people talked more about working conditions and unions than about synagogues.

**Osheroff:** I spoke two languages before I spoke English. The neighborhood was more secular than religious, which is not true. Many Jews were very religious, but we had very little of that stuff in my life. Almost everybody in my neighborhood belonged to a union. When I grew up, I didn't think it was otherwise. I thought the whole world was that way. I thought everybody belongs to a union. I would hear workers say about some guy: "We don't talk to him." "Why don't you talk to him?" He don't join the union."

**Osheroff from 'Dreams and Nightmares':** When I was twelve, I saw big demonstrations for Sacco and Vanzetti, two immigrant workers who faced the death sentence for their labor activities. Why should we fight for these wasps, I asked? Because I was told a good Italian worker is more our brother than a Jewish boss. My world grew a little larger. I did well in school, but I learned more in the streets. I knew all my friends' mothers, but I seldom saw their fathers. In 1929, I began to see the fathers. At the age of seventeen, I helped move the furniture of an evicted neighbor back into their flat, and I was arrested.

**Osheroff:** I was lucky to grow up in such a community, the working class community. It had a lot to do with what shaped me. You know, we didn't permit homelessness in that neighborhood. It was unknown. It wasn't that people didn't get put out on the street. But neighbors would gather and take the furniture right back into the apartment until the landlord gave up. Each eviction cost him seven dollars. That was a lot of money then. It didn't pay for him to keep putting him out on the street.

**Clip from 'Dreams and Nightmares':** Only the organization of the workers and the unemployed can better our... In the face of hunger and unemployment...

**Osheroff:** The idea of socialism was a very important part of the culture that I grew up in. There was no public opinion about it. It didn't exist. I didn't even know there was such a thing. There were two parties, the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, when I was a kid. And the majority party was socialist – just in that neighborhood.

**Osheroff from 'Dreams and Nightmares':** In 1937, I went to fight in Spain because I believed that, unless fascism was stopped there, it would lead to disaster. That estimate proved to be tragically correct. It became apparent that Hitler and Mussolini had joined that war on the side of Franco and that it was no longer a question of a simple civil war between Spaniards. Hitler was the epitome of all the things I had been fighting against all my life. And to become involved with Spain was just another step in the direction which my life had been going. The Spanish people were at war with fascism. Here was my chance to join the fight. One night, together with two hundred and fifty other volunteers, I sailed for Spain.

**Martin Espada:** The ship of volunteers was Ciudad de Barcelona, Abe the carpenter among them, and for them the word Barcelona tingled like the aftertaste of a kiss. Two miles from shore, they saw the prop plane hover as if a spectre from the last war, the pilot's hand jab untranslated warning. Then the thud, a heart kicking in spasm, the breastbone of the ship punctured by a torpedo from Mussolini's submarine. In seven minutes, the ship called

Ciudad de Barcelona tilted and slid into the gushing sea, at every porthole a face trapped, mouth round and silent like the porthole. Eighty mouths round in the high note of silence. Abe swam two miles to Spain, made trowels of his hands to cleave the thickening water. Today, his white beard is a garland of clouds and sea-foam. Now, for Abe, I tap these words like a telegraph operator with news of survivors: Ciudad de Barcelona, Ciudad de Barcelona.

**Text on Screen:** Eduardo Galeano, one of Latin America's most important writers, chronicled the continent's history in "Open Veins of Latin America" and the "Memory of Fire" trilogy. He visited Abe at his home in Seattle, Washington in 2006.

**Eduardo Galeano:** You said that the mistake had been so many times to let aside your critical conscience. And I was wondering, in that period, the Lincoln Brigade and your personal experience during the Spanish war, did you let aside your critical conscience or you had it accompanying you all the time?

**Osheroff:** It's much more sharp today. I've had that since I was a little kid. I don't know where it came from, but I've always had that. So I have problem with the Brigade.

**Galeano:** You had problems?

**Osheroff:** Serious problems.

**Galeano:** What sort of problems? How was it?

**Osheroff:** I'll be very quick. I'll tell you one other story that almost cost me my life. I recruited a young man to go to Spain with me. Right before we went into battle, he came to me and he said: 'Abe, I can't do it. I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself, I'll put myself to shame, I'll become a burden to the rest of the comrades.' On top of which, he said: 'I feel such strange pains in my chest. I'd like to get a medical examination.' There was no such thing. There was only one place you could even get a medic. It was Barcelona. So I went to my superior, and it's no secret anymore that I did that. And I told him what the problem was. He was not popular. He was a very bad superior. We had a couple of bad ones. And he knew that he was not popular, so he put his finger in my face and said: 'Now I know whose been organizing the discontent in this battalion and the low morale. What have you got to say for yourself?' And I said, 'go fuck yourself,' and I walked out. I've always been rebellious. Today I call it critical thinking because it's organized. But rebellion is rooted in more than just this. And I've been that way all my life. I was that way when I was a union carpenter. I got in trouble with the union for challenging the leadership. I did that when I was a college kid, challenging my professors. I don't know what it is, but I even challenge my friends, my closest friends. I give them a hard time sometimes. It's probably my nature. I also learned to like it, to respect it, and not to quit doing it but to do it more intelligently. But to me, an activist who gives up critical thinking shouldn't be involved in activism. This is the key. Of course this is the key to human life, but without this it's a jellyfish. It's nothing.

**Galeano:** All the twentieth century so rich in experiences proving that the good activist is not the blind, deaf, mute activist, so many experiences. As evidence, we should not repeat this.

**Osheroff:** I think to me, the most important thing that I can give to young people is that being an activist is perhaps the richest way to live.

**Galeano:** You're lived such a very good life, an intense life, with your dancing foot.

**Osheroff:** The reason I enjoy having you here, you've lived a great life too.

**Galeano:** One dancing foot and the other one?

**Osheroff:** In the grave.

**Galeano:** In the grave.

**Osheroff:** One of my students put it to me a different way. He said, the kettle is rusty and even has a few leaks, but look, there's still steam coming out of it

**Text on Screen:** Mississippi 1964

**Text on Screen:** The fight against racism in the South was organized by many courageous African Americans who defied the powerful forces of white supremacy in efforts to overturn segregation and create a truly just and equal society. Alongside those black activists, a few white allies found important ways to contribute to projects in that struggle. That's how Osheroff found himself in Mississippi in 1964, helping to build a community center in Holmes County, Mississippi.

**Osheroff:** In my own lifetime, I've been in places where you could kill a black person and not even be arrested. In Mississippi, early 1960, you could kill a black person and brag about it. And you might be arrested and be out on bail on Monday, and fifty years later you might be tried. That's the way it was. There were times in Mississippi that I was more scared than I was in Spain. But every night when we went to sleep, we did not know, especially in my position where I was living, whether we attacked or not. The house I lived in had a thousand bullet holes. We were attacked a minimum once a week. Gun fire. And it was scary. And a part of me would like to go back to California, but I wouldn't like that person who went back to California, and he wouldn't like himself. Some people understand it. I'd look in the mirror, and I wouldn't see what I see. I like what I see in the mirror. But I wouldn't like that face. Because even if nobody else knew it, that guy would know that he violated the most important things in his life to take care of flesh. It's a very hard thing for a lot of people to understand. The reason that the Mississippi experience was so wonderful is that I lived inside black life, not outside helping it, but inside black life and began to look at the American scene from the viewpoint of a black person. That's very unique for a white person to be able to have it, and I'm very grateful that I had that. When I'd go to town and I'd go into a store to buy something, I don't exactly get service, to put it

mildly. They were always out of whatever I want because they don't like white niggers. They hate white niggers. We have finished the project, and we're having a big celebration – a wonderful, happy celebration. The building is packed with 350-400 people jammed, and outside maybe another thousand people. And people were making little sermons on the occasion. I feel very sad. I really don't like leaving. And then the preacher, the local preacher, gets up and says, "I knows you all are wondering what Abe is doing down here. And some of you think that he's a private contractor, and there's a job that made him some money and he's going to go back to California and live it up. Have ball. Is this why Abe came to Mississippi?" And the crowd yells, No! "Some of you think the government sent Abe down here to work on Mississippi. And you should know by now what the government does and don't do. They don't do nothing which brought Abe down here. Was it the government?" And they yelled, No! "Okay, I'm gonna tell you. I'm gonna tell you the God's honest truth of why Abe is here. Because this is not the first time your good lord sent a carpenter down to Earth to help the poor folks." That was his dissertation. And the crowd yelled. Most of them believed that, the good lord sent me down.

**Text on Screen:** Nicaragua 1986

**Text on Screen:** When leftists overthrew a brutal U.S. backed dictator in Nicaragua in 1979, many were excited about the possibilities of a more just and equal society for all. But the Reagan administration quickly organized a violent proxy war against the Sandinista government, part of a long attempt by the United States to dominate Central America. A solidarity movement of radical and progressive activists in U.S. found many ways to resist that policy, including Osheroff's project to help build homes in Nicaragua.

**Osheroff:** It is no secret that the United States has always played an interventionary role in Central American politics. Nicaragua is not the first, and it turned out not to be the last. We have never had a serious political development in Central America in which the United States did not put its two cents in ever. And in some cases, we overthrew governments. In some cases, we bought the leadership of the government. In some cases, we murdered the leadership of the government. But we always intervened to keep back any revolutionary movements in Central America. The reason I got concerned with Nicaragua was that it was another place where my country was exercising its power to develop a society which is not in the best interest of the people in Nicaragua, but in the best interest of the American companies that worked in Nicaragua and the adjacent countries. I wanted to do two things. I wanted to build a village of a little bit higher standard of living for the people who lived in that area, and I wanted to get publicity for the project in order to be able to tell the American people, through the American press and radio and television, what Reagan was doing in Nicaragua. This was our aim. This was our object. I didn't fully obtain it, but obtained it to a large degree. We did build thirty houses for farmers and improved their water system, but the main thing we achieved was we brought them attention to what we consider the very sick part of American foreign policy. Not especially bad because it was Nicaragua, it was part of an overall policy. It's part of the same policy you see today. It's cut out of the same cloth. Two of my sons went with me, and one of them – he's a very good worker, he worked very hard on this project – as the years went by he said, 'Dad, didn't we waste our time? Nothing came of it. The original owners came back after the

elections, they took away their houses, a lumber company now controls the area, etc.' And my answer to him was, "Yes, they destroyed the physical evidence of what we did there, but there's something they couldn't destroy. And that's what affect we had on the hearts and minds of the Nicaraguans, and the affect they had on the hearts and minds of many Americans who heard about this and had some empathy, sympathy for what we were doing. The first thing I did is to take out a construction truck and make it into a mobile. If you look at it closely, it's a hammer and a saw. That was a consciously thought process to get attention. And it said, The Lincoln Brigade of Construction. That's what it said, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. What I liked about it, even more than my experience in the Spanish Civil War, was my contact with the local people. When I was a soldier in Spain, I had very little contact with the Spanish people. A combat soldier does not have much contact, whereas here we lived with them, we ate the same crappy food they ate, we got the same dysentery they got, we suffered the same dangers they faced, we drank the same water that they drank, we played with their children. We became part of who they were. That didn't happen in Spain. I look upon myself as a work in progress. I discovered all kinds of things in me that I don't like. Over the years, there are times in which I made enemies of people with my own hands. There have been moments when I've been tempted to go the other way. When I had a chance to be a big shit in their world, the other world. It was tempting. I have to tell you, it was tempting.

**Text on Screen:**

Abe Osheroff speaking at Seattle Central Community College  
February 2007

**Moderator:** Abe is here for a very special reason today. He's not here to tell us about many of the important struggles he's participated in the past. Abe is here to talk about the present, the things that all of us can do to make a better world.

**Osheroff:** The fact that most of you, when you become acquainted with my general background, look upon me as a person of enormous courage. The courageous thing to do is to look into yourself and find that about yourself which is most authentic and act on the basis of that authenticity. What does it mean to be an authentic human being? The word is banded around a little too lightly. To me, authenticity consists of, first, recognizing that we three main aspects of our life, which is the degree to which we think, the degree to which we talk, and the degree to which we do things about it. Those three aspects usually are disconnected to most people. What we think very often has very little to do with how we act out. Authenticity consists mainly in finding a correspondence to whatever degree possible between what you think, and some people are even afraid to do too much of that, and what you say about that thinking, which already presents certain hazards in human relationships, and what you do about that thinking, which can cost you a job. It can cost you not getting on a tenure track. It can cost you your basic relationship to another human being. And that takes me to chapter two. You guys are heading for a rough ride, your generation. You, for sure, and your children, damn sure, are heading for a really rough ride because you are involved in a period of American history in which an empire is falling apart. That's what Iraq teaches us. That this empire is in deep, deep shit. And doing that, isn't there anything you or anybody else can do about it. No

matter what you do on the campuses or the factories or the streets of America, activity itself of that sort is not going to stop the war in Iraq. Despite the so-called transfer of power to another grouping, in fact, the power shifted from one wing of the turkey to another wing of the turkey but basically the same turkey. So, yes, be a little delighted with some of the recent elections, but don't get your hopes up too high. In the long run, what will happen will depend very much on what your generation and your kids are going to do because a crisis is coming, an enormous worldwide crisis, where American unipolarity will be challenged and to some degree successfully, and the world will again become either bipolar or multipolar because in ten or twenty years, for one example, China will be far stronger both economically and militarily than the United States and able to say to the United States, we are not afraid. If North Korea, with four little fart bombs, can bring you to temporary halt, you're dealing with big stuff now. So a whole new situation develops in the world, an unholy tension within which we have to operate. Not only that but no matter who gets elected in the near future, so much damage has been done to certain aspects of American life that the resources to rebuild and go beyond that will be very limited. Simply put, your future and that of your children has been mortgaged by the Iraq War, because that has to be paid for. They walked away with the profits, but there's a great big mortgage as a result of that war, a mortgage that will limit the capacity of our country to take care of its population, to develop universal health care, to expand education. Looking down the road, is a better world possible? Of course it is. It's not only possible, it's necessary. Is it probable? At this moment it does not look like it. And the only thing you can change, the first part of the equation, but the only thing you can do about the second part of it, which is making this happiness probable is human activity. There's nothing else that can change that to a high degree of probability, a better world. Changing the world will not come out of libraries, and it will not come out of books, and it will not come out of intelligent, good people talking to you. It'll come out of you feeling in your gut the horrible injustice that's involved in these processes, of feeling in your gut that anger that moves history. But history is not made by empathy, and history is not made by compassion. History is made by organized anger. And why should most Americans not be angry? Because they have a fucking good life. Twenty, thirty percent of this country has a shitty life. Karl Marx would turn over in his grave if he saw how most Americans lived. And the vast majority of people in the world would forgive us all the other crimes and love to be over here. So what happens is not so much a political as a psychological and cultural phenomenon. People become not only accustomed and used to the good life, they spend a great deal of energy expanding it. They have two bathrooms, three bathrooms. The basement's unfinished, shit, grandma might come next year. Finish the fucking basement. The car's making funny noises, buy another car. Not a regular car. Be a progressive. Buy one of those hybrids that burns two kinds of oil and will even run on piss sometime in the future. I've had this happen to me. It's not a bad person who does it. A good person is doing this, and feels a little less guilty for poisoning the atmosphere and killing the world. And by the way, I just want to say a few words on that. Everything we talk about, war and peace and justice, all of that is secondary to the fact that this planet is very quickly coming to a point of damaging its worse predators. No animal on this face of the Earth is as predatory as human beings. We are not only predators to other animals, no other animal is as predatory to its own kind. We, the human race, were capable, not too long ago, of killing 60 million of each other under the worst of possible conditions. And the planet is

revolting. It's trying to tell us that we're close to the point of irreversibility, let alone the best we can do is stop or still the process. But we have to give up something to do that. Something much more than increasing the mileage on our Honda.

For me, it comes down to teaching young people that a life devoted only to improving my material pollutions and my wealth and my standards in this society is not a fully lived life. It isn't. And I try to teach that to young people, and for the last thirty years, it's basically what I've done. Even when I was teaching at UCLA or whatever, I was telling young people there was a better way to live. And there is. There is. And I'm fortunate because I learned to live in such a way that I'm not just saying it. I live it. I call my life the Freedom Train. What do I mean by that? The Freedom Train had no final stop. It's forever. The search for additional human freedom is forever, but being a train, it has places where it's hard to get up because it runs into a big mountain. Occasionally it gets derailed. But more or less but certainly, eventually, that train moves forward. And I view myself as being on the Freedom Train. And there's all kinds of passengers on the Freedom Train. There are passengers when the train runs into difficulty. They get out and they take a taxi, politically speaking. There are other passengers who get out. They want to lighten the load so the train can make it. So they'll take the load off by getting off the train and walking, but some of us on that fucking train will get out and push that fucking train until it gets to the top of the hill, and then get back in and continue with the ride. That's the real activist. And what makes such a person? I'll say it in a few words. Activism is not a sacrifice. If it becomes a sacrifice, get out of it. To me, being a radical human is to be a person who is concerned with the world in which he lives, recognizes a great deal of inhumanity in this world, has decided to do something about it, but it's not enough to go about it, what I would call, by little increments. They're important. They're certainly not unimportant. But really believe that some fundamental revision of society would be necessary to deal with peace as opposed to war, human cooperation as opposed to exploitation.

**Martin Espada:** Abe Osheroff, with characteristic honesty, wonders aloud if the fight can ever be won. "We fought the Good Fight," he says. "And we lost." And yet, I received a letter from Abe less than a month ago, saying, 'I am still in the good fight, even in a wheelchair.' I have also heard him say that we do not fight the good fight because we know the fight will be won. We fight the good fight because it is the right thing to do. Our lives will be immeasurably richer for it. We are driven to create a record of human suffering and resistance to suffering without the luxury of measuring our impact on the world, which cannot be weighed, measured, or otherwise quantified. We do not write such poems because we necessarily believe that our side will win and the conditions will change. We write them because there is an ethical compulsion to do so.

**Osheroff:** You spend your lifetime trying to have some decent influence over other human beings. Do you have moments when you just say, what the hell am I doing?

**Galeano:** It was the definition of utopia that a friend gave me once in Colombia when we were speaking to students in Colombia. One of the students asked him, Fernando Vivre, the cinema and movie director: 'What do you think about utopia? What is utopia? Is it useful?' Useful for what? And then Fernando said that utopia is in the horizon. And he

said, I walk and walk and walk, and the horizon is far away and far away and far away. And that's when I say keep moving. The horizon also moves. And I know, I perfectly know, that I will never reach it. Never. So you asked me is utopia useful. Useful for what? What's the sense of it? If I never get it. The horizon will always be far away. But that's why it's useful for walking. "I don't travel because I want to arrive. I travel because I love to go." And you are going, even if you have difficulties now to walk physically. As soon as we may speak without words, we may also walk without legs. I'm sure you walk a lot. It was such a pleasure. I am so happy.

**Text on screen:** Hommage aux defenseurs de la liberte! (Tribute to defenders of freedom!)

**Osheroff:** I think that it's important to dissent every chance you get. Even if you're wrong, try it out. And the reason I feel that way is that real intellectual growth never takes place simply out of agreement, or you're telling me something I accept. Real intelligent growth when people have differences. Dissent and respect each other's differences listen and take out of it what they think is meaningful, truth, and there's not enough of that in our political life. I don't say that I'm always very good at it. I lose my temper. I do. But less and less as I grow older. And it's not because of lack of energy, it's because I understand a little better. I used not to listen when I was young. And you don't grow if you don't listen. You don't grow no matter how many good things you say. You don't grow. You only give out what you are or where you are. I can only grow if you nourish me, if I allow you to nourish me, but for you to nourish me, I have to listen to you.

**Text on Screen:**

...at a very early age I learned that solidarity is love in action.  
– Abe Osheroff

**Text on Screen:** Abe Osheroff passed away on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

[END]