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Reviewers of this book have raised many concerns about this proposal for creating a good society. Before addressing these concerns, let me first summarize the main points made in this book.

SUMMARY

In **Chapter 1**, I described how my personal experience as a progressive activist and my study of historical social change campaigns led me to believe it is possible to create a

truly good society. I argued that people are sufficiently intelligent and humane to live in a good society and that there are enough resources to support one. I further asserted that there are viable solutions to all of society's worst problems and backed up this assertion with a list of several seemingly impossible problems that actually have solutions. This chapter also listed some important factors that increase the chances for successfully creating a good society:

- Most people have experienced a bit of a good society.
- Most people want a good society — we are all on the same side.
- Most people agree about the basic elements of a good society.
- Most of the time, most people are civil.
- Most people act as well as they can.
- Society has improved in some important ways over the centuries.
- Movements for progressive social change are viable and powerful.
- Many people now work hard to create a good society.
- Even more people *want* to work to create a good society.

Chapter 2 described the basic elements I believe must be part of a good society. Built on the foundation of the Golden Rule, these include:

- Rudimentary democratic consent — Everyone must at least passively endorse the society; otherwise, it is oppressive.
- Universal access to human essentials (air, water, food, protection from harsh weather, and safety from harm).

- Access to at least some other desirable items (such as good housing, running water, electric lights, meaningful work, fulfilling relationships, bicycles, computers, health care) and some luxuries.
- Freedom and liberty — Everyone is protected from oppression and can do what they want as long as it does not infringe on others.
- Equity and fairness — Everyone has equal opportunity and roughly equal access to societal resources.
- Environmental sustainability — Society is in consonance with the natural environment.
- There is balance between conflicting wants and needs.

This chapter also described some additional elements that would characterize a good society:

- Humane and compassionate
- Democratic and responsible
- Tolerant and wise
- Fun

Chapter 3 described the five main obstacles that stand in the way of creating a good society:

1. Adverse power structure — Society's institutions and structures entice and coerce everyone into acting to perpetuate these institutions and social structures and to resist progressive change.
2. Destructive cultural conditioning — Outmoded or harmful traditions, customs, religious practices, prejudices, and advertising images impede progressive change.
3. Dysfunctional emotional conditioning — Emotional traumas condition people to act in rigid and dysfunctional ways (irrational behavior, inhibitions, compulsions, phobias, addictions, depression, low self-esteem, et cetera).
4. Widespread ignorance — Most people have a limited understanding of the workings of society. Few people know about progressive ideals or change methods.
5. Scarcity of progressive resources — Most progressive activists are financially poor and receive meager personal support.

Chapter 4 briefly evaluated various historical strategies for overcoming these obstacles and transforming society: violent revolution, historical materialism, a vanguard party, countercultural transformation, alternative institutions, mass advertising, technological advances, conventional electoral politics, mass social movements, and incremental change. Learning from their limitations and failures, I then compiled a list of eight crucial characteristics of fundamental change efforts. To be both progressive and effective, these efforts must be:

- Powerful and inspiring enough to overcome strong opposition.
- Focused on broad, fundamental, and enduring change (to transform individuals, institutions, and the

culture enough that they do not revert to the old ways).

- Reliant on ordinary people (since the elite usually will not help).
- Democratic and responsive — not dictatorial.
- Focused on ending systemic oppression, not toppling individual oppressors (since anyone has the potential to become an oppressor).
- Nonviolent — not oppressive or destructive.
- Moral, principled, true to ideals, with means in harmony with the ends (so efforts do not go astray).
- Direct and personal (so they can deeply touch and transform people).

Based on this analysis, I argued that the only viable way to bring about fundamental progressive change is to educate and liberate the imagination of every person in society so that everyone can collectively and democratically choose to create a good society. To transform all of society also requires powerful social change movements capable of challenging entrenched power.

I then asserted that an effective strategy should be based on mass education and social change movements and include these six essential components:

1. Clear conceptions of progressive change including
 - A clear vision of a good society
 - A comprehensive and feasible strategy for change
2. Widespread education in which people can
 - Learn how society actually functions
 - Learn to practice democracy and cooperation
 - Learn to overcome destructive cultural conditioning
 - Learn to change society
3. Widespread emotional therapy
4. A supportive community for progressive activists
5. Large numbers of progressive activists working simultaneously for change
6. Concerted change efforts continuing for many years

Chapter 5 described a four-stage strategic program for creating a good society that incorporates these characteristics and components. Progressive activists would:

1. Lay the groundwork
 - A. Find other progressive activists
 - B. Educate themselves — learn how human affairs are currently organized and other ways they might be organized
 - C. Learn and practice change skills and overcome destructive and dysfunctional conditioning
 - D. Form supportive communities with other people of goodwill
2. Gather support
 - A. Raise others' awareness about the possibility of creating a good society and the means to do it
 - B. Build powerful political and social organizations

3. Struggle for power
 - A. Vigorously challenge the power structure and destructive cultural norms through conventional political and legal methods
 - B. Illuminate domination and oppression using various methods of nonviolent action
 - C. Resist oppression using nonviolent action
 - D. Develop appealing alternative institutions based on progressive ideals
4. Diffuse change throughout all of society

This chapter further argued that this program could best be carried out with a democratic, bottom-up change movement structure in which a small number of dedicated activists would personally inform, support, and inspire a larger number of steadfast activists. These activists would, in turn, inform, support, and inspire a much larger number of progressive advocates. Together, these activists and advocates would inform, persuade, and inspire everyone in society.

In this model, the most skilled and experienced activists would constitute a stable and reliable core. These experienced activists could support other activists, broaden their understanding of society, suggest innovative and effective ways to tackle difficult problems, and continue doing tedious or grueling work when other activists strayed or faltered. This would help to ensure that progressive organizations would grow and prosper, not go off course, stagnate, or erupt in infighting.

This chapter concluded by explaining the dynamics of nonviolent struggle, since nonviolent action would play a crucial role in the project and is often misunderstood.

To begin to implement this four-stage strategic program and the bottom-up activist structure, I proposed the Vernal Education Project in **Chapter 6** (and **Appendix B**). This project would establish fifty Vernal centers around the United States that would provide education and support for a large number of dedicated progressive activists.

Designed to be practical and inexpensive, the yearlong Vernal education program would consist of these main components:

- Student-run study groups
- Internships with existing social change organizations
- Independent social change work
- A small amount of social service work
- Self-study of current affairs
- A series of five ten-day-long, staffmember-facilitated workshops
- Student-run emotional support groups or individual therapy
- Social events that enable students to connect with each other

This program would offer activists a chance to experience and learn direct democracy, cooperation, emotional therapy, personal support, and a variety of social change methods while building strong bonds with other nearby

activists. Students in this program would be encouraged to work for fundamental progressive change at least twenty hours per week for seven years after they graduated.

If the Vernal Project proceeded as described, after about a twenty-five year period of development and growth, the fifty Vernal centers would be providing a quality education covering the basics of fundamental social change to six thousand students every year.

Chapter 7 (and **Appendix C**) showed how this education project could greatly bolster and support progressive change organizations. Based on reasonable assumptions about the growth of the project and the number of activists who might participate, I determined that after twenty-five years there would be 25,000 graduates of the education program working at least twenty hours per week for fundamental change. There would also be 150,000 other steadfast activists working at least three hours per week and an additional 900,000 progressive advocates working a few hours per week. Together, they would constitute an unprecedented force of over one million progressive proponents.

This many activists — most of whom would have much greater knowledge and skill than activists today — could generate an effort perhaps three or four times more powerful than current efforts for fundamental change. Dispersed all across the country, they could create an immense and sustainable movement for progressive change.

Chapter 8 told Melissa's story to illustrate the various ways the Vernal Education Project could inform, support, and inspire activists.

Chapter 9 (and **Appendix C**) first described the unique dynamics of social change and then showed how the Vernal Education Project could affect those dynamics and actually bring about fundamental transformation of society over eighty years.

Graduates of the education program — working with and supporting hundreds of thousands of other progressive activists — would build communities in which they could support each other and learn to work together cooperatively. They would build alternative institutions based on progressive values as well as nonviolently challenge institutions and cultural norms that stood in the way of creating a good society. By struggling steadfastly for decades, I predicted they could influence most people in the United States to adopt a more progressive perspective and help them to become more responsible and active citizens.

After about fifty years of sustained struggle — with a majority of the public favoring fundamental progressive change — transforming society would then begin to be easier. The change process would accelerate and could be largely completed in just thirty more years.

Chapter 10 laid out a timeline for implementing the Vernal Education Project, especially the tasks required to

launch it and carry it through the first five years. I concluded that the project could begin once a large number of activists expressed interest in and support for the project and three initiators — who were willing and able to launch the project — have come together.

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

Reviewers of this proposal have questioned both its premises and its viability. Below are some of their concerns and my responses.

Is It Possible to Create a Good Society?

IT SEEMS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

Your good society sounds like some kind of unreachable fairyland. Are you trying to create a perfect world?

No matter how wonderful society might eventually be, I am sure there will always be many problems. Human beings will continue to be born with physical deformities. People will still get sick, have accidents, and incur injuries. Lightning will continue to strike, floods will inundate us, earthquakes will shake us, and tornadoes and hurricanes will ravage us. Moreover, people will continue to make mistakes and accidentally hurt others. They will also continue to disagree and get angry at each other. Even if people could act their best, we will still invariably hurt one another. I do not believe there is any way to abolish these aspects of life and achieve perfection. If we ever could, our lives would probably be very boring.

However, I believe our society could be vastly better than it is now. Some people routinely act in caring, cooperative, and responsible ways that nourish those around them and promote a supportive society. If most people behaved this way instead of just a few, our society would be tremendously better. Gone would be most of the current strife and repression of human spirit. Without all this human-imposed suffering, I believe joy and a sense of solidarity with others could be as common as hopelessness and alienation are now.

In the long run, men hit only what they aim at... they'd better aim at something high.

— Henry David Thoreau

IS PERFECTION REQUIRED?

In your good society don't you assume that everyone would be perfect?

I assume only that most people would be in reasonably good psychological shape — as emotionally healthy and capable as many people are now. People could still make mistakes, and they could still occa-

Aim for excellence, not perfection. — Proverb

sionally be irrational and hateful. However, I assume that most people would be rational and compassionate most of the time. I assume they would be able to rebound from depression or hurt quickly in the same way many people can now.

MUST PEOPLE CHANGE THEIR PERSONALITIES?

How do you expect to change people's personalities?

I do not believe that people have rigid, unchangeable personalities. My own feelings and reactions change drastically from day to day depending on the situation in which I find myself. When surrounded by gentle, loving people, my tender side comes out. When attacked, hurt, or stifled, I am more defensive and surly. When I walk in the woods on a beautiful day, watch a heart-touching movie, or have a good cry with a loving friend, my heart opens with joy and compassion. When threatened by authorities, thwarted by obstinate bureaucracy, scorned by friends, or impeded by poorly designed technology, I usually become angry or withdrawn. Encouragement boosts my intelligence and creativity. Ridicule lowers my responsiveness and self-esteem. I assume that circumstances affect other people in these same ways. If so, then a good, compassionate society would bring out the best in all of us and make it much easier to create and maintain a good society.

I also assume people would be more capable and compassionate if they were not raised in poverty, pushed around by alcoholic parents, sexually abused, raped, or battered by adults, taunted and humiliated by their peers, forced to go to war by the government, and in other ways traumatized as they grow up. I further assume that caring support and good emotional therapy would help them to become less neurotic and more resilient.

Is Democracy Possible and Desirable?

IS DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING POSSIBLE IN A LARGE SOCIETY?

Is it really possible to practice participatory democracy in a large society? How could we make cooperative decisions among millions of people?

We have only begun to use the knowledge and technology developed over the last few centuries that should make widespread democracy much more viable. At the time of the American Revolution, large distances and slow travel made direct face-to-face decision-making impossible for the large and dispersed U.S. population. At that time, electing a representative who could go to the capital and fashion legislation with other representatives by majority vote seemed like the best democratic process possible. The founders of this country presumed that people would elect wise men who would, in good faith, represent them. Now, two hundred years later, it is easy to see the limitations of this system: advertising, money, and hype distort both the electoral and legislative processes. Even the worthiest representatives

are flawed human beings, subject to the lure of power, wealth, and fame. They often act on their own behalf or that of their sponsors, not on behalf of the common good.

However, we now have available to us incredibly powerful communication technologies — including telephones, mass-distribution newspapers, radio, television, email and the Internet — that allow us to communicate with people all over the world. If these technologies were used to convey solid information and to allow citizens to exchange opinions, then everyone could be far better informed. Moreover, if everyone knew the basics of cooperative discussion (speaking clearly and succinctly, listening carefully, summarizing agreements and disagreements, and synthesizing solutions), people could work together more effectively to fashion consensual agreements.

As I envision it, a good democratic process would be based on small discussion and decision groups. People would meet face-to-face with people who lived nearby to make all decisions affecting their local group. They would also appoint one or two representatives who would attend neighborhood-wide council meetings and ratify decisions on neighborhood issues. These representatives would be held strictly accountable to the will of their local group: they could only agree to measures that their local group endorsed. If a proposal at a neighborhood council meeting were not endorsed by every representative of every local group, then the representatives would formulate new proposals that each representative would then take back to her local group for more discussion and approval. Discussion of proposals would shift back and forth between local groups and the neighborhood council until all of the local groups consented to a final proposal.

In a similar manner, representatives from the neighborhood councils — who were similarly held accountable to the neighborhood councils — would make community-wide decisions in community councils. Councils of representatives at the city, region, nation, and world level would make decisions in the same fashion. Such a tiered decision-making process would enable everyone in society to have control over all decisions that affected them with a minimum of hierarchy and bureaucracy.¹

This process could only work if there were effective means for discussing proposals, making cooperative decisions, and resolving conflicts, and only if everyone were skilled in using these techniques. Fortunately, great advances have been made in the fields of interpersonal communication, mediation, conflict resolution, and cooperative decision-making. Currently, few people know these techniques, but in a good society, I imagine that everyone would learn them in grade school and would be adept at using them by the time they reached adulthood.

IS THERE ENOUGH TIME FOR REAL DEMOCRACY?

How would people find the time to learn about a variety of issues, discuss them with others, and make good societal decisions?

Currently, many of society's resources are devoted to producing unimportant (sometimes totally useless) consumer items and then advertising them enough to attract buyers. In a good society, I expect we could eliminate most of this waste. This would free up vast resources of time and effort.²

In addition, in our current society, much effort is devoted to determining who is entitled to own goods or property and who is entitled to receive services. Additional effort is devoted to enforcing these property rules. Much of the banking, insurance, and real estate industries is devoted to these tasks as well as much of the judiciary system, prison system, police, military, and private security firms. In a good society in which everyone had all her basic needs met and no one owned much more than anyone else, these tasks would require far less effort and far fewer resources.

Moreover, I expect that in a good society there would be no idle rich people and no unemployed poor people. Every able-bodied person would work throughout her life. In such a fully employed society, people would be able to work fewer hours each week than they do now. Consequently, they would have more time for childrearing, visiting with friends, and engaging in civic affairs.

I also expect that in a good society civic responsibilities would be more evenly distributed. Right now, only business managers and government officials spend much time making decisions, and they often spend all their working time attending meetings and making far-reaching decisions. Most ordinary people — overworked and disempowered — spend little time on management or civic affairs. Instead, they spend their free time entertaining themselves and trying to recover from the stress of their jobs. In a good society, I expect no one would spend all her time making societal decisions and everyone would spend some time doing so.

Moreover, decision-making would probably be a lot easier than now. Currently, many issues are raised only to inflame people so they will support particular politicians or endorse particular measures that enrich a special interest group. In a good society in which everyone had her basic needs met and in which the culture encouraged frugality, sharing, and cooperation, there would probably be much less of this needless wrangling. People would strive to find mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts, not constantly bludgeon their opponents. Better decisions would be made with more input from more people. Once a decision was made, it would probably not have to be revisited for a long time.

*It won't work. We know
because we haven't tried it.*
— English Proverb

WOULD PEOPLE WANT TO SPEND TIME ON SOCIETAL DECISION-MAKING?

Would people want to spend so much time on decision-making? Wouldn't some people decline to participate?

Most people currently find civic affairs boring or trifling. However, in a good society in which people made important decisions, they would likely have much greater interest. The process could also be a lot more fun. Decision-making would give people a chance to interact with their neighbors, to work toward meaningful goals that directly affected their lives, and to develop creative solutions. If practiced well, I imagine decision-making could be as enjoyable as sporting events. Certainly, the results would be much more meaningful to everyone involved. Still, some people would probably decline to participate. This would be fine; no one would be forced to participate.

Are the Five Obstacles Enumerated the Real Obstacles to Positive Change?

WHAT ABOUT OTHER OBSTACLES?

Philosophers and activists have posed many other obstacles to positive change. In your list of the five main obstacles, why don't you include obstacles like people's stupidity or their fear of change?

The dumb things that people do are amazing. However, foolishness is not limited to certain people: we all make mistakes and act stupidly at times. Unquestionably, this does hinder positive change, but I do not see this as a major obstacle.

Human beings have incredible intellectual abilities, and most of the time we think remarkably well. In a good society, people would be squelched much less than they currently are, so I expect even more of everyone's intellectual capacity would be available. Overall, I believe we are smart enough to create a good society.

Clearly, some people are *more* skilled at thinking about issues or solving problems than others just as some are more physically or musically adept than others. But when people want to work together cooperatively, these differences *enhance* the process. In a cooperative atmosphere, those people who have less knowledge or understanding turn to those with more knowledge or understanding for guidance. In a cooperative group, when someone is able to come up with a good solution, everyone is happy to endorse it.

A cooperative society would draw on those who can easily perform mathematical calculations when that is required, and it would draw on those who can make music when that is desired. A cooperative society would thus function at the level of the smartest and most skilled rather than sinking to the lowest common denominator.

There are many other obstacles — like hopelessness and fear of change — that I see as subsets or combinations of the five main obstacles I described. In choosing obstacles, I tried

to choose ones that were broad enough to encompass every other obstacle and that did not overlap with each other. I believe these five cover all the significant obstacles to positive, fundamental change.

IS THE POWER ELITE MONOLITHIC?

Is the opposition from the "power elite" a single unified force?

Members of the power elite are not monolithic in their composition or perspective, but the interests of the elite frequently overlap and their efforts often coalesce. There is not a secret conspiracy, but there is a confluence of affluent and powerful interests who find it to their advantage to cooperate in such efforts as restricting government regulation and lowering taxes for the wealthy. These interests are centered in the corporate community and the social upper class. Institutions like the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Enterprise Institute, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Bohemian Club help to solidify the perspective and culture of the elite and align their actions.

One sign of widespread agreement among members of the elite is that seldom does anyone in any position of wealth or power criticize capitalism, competition, property rights, wealth accumulation, or U.S. military domination of other countries (protecting "our national interests"). Most members of the elite agree on these important, fundamental tenets. Their disagreements usually involve only the details of when and how to apply these basic principles.

ARE SOME CULTURES BETTER THAN OTHERS?

Do you assume that some cultures are better than others? How do you decide which ones are better?

I do not assume that any particular culture is bad or that any culture is better than another. I suspect every culture has dysfunctional and destructive aspects, as well as useful and empowering parts. For example, the perfectionism that I got from my German and English ancestors has some positive aspects, but it mostly makes me feel like I am worthless unless I do everything perfectly — which is not particularly useful. I hope that we can develop a variety of interacting cultures that draw on the best of all current cultures but have fewer destructive and dysfunctional parts.

As a social change strategy, I think it is generally best to let people criticize their own culture rather than attacking others' cultures. Most people are defensive about their culture and do not want other people to criticize it publicly. Moreover, people often already know the parts of their culture that are irrational and oppressive since they have been bludgeoned by them all their lives. When I find it necessary to criticize someone's culture, I try to put the

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. — Paulo Freire

criticism in a constructive context by listing the positive as well as negative aspects of their culture as well as my own.

WHAT KNOWLEDGE IS ESSENTIAL?

There are many kinds of knowledge. Who is ignorant and of what are they ignorant?

For a good society to exist and persist, I believe people need to know how to practice democracy and cooperate with each other. They also must know how to overcome their dysfunctional cultural and emotional conditioning. Moreover, a large number of people (progressive activists and advocates) must know how to change society in a positive way. Parents and those who work with young people must know positive childrearing practices.

It would be useful if everyone were knowledgeable about nature, technology, psychology, sociology, history, culture, art, and all the other fields of knowledge, too, but this is not essential.

Is This the Right Strategy for Change?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “FUNDAMENTAL PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL CHANGE”?

What do you mean by the term “fundamental progressive social change”?

By “fundamental,” I mean getting to the root of problems and completely changing whatever needs to be changed to create a good society. “Progressive social change” means any activity that moves positively toward a good society. Figure 4.2 lists several behaviors and attitudes I consider progressive.

It is difficult to write about fundamental progressive social change because all the conventional terminology is either vacuous and unclear or suggestive of practices I do not endorse. I have chosen words that I think best convey what I mean and do not carry too much extraneous baggage. I have also tried to use simple, straightforward language whenever possible. Still, many people inevitably misunderstand or misinterpret these terms.

We are getting into semantics again. If we use words, there is a very grave danger they will be misinterpreted. — Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman testifying in his own defense at the Watergate hearings

WHY ARE PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISTS NEEDED?

Why do we need activists to create a good society? Why isn't the current system of private business and representational government with two parties adequate to create a good society? Shouldn't we leave the job of helping the unfortunate to churches and social service agencies?

Our current society is based on narrow self-interest and fierce competition. It sets up an endless succession of win-lose contests. Our educational system encourages individu-

alism and callous rivalry. Business is based on furious, cold-hearted competition. Any business that does not play brutally enough risks losing to others that do. Moreover, the whole economic system is structured so there will always be unemployment and unmet consumer needs (scarcity).

The American system of ours, call it Americanism, call it Capitalism, call it what you like, gives each and every one of us a great opportunity if we only seize it with both hands and make the most of it. — Al Capone, American gangster

As a natural consequence of this competitive and savage environment, many people — usually those beset by accident, illness, disability, physical or emotional battering, or just bad luck — end up losing one or more of these contests. Those who lose many rounds of this pernicious game usually fall so far behind that they (and their descendants) continue to lose in every future round. Even those who win can never rest since there is always the danger that someone stronger, prettier, smarter, shrewder, healthier, luckier, or more brutal will surpass them.

Our society also encourages winners to blame those who have been defeated — self-righteously calling them stupid or lazy. Moreover, our society sanctions the use of bullying to force losers to accept their miserable fate.

Such harsh institutions and such a callous culture cannot possibly produce a good society of toleration, compassion, fairness, equity, balance, democracy, and joy. At best, good-hearted individuals and church groups can alleviate some of the worst suffering created by this system, but they cannot end the misery if they only focus on helping individual victims.

Government could provide more support for those who have lost these battles and it could work toward establishing fairer competition. It could even change societal institutions to downplay competition and support compassionate alternatives. However, since the winners control government, government generally works to perpetuate competition and usually takes the winners' side.

The problem is structural and institutional. It involves the essence of our economic, political, and social systems. It can only be solved by totally transforming all aspects of our society — replacing the underlying ideology of greed and competition with one of compassion and mutual support, and replacing inhumane institutions with compassionate alternatives. The current structures are inadequate to accomplish this task.

ARE ACTIVISTS THE ONLY ONES WHO CREATE A GOOD SOCIETY?

Is it only “activists” who will create a good society? What about schoolteachers, ministers, social workers, planners, architects, nurses, doctors, hairdressers, and grocery store clerks? Is it only when we explicitly call ourselves “activists” and work outside existing institutions that we contribute to a good society?

Activists are people who *actively* work to create a good society. Hence, by definition, they are the ones who will create a good society. I consider anyone of goodwill who works toward a good society to be an “activist” whether they consider themselves one or not.

In this book, I focus particularly on those who work steadfastly for fundamental, comprehensive progressive change at least a few hours each week (labeled in this book as steadfast activists and progressive advocates) because they take a leading role — they are more involved and more progressive than other activists. I hope we can greatly increase their skills and increase their numbers to more than a million. Nevertheless, in a society of several hundred million adults, these million activists cannot transform society unless they are working in conjunction with many more less-involved activists who each do their own small part. Still, if all people just live their everyday lives and only promote a good society through their normal work and relationships, then I do not believe we will have the strength to overcome the obstacles and create a good society.

WHY ARE SO MANY ACTIVISTS REQUIRED?

Is it really necessary to educate and organize so many activists?

There are people with wealth and in positions of authority who currently have a vast array of powerful means to coerce or threaten anyone who tries to change society. Most of the gigantic institutions that dominate our society also have built-in mechanisms for perpetuating themselves and for preventing significant change. Our culture, including its destructive aspects, also perpetuates itself. Moreover, each of us has a multitude of internalized hurts and fears that stifle us and limit our ability even to see what is happening.

Effectively challenging the power elite, the institutions they control, and everyone’s cultural and emotional conditioning requires an extremely strong counterforce. To keep this counterforce from getting out of hand and itself becoming oppressive, it must be widely dispersed and of a relatively benign nature.

For these reasons, I believe we need a large and broad movement of activists supported by the vast majority of the adult population. Since most people do not have the skills, knowledge, or desire to participate in this movement, there must be a smaller number of activists who deliberately devote time and energy to create this movement and generate interest in it. These activists must carry out a large-scale, sustained campaign to inform and inspire millions of people

to understanding and action. Likely, they will not have the money, prestige, or authority to carry out this campaign using conventional means (national advertising, massive news coverage, televised publicity stunts, celebrity endorsements, slick teacher packets, research grants to university professors, grants to social service agencies, and so on). Instead, they must rely on their own personal integrity, their large numbers, and their resolute efforts to persuade other people, one by one.

To reach a majority of the people in a country the size of the United States using direct face-to-face methods requires a very large number of activists — I assume one for every 200 adults or so. This means there must be around a million progressive activists in the United States, each working for change at least a few hours every week.

DOES IT MAKE SENSE TO ACT WITHOUT GREATER UNDERSTANDING?

There are many ways to think about our world and society. People have proposed many ways of solving our problems. By choosing a particular orientation and a particular solution, aren’t you excluding other possibilities? How do you know this is the right strategy? Does it make sense to choose one strategy and act on it without greater understanding?

The world is certainly multifaceted and complex. No perspective can ever be completely correct. Being open to multiple perspectives is essential if we are to avoid falling into an ideological rut. There is always a danger of believing one perspective too single-mindedly and consequently making terrible errors.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, there is always the danger of being so open to multiple perspectives that we can never make a decision or act. Paralysis of analysis can relegate us to the sidelines. Then, by doing little or nothing, we unwittingly support the status quo.

I believe we have enough understanding to act. Certainly, we will make mistakes, but if we do our best to stay true to our ideals, our worst mistakes will be minor compared to the horrors of current oppression, destruction, and war.

Like a surgeon, we must be careful not to harm the patient by intruding needlessly. Nevertheless, if the patient is severely ill, then we must operate, even if surgery is risky. We must be as careful as possible, but we must proceed.

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

— Edmund Burke

WHY AN EDUCATION PROGRAM?

The Vernal Project would require a large amount of time and effort — most of it devoted to education, not action. Wouldn’t it be better to use these resources to support activists in their efforts to bring about change?

My experience working in a variety of change campaigns has convinced me we need to find a better way to bring about fundamental social change. Too much of our current

efforts are devoted to struggling with each other (infighting) and pursuing ineffective strategies. This wastes much of our effort and drives away many people who might support us. It saps the strength and energy we need to succeed.

I believe the time and effort required by the Vernal Education Project is worth the cost. By greatly increasing the knowledge, skill, and endurance of activists, I think it would generate far more useful effort, over the long run, than it would consume.

Today the world is the victim of propaganda because people are not intellectually competent. More than anything, the United States needs effective citizens competent to do their own thinking.

— William Mather Lewis

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BRING ABOUT FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE WITHOUT A FIGHT?

Most strategies for progressive change have called for armed struggle. But the Vernal Project focuses mostly on supporting, educating, and inspiring people, not on struggle. Is it possible to bring about fundamental change without a fight?

As I envision it, the Vernal Education Project would involve a great deal of struggle with those who stand in the way of positive change (the power structure). It would also involve a great deal of struggle to overcome destructive cultural norms and dysfunctional emotional conditioning. I see a fierce fight, sometimes dangerous and intense, spanning eighty or more years and extending into every realm of society. Some people will probably die and many more will be injured physically, mentally, and spiritually. I do not see any way around this.

However, if this battle is to lead to a good society, it must proceed in certain ways. Democracy, wisdom, and compassion typically fare poorly in savage wars. Civilians are massacred and truth vanquished. Repression, bigotry, and hatred typically do much better — often thriving — in such an environment, and they end up winning out in the end.

Therefore, we must find a way to exert massive power without undercutting our own efforts and ultimately undermining our victory. We must fight in a way that is effective, but does not destroy the things we are fighting for: truth, freedom, fairness, compassion, sustainability, tolerance, balance, and joy. To do this, activists must have the knowledge and skill to employ suitable methods in useful ways at appropriate times. The Vernal Education Program would offer this essential information to activists.

Even if we are very skilled, it seems impossible for us to bring about massive change against a deeply entrenched opposition without them causing devastating destruction. Fortunately, there are many nonviolent techniques that actually undermine our opponents in a way that restrains their response. We may also be able to outflank our opponents by educating large numbers of people, inspiring them to their best behavior, and supporting them as they shift

their support from conventional institutions to alternative institutions. When large numbers of people withdraw their support from our opponents, the strength of our opponents diminishes, reducing their ability to fight back, and therefore rendering them less dangerous.

ARE THESE THE CORRECT METHODS?

The Vernal Project relies heavily on education, nonviolent struggle, emotional therapy, and consensus decision-making. These tactics have their limitations, and they have often been used poorly and abused. Are you sure these are the best methods?

Education, nonviolent struggle, emotional therapy, and consensus decision-making are certainly not perfect methods of change. Still, they are usually benign and generally better than most other methods. If practiced well, they prevent activists from making too many grievous mistakes. Each of these processes encourages understanding, dissent, questioning, and challenge. They build people up so that they can speak their minds clearly and forcefully against oppression. They also promote honest interaction and compassionate embrace of other people.

There are two ways for me to win an argument: I can convince my opponents that I am right. Or they can convince me they are right; then when I adopt their perspective, I also become right.

Even when these methods fall short of ideals, I think they have much more potential than hierarchical authority processes or processes based solely on tradition. Such processes have aspects that squelch dissent and questioning, so they are more likely to lead to groupthink and self-righteous oppression of others.

There are still other processes — bargaining, mediation, ministering, prayer, meditation, and so on — that have potential for moving toward a good society, and I do not oppose them when they do. However, I am more wary of these processes since they do not necessarily steer people toward boldness, honesty, openness, questioning, dissent, and compassion.

WHAT KIND OF EMOTIONAL COUNSELING DO YOU ADVOCATE?

To improve their emotional health, do you recommend that people should talk about their childhoods and how bad they feel? If people are happier when they talk about making music, why not help them set up their lives so they make more music instead?

I believe people can overcome their emotional obstacles in many ways. When I am depressed, confused, or emotionally stuck, I typically do the following things:

- Listen to music
- Sing, whistle, or play music
- Go for a hike or a bicycle ride
- Exercise or stretch

- Read a good book
- Go to a movie
- Go for a drive in the countryside
- Get a massage
- Talk to my friends
- Help someone out
- Ask someone to help me out
- Write in my journal
- Write a political treatise
- Have an intense political discussion with someone
- Work on an exciting project
- Make love with my partner
- Go to a therapist who can help me see a perspective I do not already have
- Think positive thoughts about better ways to act and then try to act that way
- Feel sorry for myself, then get angry and decide to fight back
- Cry or laugh intensely

Other people often do the following things (which I usually do not do):

- Watch TV
- Go to a party and dance
- Drink alcohol or take mind-altering drugs
- Play card games, board games, or video games
- Engage in competitive sports like basketball, golf, or bowling
- Watch other people play sports (on television or directly)
- Go to a store and shop
- Work in a garden
- Drive fast, skydive, river raft, etc. (engage in a mind-absorbing activity)
- Attend church
- Pray
- Gamble
- Take anti-depressant drugs
- Yell at someone, start a fight, attack someone

As far as I can tell, all of these activities help people deal with their emotional upsets and limitations to some extent. I am not opposed to any of them practiced in moderation (except the last one). Some of them are probably more efficient in helping get someone back on an even keel than others, and some of them can be destructive at times. Still, it differs for every person, so it is difficult to prescribe a single method.

When I counsel people, I try to encourage them to do what seems to work best for them. Sometimes I encourage them to be bolder. Sometimes I encourage them to be mellow. Sometimes I hold them and stroke their hair softly. Sometimes I challenge them. Usually, I try to see how they are hurt and where their limitations are, and then encourage them to overcome those limitations.

I do not care which kind of therapy or activity people use to overcome their emotional problems as long as the method they choose enables them to act intelligently and compassionately and it does not hurt anyone else.

WHAT ABOUT ACTIVISTS IN RURAL AREAS?

As described here, the fifty Vernal centers would be located in metropolitan areas and would generally only admit students who lived within a 75-mile radius of a center. What provision is there for activists who live in rural areas or in metropolitan areas other than these fifty?

In developing the idea of the Vernal Education Project, I felt it essential that activists learn in their own home environment. I also felt that to minimize resource costs, the Project could not have more than fifty centers. By putting centers in the largest metropolitan centers (and having them reach out to a few metropolitan areas that are not within 75 miles of a center), I found that they could accommodate about two-thirds of the U.S. population. I think this is about as good as can be hoped. Still, in this arrangement, one-third of the population would not have direct access to a Vernal center.

However, this does not mean that one-third of the country would have no progressive activists. I see the Vernal Project as a *supplement* to progressive change movements, not a replacement for them. There are now progressive activists in almost every city, town, and rural area in the United States, and I assume this would continue throughout the time of the Vernal Education Project. As I envision it, the Vernal Project would simply increase the number of skilled and experienced activists in these fifty metropolitan areas.

Moreover, just as now occurs, I expect that the efforts of Vernal activists would spill over into other areas. The news media would report positive, powerful change activities, and activists across the country would learn of these actions and duplicate them in their own communities. Natural migration would also lead many Vernal activists — and the steadfast activists and progressive advocates they support — to move to regions where there were no Vernal centers. They would bring their knowledge and expertise to their new communities.

Furthermore, I assume Vernal activists would not focus exclusively on their own communities. Since they would be interested in creating a good society, they would want progressive change to occur in all parts of the United States (and the world). I expect they would publish their strategy and skill papers on the Internet and distribute them to anyone who wanted them. Furthermore, I expect many of them would deliberately work to reach out to activists in the outlying areas around their centers. They might periodically travel to these areas and facilitate skill-training workshops for the activists there. They might also provide telephone or email consulting to activists in these outlying communities.

WON'T EXCLUDED ACTIVISTS BE RESENTFUL?

Won't those activists who do not live near a Vernal center be resentful? Won't some of them move to a city with a Vernal center so they can attend a Vernal Program?

Some activists may be discontent and move, but I hope they are not and do not. Activists are needed everywhere to bring about the transformation of society. If an activist moved close to a Vernal center and lived there for a year while attending a Vernal Program, her focus of attention and her connections would likely shift. There is a good chance she would not move back after graduating. Therefore, the community she moved away from would no longer benefit from her activist energy.

We fight not to enslave, but to set a country free, and to make room upon the earth for honest men to live in.

— Thomas Paine

To prevent this, I would expect that Vernal centers would generally be reluctant to accept applicants from outside their focus area. Instead, they would encourage Vernal graduates to facilitate educational workshops for activists in outlying areas.

I also hope that activists would understand why the Vernal Education Project was limited to fifty centers. I hope they would see that their change work in their own communities was more important than attending a Vernal Education Program.

WHY FOCUS ON ONE NATION?

Why do you focus on the nation-state of the United States? Why not the whole world or smaller areas like a single state or bioregion?

By focusing on the United States, I do not mean to imply that I accept the inviolability of the system of nation-states. If we were able to create a good society, political boundaries would likely decrease in importance. Nevertheless, they are currently very important. Crucial decisions regarding the military, tax policy, civil rights, and regulation of corporations are made on the federal level. These decisions often supersede local, state, and international decisions. People frequently move from place to place within the United States, but usually do not move outside its borders. So culturally, we are more alike than different.

Still, the world is changing. Transnational entities like multinational corporations, the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and NATO are becoming more important. Immigration, especially in California, Texas, and Florida, is significant. Over time, it will be increasingly important to address world issues.

However, for this project, it seemed prudent to choose an entity large enough to make a difference, but not so large that it was overwhelming. That is why I chose the United States as the focus of the Vernal Education Project.

WHY FOCUS ONLY ON THE UNITED STATES?

Why do you focus only on the United States? We live in a highly interdependent world. Multinational corporations go wherever labor is cheapest and wherever it is easiest to pollute and dispose of toxic wastes. The financial influence of countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela greatly affects the economic and political systems in the United States. Drugs from countries like Colombia and Cambodia also greatly affect us. We should be working with The Greens in Europe and working in solidarity with struggling movements for change in Central America, Eastern Europe, Africa, Australia, Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere.

I completely agree with these sentiments. It is essential for contemporary change movements to be aware of international issues and to work with other progressives around the world. I assume that Vernal-supported change movements would devote significant amounts of their energy toward changing conditions worldwide, just as many progressive movements do today.

As I stated in the Preface, I have focused on the United States not because I am xenophobic or parochial, but for these three reasons:

(1) This is my country, and I feel responsible for the way it works. It seems proper for me to work to clean up my home country before addressing the ills in other countries.

(2) I have lived here all my life. I understand this country much better than any other place. Immersed in this culture, I have some sense of how to change the United States. Any strategy or program I might develop for another country would likely have serious flaws.

(3) Fundamentally changing the United States would probably have more impact on the world than changing any other single country. The United States dominates the world militarily, economically, and culturally. Elite interests in the United States can and do impose their policies on most other countries. If the U.S. elite stopped dominating other countries, they could implement more programs that address the needs of their citizens instead of supporting "U.S. interests."

Also, please note that the Vernal Project is only an education and support project. The social change movements that Vernal graduates supported would probably focus on a wide variety of issues including U.S. foreign policy and economic trade with other countries. Many Vernal graduates would probably decide to travel overseas and work with groups like Doctors without Borders or Peace Brigades International at some point in their change careers.

WOULD THE VERNAL PROJECT GO INTERNATIONAL?

If the Vernal Project were successful in the United States, would it spread to other countries?

As I envision it, the Vernal Project is limited to fifty Vernal centers in the United States. However, once it grew to noticeable size in Phase 2, the *concept* of the Project would likely spread around the world. If the Project were

effective, I am sure that activists in other countries would replicate it in their own countries, adapting it as appropriate to fit their own cultures.

IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE TO ATTRACT SO MANY ACTIVISTS TO JOIN THE VERNAL PROJECT?

When the Vernal Project reaches full size, you expect 6,000 activists to attend the program every year. Is it reasonable to assume so many activists would be willing and able to attend?

It will not be a trivial task to attract 6,000 students every year, especially in the years before Vernal graduates have had much impact on society. This is a large number compared to current change efforts. However, this figure is comparable to the number of people entering the Peace Corps each year (about 4,000). If the Vernal Project is doing well, I expect staffmembers should be able to generate enough interest and excitement in the Project to attract that many applicants.

I believe there are many people who really want to create a good society — they just do not believe it is possible, and their cynicism keeps them away. If the Vernal Project were proceeding as described in this book, these doubters would see thousands of other activists working for change. This would dispel their concerns and fears. Energized and hopeful, they would be ready and eager to attend a Vernal program. Recruit-

If you think you can do a thing, or think you can't do a thing, you're right.

— Henry Ford

ing them would only require locating them, informing them of the program, encouraging them to apply for admission, and helping them find enough money to cover their tuition and living expenses.

WHAT SECULAR SENTIMENT WOULD INSPIRE SO MANY ACTIVISTS TO JOIN?

Working for progressive change is hard work and can be very dangerous. It requires a great deal of effort and usually provides little in return. Capitalism attracts adherents by appealing to self-interest. Conventional politics often attracts those who desire power and fame. Many religions attract large numbers by threatening damnation and offering salvation. What positive secular philosophy or sentiment can attract so many activists?

As I see it, people would be attracted to the Vernal Education Project for several reasons:

(1) Some people, appalled by our current destructive and dysfunctional society, feel compelled to do something to change it. They would see the Vernal Project as a powerful, practical way to end oppression, alienation, prejudice, corruption, deceit, violence, war, strife, and destruction of the environment. They would join the Project in response to their feelings of anger, guilt, fear, or hopelessness.

(2) Some people are inspired by the noble progressive ideals of honesty, integrity, respect, compassion, generosity, democracy, equity, fairness, tolerance, responsibility, coop-

eration, community, and so on. They would see the Vernal Project as a moral and effective way to implement these ideals.

(3) Some people are inspired by their own selflessness and altruism to do the right thing and work for positive change. They would see the Vernal Project as a suitable means.

(4) Some people work for change with the hope that they can create a better world for their children and grandchildren. They too would see the Vernal Project as a suitable way to accomplish this goal.

(5) Some people would be attracted to the supportive and life-affirming atmosphere of the nascent communities of activists where progressive ideals were already partially implemented. They would join the Project to be treated well, to feel supported, and to be able to act according to progressive ideals without being exploited or ridiculed.

Each of these is a powerful motivator that I believe could attract thousands of people of goodwill and sustain them for many years as they worked for progressive change.

Would the Vernal Project Distort Progressive Change Movements?

WOULD THE VERNAL PROJECT CREATE AN ELITIST VANGUARD?

Would Vernal activists become an elitist vanguard?

Because of their greater experience and higher level of skills, Vernal activists would naturally be prominent in many movements for social change. Still, I hope that Vernal activists would see themselves only as being *different* from other activists, not particularly *special* or *privileged*.

Nevertheless, because of their unusual situation, they might have a tendency to overtly or subtly assert their “superiority” over others, to huddle with others like themselves, to become rigid in their political dogmas or actions, or to dominate others. This would be detrimental to positive social change. It is essential that they *not* be elitist or oppressive.

To minimize inappropriate behavior, I expect Vernal staffmembers would constantly remind Vernal students of the dangers of deliberate or inadvertent domination or rigidity. Staffmembers would encourage graduates to provide “leadership from below” rather than to assume prominent leadership positions. I hope graduates would develop and promote a strict code of responsible behavior and an effective feedback system to restrain any tendency toward elitism, domination, rigidity, or self-righteousness.

WOULD THE VERNAL PROJECT FOSTER A WHITE, MIDDLE-CLASS MOVEMENT?

If the purpose is to improve society for all people, a large-scale project must include all people (not just token representatives of minority groups). Would the Vernal Education Project actively recruit and involve a racially diverse group of

staffmembers and students? Isn't the Vernal Project oriented toward white, middle-class people?

I expect each center would be committed to diversity. I assume that Vernal staffmembers would actively recruit and involve a cross-section of all people in their community including racial minorities, men and women, rural people, working-class people, gay, lesbian, and transgendered people, younger, older, and middle-aged people, and so on. Scholarships and stipends would make it possible for low-income activists to attend a Vernal session.

Nevertheless, because the program would charge tuition and would require students and graduates to support themselves, I imagine that it would appeal more to those who were financially better off. Thus, it might attract a disproportionate number of activists from financially stable, middle-class and working-class backgrounds. There might also be a relatively higher proportion of students from wealthy backgrounds, though the number of rich people — especially those who desire fundamental progressive social change — is not large.

Still, I do not expect the imbalance to be large. I expect the students and staffmembers of the Vernal Project would be reasonably representative of the larger population.

More importantly, I assume Vernal graduates would be able to reach out to all parts of the American public. I assume the social change movements they worked with would cover a broad cross-section of society. Remember that the Vernal Education Project is not a social change movement, but a *support* program for other social change efforts. I believe the social change movements supported by the Vernal Project would be very diverse and representative of the U.S. population.

WOULD THE VERNAL PROJECT CREATE A CULT?

In many ways, the Vernal Education Project sounds like an indoctrination program for a cult. Would the Project be a cult? How would you prevent it from becoming cultish?

People working primarily as social change activists have a tendency toward cult-like behavior. Working long hours and earning little money, believing themselves to have a better answer to how to live, and constantly attacked or ignored by regular people, activists can easily become separated from the mainstream. Under these circumstances, it is easy for them to fall into cultish or “groupthink” behavior. Furthermore, to actually accomplish significant social change, activists often admonish each other to be “disciplined” — which often means to adhere to a strict code of behavior that may or may not be rational or ethical.

The Vernal program would not endorse or support isolation, overwork, or other cult-inducing activity. Staffmembers would teach students about cult mind-control and groupthink, and they would do their best to interrupt rigid, elitist, or sectarian behavior. They would point out the dangers of being dogmatic “true believers” in a cause.

Moreover, Vernal staffmembers would strongly encourage Vernal activists to:

- Practice humility and abstain from self-righteousness
- Value every person
- Stay connected to relatives, friends, neighbors, and co-workers
- Think for themselves and value their own opinion
- Speak openly and keep few or no secrets
- Look at things from many different perspectives
- Seek information from varied sources and view all information skeptically
- Critically evaluate every idea, no matter its origin or promoters
- Encourage dissent and multiple points of view
- Avoid mystifying jargon
- Realistically accept bad news or setbacks (not naively deny or avoid it)
- Not dwell on bad news, setbacks, or apocalyptic visions
- Not buy into paranoia or excessive fear
- Avoid conspiratorial thinking
- Be realistic and avoid fantasizing about impossible scenarios
- Express their emotions
- Avoid guilt tripping, shaming, or humiliating themselves or others
- Refrain from attacking or demeaning others
- Avoid making irrevocable commitments
- Accept uncertainty
- Continually think — flexibly and open-mindedly

DO YOU THINK YOU KNOW WHAT EVERYONE SHOULD DO?

You seem to think you know what everyone should do. Do you have an agenda for us all?

Since I am trying to create a good society, I would like a large number of people to do many things. I promote my ideas and hope that others will pick them up for the same reasons I picked them up from other people — because they seem to make sense and they might work. That is the essence of my social change strategy and why I have structured the Vernal Project as a dispersed educational program instead of as a hierarchical cult, religion, or army.

I am open to changing my ideas. I hope this book starts a dialog about the best way to bring about progressive change. As we discuss these ideas, I hope that we all learn and grow and that we come up with increasingly better ideas.

Insanity without ambition is like a machine gun without bullets. — Graffiti at Stanford University, 1990

ISN'T THE VERNAL EDUCATION PROGRAM RIGID AND DOGMATIC?

With the level of control you seem to intend in the Vernal education program, won't it be hierarchical, rigid, dogmatic, and propagandistic?

I have tried to design an education program that has some structure so that it can contribute something valuable to the effort to create a good society. However, I also intend it to be very flexible. I have tried to build democracy and openness into every aspect of the structure. I have tried to avoid rigidity and dogmatism of every kind.

In this design, everyone who attended an education program would do so voluntarily. As I conceive it, the program has much less structure than a typical undergraduate degree program, and it only lasts a year. It would have no graduation requirements and every activity would be completely voluntary. Many of the study topics would be student-generated and the rest could (and probably would) be altered to suit the students' interests and concerns. If students wanted to revamp the program totally, I would support them as long as they understood the implications of their actions.

As I envision it, the study group readings would be diverse and include both mainstream and conservative perspectives — though the readings would emphasize a variety of progressive perspectives. Students would be exposed to a large number of perspectives by working with three separate and diverse internship organizations, their own social change organization, as well as a social service organization. They would also interact with twenty-nine fellow students and at least four different staffmembers. Students would choose all their internship programs and social service activities.

I hope that the staffmembers would spend less than a quarter of the time in which they interacted with students making presentations to them. When they did present lectures, I would expect them to lay out multiple perspectives (albeit, most of them probably progressive perspectives). I hope the staffmembers would spend most of their time asking strategic questions, setting up roleplays that enabled students to consider many perspectives, and challenging students to develop their own ideas.

I developed a detailed education program to show that it is possible to meet all of my design criteria with a reasonable one-year program. I am open to changing the curriculum, the format, or even the whole concept. I only desire that, however the program eventually develops, it meets the design criteria.

Note that graduates of the education program would be *completely* free to do whatever they wanted to do. I hope they would work assiduously and passionately for fundamental progressive change — at least for a few years — since I expect that society can only be transformed if most of them do so. Still, they could do whatever they pleased. No matter what they chose, I hope that the staffmembers

would be understanding and supportive, though we might be frustrated if graduates chose activities we thought were frivolous or counter-productive.

Will This Strategy Take Too Long?

WHY DOES THIS STRATEGY TAKE SO LONG?

Most revolutions take only weeks or months to succeed — a few years at most. Why does this strategy take eighty years?

Most revolutions make only superficial changes in society: usually just substituting one ruling group for another. The Vernal Education Project seeks democratic transformation of all of society down to its roots. This requires the vast majority of people to change significantly. They must learn a large amount of new information and develop a vast array of new skills. They must change their perspectives about most aspects of society, and they must understand and overcome a large portion of their dysfunctional and destructive cultural and emotional conditioning. All these changes take time, especially since — for many decades — the power elite and the dominant culture would continue to bombard them with misleading propaganda and advertising.

Moreover, many institutional and structural changes take decades to implement. For example, our society's severe income stratification and reliance on automobiles have led to widespread suburban sprawl, ghettoized central cities, and a car-oriented society. Reconfiguring the layout of cities to reflect the principles of sustainability, equity, and human-orientation would take many decades.

The social transformation outlined here would actually entail rapid change. I assume that social change movements are relatively quiet when the Vernal Project begins. Yet, after only a few decades of development and growth (by Vernal Year 25 or so), progressive social change movements would be at least as large and strong as even the most powerful previous social change movements in this country's history — maybe much stronger. Just fifteen years after that, a majority of people all across the country would be significantly affected by these movements in all realms of their lives — political, economic, cultural, and personal. This would be an unprecedented feat — comparable to other massive socioeconomic transformations such as the industrial revolution or the computer revolution. Most historical shifts of this magnitude take many decades or even centuries to evolve.

*To reform a man,
you must begin with
his grandmother.*
— Victor Hugo

COULDN'T TECHNOLOGY SPEED TRANSFORMATION?

The Internet and other technologies make it possible for activists to communicate rapidly around the world and to reach billions of people. Won't these technologies make it possible to speed the transformation process?

Communication technologies have the potential to accelerate the process greatly. However, the power elite would likely continue to control most communication channels throughout most of the transformation process. Progressive communications would probably continue to be buried in an avalanche of banalities and advertising. Most people would not hear about (or even think of searching for) alternative ideas for many years. Only when the power to control society shifted (around Vernal Year 60 in my projections), would progressives be able to regularly promote their ideas to the majority of people.

Moreover, I believe that deep, personal change in people's perspectives and psyches take many years. These changes usually come as the result of direct and personal change experiences. Most people do not change their fundamental beliefs after merely reading an enlightening article on the Internet, hearing an alternative radio program, or receiving an email from a progressive activist. They must hear alternative perspectives many times from many sources, especially from sources they trust.

Developing new skills takes even longer. Most people must practice for weeks, months, or years before they are proficient at counseling friends, cooperating with co-workers, facilitating cooperative meetings, mediating conflicts, struggling nonviolently with opponents, and building alternative institutions. Technology can help people learn these skills, but it probably cannot accelerate the process much.

BUT WE DON'T HAVE EIGHTY YEARS...

The natural environment is rapidly deteriorating. Species are going extinct at a dizzying pace. Elite interests are consolidating their power globally and undermining democratic governments. Weapons of war are becoming ever more deadly and increasingly available to combatants and terrorists throughout the world. We do not have much time. We can't wait eighty years. We must act now.

Just because there is a need for faster change does not mean that it is possible. Positive change can only come as fast as it can come.

The only time you do not fail is the last time you try anything — and it works.
— William Strong

There may be faster ways to bring about change, but many of those ways would probably be more negative than positive. I believe the Vernal Project is the best and fastest way to bring about *positive, enduring* change and to create a truly good society. I hope we can do it before the natural environment is irrevocably destroyed and before a fascist or militaristic regime engulfs and enslaves us all.

AND WE'LL ALL BE DEAD IN EIGHTY YEARS...

Eighty years seems like a long time. Most adults now living will be dead by then. Why should people work on a project that would not produce a result until long after they were gone?

The Vernal Education Project focuses on a long-term goal, but this goal is quite similar to the goals that many people already have: making life better for their children or making a difference for posterity. In striving toward these goals, people know they will never see the fruits of their work, but they still work to enable future generations to have a good life.

Moreover, if the Vernal Project proceeds as I envision, there would be a great deal to see and experience after only a few years. The growth and development of the Vernal Project would be exciting in itself. Graduates of the Vernal Project would help generate social change movements comparable to those in the 1930s or 1960s within twenty to thirty years.

I believe most activists could be motivated by these more short-term events along the way to the larger, more distant goal.

Part of the reason I wrote this book was to lay out a realistic transformation scenario so people would understand it, believe it, and want to work toward making it happen even though they would probably not see it completed. If the Project developed in the early years as I describe it here, readers of this book would have reason to believe that it would proceed to the conclusion described.

Give the gift that keeps on giving: a good society. Your grandchildren will be glad you did.

What About...?**RESISTANCE TO ATTACK AND SUBVERSION?**

The power elite regularly sabotages social change movements through various kinds of surveillance, disruption, and attack. Agents of the elite spread disinformation about activists, provoke infighting among activists, encourage activists to be belligerent, promote violent change tactics, and assassinate movement leaders. How would the Vernal Project resist infiltrators, provocateurs, and assassins from disrupting or discrediting progressive change movements?

There is no way to safeguard movements from infiltration and disruption, but the Vernal Project would foster social change movements that were less susceptible to these efforts in a variety of important ways.

The Vernal Education Project would create and promote:

- **Savvy activists:** Vernal activists would know the history of movement sabotage, and they would probably be able to recognize disruptive techniques. They could warn their fellow activists about and would know how to respond effectively to sabotage, character assassination, and disruption.

• **Decentralized leadership:** By empowering and building leadership skills among thousands of people, movements supported by the Vernal Education Project would be much less vulnerable to assassination or co-optation of a few leaders. Likely, there would be hundreds or thousands of people who could step forward and carry on whenever any single person was killed, disabled, or co-opted.

• **Geographical decentralization:** Change movements supported by Vernal activists would be dispersed all over the country. This would make them less vulnerable to charges of regional elitism (such as “Yankees are trying to run our lives” or “Washington bureaucrats are trying to dictate what we do”). It would also make the overall change movement less vulnerable to local or regional attacks.

• **Homegrown activists:** Generally, Vernal students would live in their home communities while attending a Vernal session and would continue to live there after graduating. This would make them less vulnerable to community concerns about “outside agitators.” By building direct and personal connections with many people in the community, each progressive activist could garner broad support whenever she was unfairly attacked. Because each activist would be working in her home community, she would probably also be better at understanding and dealing with her antagonists.

• **Network of support:** Vernal activists would probably have strong connections to other Vernal activists. If attacked locally, they could ask for support from other Vernal activists outside their locality.

• **Focus on diverse issues:** Vernal-supported change movements would address a wide variety of issues. This would force opponents to challenge these movements on many fronts, which would likely reduce the extent of opposition or reformist co-optation on any particular issue. Also, by working on all kinds of economic, racial, social, and cultural issues simultaneously and taking a broad progressive perspective, Vernal-supported movements would be less vulnerable to accusations of elitism, classism, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, and so forth.

• **Strong progressive community:** Vernal-supported change movements would develop a strong community spirit. Activists would probably know and like each other, which would make them less vulnerable to character assassination. I expect each activist would also have much greater personal support from her friends and colleagues than most activists do now. This would make each one less vulnerable to intimidation.

• **Emotionally healthy activists:** Vernal activists and those they supported would probably be much more emotionally healthy than current activists. This would mean they would be less susceptible to manipulation by guilt-, hate-, and fear-mongers.

• **Greater understanding of conflict and how to resolve it:** Members of Vernal-supported change groups would know that conflict is inevitable and that it can be positive if handled well. Hence, they would be less likely to

suppress conflict. Vernal activists would also be skilled and knowledgeable in mediating and resolving conflict.

• **Practice of progressive ideals:** I expect Vernal-supported social change groups would attempt to adhere to progressive ideals. Their change actions would strive toward goals of fairness, equity, and democracy and their tactics would be open, forthright, democratic, and nonviolent. In this context, secretive, manipulative, or offensive tactics or shortsighted shortcuts advocated by provocateurs would

Furthermore, since the Vernal Project would produce relatively few graduates and would have little influence throughout Phases 1 and 2 (through Vernal Year 20), I hope that it would not attract much attention until it was firmly established.

The nature of the Vernal Education Project should also protect it from infiltration. To become a Vernal staffmember (or a new staff preparer), an activist would have to demonstrate a long history of positive change activity. Hence, it would not be easy for infiltrators to become staffmembers. The board of directors for each Vernal center would consist of Vernal staffmembers, students, and graduates as well as a few activists from the local progressive community. Each would have to demonstrate a relatively long history of progressive change work. Consequently, it is unlikely that infiltrators could take over the board.

If a few infiltrators did make it onto the board of a Vernal center, they could be disruptive. However, the other members of the board would be skilled and knowledgeable. They would likely spot an infiltrator who tried to disrupt the center. They could use their skill and knowledge for resolving conflict, and their ability to counsel activists, to confront anyone who was disruptive. Moreover, since the board would use a cooperative consensus decision-making process, those who were not open, cooperative, and oriented toward problem solving would stand out. If a boardmember refused to work honestly with others to resolve conflicts, it would be relatively easy to develop a consensus among the other members to remove that person from the board.

DOES THE PROJECT PROVIDE RESISTANCE TO DOMINATION?

What would prevent the Vernal education network from being dominated by progressive activists with big egos?

Again, I assume that the emotional health of the Vernal staffmembers would be relatively good, and they would be knowledgeable and skilled. I expect they would rarely act arrogantly or try to dominate others. When one did, her colleagues (usually three others) could quickly intervene. I expect these other staffmembers would be strong and skilled enough to challenge, support, and counsel the errant staffmember until she stopped acting out.

Still...

IT JUST SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE...

The whole undertaking just does not seem possible. The goal is so ambitious. The ideas have to be wrong. It has to be too simple or too naïve or missing something. How do you know this will work?

Honestly, I do not know if it will work. However, just because something has never occurred before does not mean it can never happen. Slavery was common 150 years ago, but is now mostly gone. Capital punishment is considered barbaric in most of the world and only a few countries still allow it (unfortunately, one being the United States). The

computers, telecommunication satellites, and jet aircraft we take for granted now were just the imaginings of a handful of crazy dreamers a few decades ago.

In our current society, it is especially difficult to imagine any genuine positive change. Television news assaults us every day with a stupefying brew of dreadful images of disasters and tragedies, inane reports on trivial events, and titillating but useless gossip. Politicians regularly drown us with deceptive blather and disingenuous promises that they seldom keep. Advertising constantly bombards us with splashy images and clever appeals that tempt us to purchase worthless products. At the same time, most things of true value to human beings are ignored, mocked, or repackaged into banal commodities. So our whole culture repeatedly and pervasively informs us that significant positive change is impossible. Hopelessness permeates our society like a thick cloud of poisonous gas, numbing our senses and killing our spirits. The heavy weight of despair keeps us down.

Moreover, cynics incessantly cite innate human frailties like greed and arrogance, and they recount the many previous failed efforts for positive change. But these are really more excuses than reasons for failure. For every way in which humans are warped or weak, there is a way in which we are noble and strong. For every promising initiative that has failed, another soared beyond anyone's expectations.

I believe there are only five main obstacles to creating a good society and none of them is insurmountable. We can overcome each by applying skilled effort methodically and patiently over time. It may seem impossible — but I believe our hopeless feelings indicate only how difficult it has been in the past for us to succeed and how painful it has been for us to fail repeatedly.

Still, I may be wrong. It may be impossible to create a good society, or this particular way of getting there may be the wrong path.

I am heartened by the responses of the many experienced activists who critically evaluated the draft of this book. Most expressed general skepticism that it would work, but almost none offered specific reasons why it could not work. Almost all of them encouraged me to continue working on this project.

I do not know if this effort will work or not, but I believe it is the best chance we have.

That which seems the height of absurdity in one generation often becomes the height of wisdom in another.

— Adlai Stevenson

Every noble work is at first impossible.

— Thomas Carlyle

The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts. — Bertrand Russell

YOUR ASSUMPTIONS MAY BE WRONG...

You make a large number of estimates and projections about how things might evolve. Are you sure these are all reasonable?

Writing this book forced me to specify concretely how everything might work. Consequently, I am aware of the considerable number of assumptions and assertions I make and how large some of them are. Each is subject to challenge and criticism. In fact, I can formulate powerful arguments against almost every assumption and assertion that I make. Then again, I also have strong and persuasive arguments in support of each of them.

Only those who attempt the absurd can achieve the impossible. — Graffiti

Overall, after carefully evaluating each one, I am convinced these assumptions are sensible, reasonable, and compelling. Still, they may be wrong. As the Vernal Project proceeds, we can check these assumptions to see how reliable they are and revise the Project accordingly.

WILL THIS REALLY WORK?

If your assumptions are faulty, this project will probably not work out. What happens if the Vernal Education Project never happens?

If the Project failed to take off, it might be because my ideas were faulty — my understanding too naïve, my projections for the future too utopian, or my plans just plain misdirected. If so, then I would need to reconsider all my assumptions and reasoning and then start over.

A cynic is an idealist turned inside out. — Graffiti

It may be that the analysis is correct, but that the forces arrayed against positive change are just too strong. Then the Project would ultimately fail. This would be disheartening. Still, I believe the effort would have been worthwhile. It is far better to strive for a grand goal and fail than never to have striven at all.

If we proceed yet fail, our efforts will not go to waste: whatever curriculum we develop, workshops we facilitate, and positive change we are able to bring about will be valuable and will contribute to progressive transformation. I believe it is worth making the attempt.

In great attempts, it is glorious even to fail. — Cassius

The probability that we may fail in the struggle ought not to deter us from the support of a cause we believe to be just.

— Abraham Lincoln

Defeat is not the worst of failures. Not to have tried is the true failure. — George E. Woodberry

For more objections and concerns, and to join a discussion of the Vernal Education Project, see: <http://www.vernalproject.org>

NOTES FOR CHAPTER 11

¹ I imagine a local group might encompass about 10 families (roughly 20 adults). A neighborhood might then include 20 of these local groups (400 adults in all), and a typical community might have 25 of these neighborhood groups (10,000 adults). A typical city might encompass 20 of these communities (comprising 200,000 adults). Fifty cities (totaling ten million adults) would constitute a district, state, or bioregion. With just two more levels (seven levels in all), everyone in the world could be included.

Kirkpatrick Sale in *Human Scale* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980, HC106.7 .S24 1980), p. 179–208, investigates the optimal size for human groups. He discovers that a face-to-face association — a tribe, village, or neighborhood in which everyone knows everyone else — typically has about 500 members. Communities typically have about 5,000–10,000 people. This is large enough to provide all necessary services, but still enables people to live within easy walking distance of each other. The most desirable cities typically have 50,000–100,000 people.

Note that people would likely form additional groupings — based on their common jobs, interests, hobbies, lifestyles, ethnicity, gender, or age — to discuss issues that affect particular facets of themselves. These cross-connections would further foster consensus across society.

² A few obvious examples of items that would be unnecessary in a good society: most advertising and junk mail; cigarettes and other destructive drugs; symbols of conspicuous wealth like mansions, luxury yachts, luxury autos, backyard swimming pools, and expensive jewelry.

In a good society, people would live closer to their work and would spend less time commuting, and there would be much better mass transportation and fewer cars. This would result in many fewer collisions thus reducing the need for health and rehabilitative care. In addition, the environment would be much less polluted so there would be less need for health services to repair the damage to our bodies caused by pollutants and toxic waste.