We have it in our power to begin the world over again.
— Thomas Paine

Inciting Democracy
Cleveland Study Group

Fall 2003, Cleveland, Ohio

Description and Basic Information

This study group will explore the idea of creating a good society as described in the book Inciting Democracy: A Practical Proposal for Creating a Good Society What would a good society be like? How have people tried to bring about social change in the past? How should we go about it now? What would it take to really transform society?

Meeting Times: 7:00 – 9:00 PM

   Session 1: Thursday, October 23, 2003
   Session 2: Thursday, November 6, 2003
   Session 3: Thursday, November 20, 2003
   Session 4: Wednesday, December 10, 2003

Convener: Randy Schutt

   [see http://www.vernalproject.org/AboutRandy.shtml]
   rschutt@vernalproject.org http://www.vernalproject.org Phone: _____

Interested in participating? Please RSVP to Randy Schutt <rschutt@vernalproject.org>
The study group will be limited to 20 people.

Purpose, Goals and Objectives

Most discussions of social change focus on the very near future: How can we get a specific law passed? How can we influence an officeholder or other authority to act differently? How can we get a different person elected to office? Or, if the focus is longer term, the discussion typically becomes very philosophical and abstract: Are human beings inherently good or evil? Are humans perfectible? What is the ideal society? Is democracy possible?

In this study group, we will explore these topics briefly, but the focus will be on considering how to create a good society in the mid- to long-term (25 –100 years). How could we actually create a truly good society, beginning now, in the present situation? What is the best strategy? How can we go about it? What resources do we need? What should we do to insure that we end up with a good society?

Readings

Inciting Democracy: A Practical Proposal for Creating a Good Society by Randy Schutt, SpringForward Press, 2001 http://www.vernalproject.org/IcD.shtml

downloadable from: http://www.vernalproject.org/IcDDownload.shtml

You can also buy a copy of Inciting Democracy from Randy for $20.

Content Outline

Session 1: Introduction, Elements of a Good Society

Readings:

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 1 "Background" (pp. 1-12)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 2 "Elements of a Good Society" (pp. 13-32)

Total pages: 32

Additional Optional Readings:

"Building a Just and Caring World: Four Cornerstones" by Riane Eisler

http://www.partnershipway.org/html/subpages/articles/cornerstone.htm

"Buying Dreams: Visions for a Better Future" by Michael Albert

http://www.zmag.org/ParEcon/writings/albertold15.htm

"Hope is Not a Foolish Notion" by Randy Schutt

http://www.vernalproject.org/Papers2/HopeNotFoolish.html

Inciting Democracy, Appendix A, "Some Positive Near-Term Policy Changes" (pp. 239-246)

Agenda:

Introduction to and overview of the study group

Personal introductions

- Your name
- What you do in the world
- Your life goals
- History of your thinking about social change (if time)

Study group logistics

- Location, meeting dates and times, etc.
- Readings & discussion questions

Values Clarification Exercise: What should be changed?

- Group brainstorm: Things that should definitely be changed to create a good society

Brief presentation on Chapters 1 & 2

Discussion of Chapters 1 & 2

Evaluation

Discussion Questions: (we will not discuss all, just the ones you find most interesting)

1. Do you believe society is moving toward a good society or away from that ideal?

2. Does the Golden Rule provide a sufficient basis for a good society?

3. Do the elements outlined in Inciting Democracy provide a sufficient basis for a good society?

4. What utopian novels have inspired you? What elements of utopian societies seem particularly attractive?

5. How would a good society provide the essentials: housing and clothing? transportation of goods and people (commuting to work and traveling for leisure)? How would roads, rails, and airports be built and maintained? How would a good society build and maintain infrastructure (water, sewage, communication, and energy)?

6. How would a good society provide childcare, elder care, and healthcare (routine and critical)? How would a good society provide education (basic reading, writing, and arithmetic for children; general education about philosophy, art, and the basics of society; specialized training for particular work professions)? Who would get specialized training?

7. How would a good society produce goods (useful necessities, niceties, and luxuries)? How much should be produced?

8. How would a good society provide other services like food preparation, haircutting, mail delivery, firefighting, emotional therapy, and massage?

9. How would a good society provide creative art (music, dance, drama, comedy, visual art, television, radio, and video)? Who would be artists? How would they be supported? In a good society, how would parks and museums be built and maintained?

10. Who in a good society would do basic research (theoretical and laboratory)? How would they be supported?

11. In a good society, what happens to sewage, garbage, and toxic wastes?

12. In a good society, how would people be motivated to behave usefully and responsibly and discouraged from behaving destructively? How would a good society deal with someone who was able, but unwilling to work?

13. How would a good society treat those with less capability (children, elders, those who are physically disabled, mentally retarded, psychotic, or addicted to strong drugs)? In a good society, how much would they be helped or controlled and who would help or control them?

14. How would a good society deal with conflicting needs or desires (such as the needs and desires of one person versus another, one religious belief versus another, leisure versus production, ownership versus access, noise versus quiet, resource extraction and utilization versus the environment, humans versus animals)?

15. In a good society, how would trade be conducted? Would a good society have money? Would interest be charged for loans? Would there be insurance?

16. In a good society, what things should be public and which should be private? What should be controlled for the common good and what should be left to individuals? Who would own clothing, housing, industry, and transportation equipment (cars, trucks, railroads, and aircraft)? What power and responsibilities would go along with ownership?

17. Who would control a good society? How would decisions be made? How would decisions be enforced?

18. In a good society, what would be the role of religion?

19. How would a good society deal with rapists and murderers?

20. How would a good society deal with cults?

21. What role should clothing fashion and other fads play in a good society?

22. Would a good society allow or provide abortion?

23. Can our current society be transformed into a good society, or must our current society be completely overturned and recreated from scratch?

Session 2: Obstacles to Progressive Change / Elements of an Effective Strategy

Readings:

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 3 "Obstacles to Progressive Change" (pp. 33-58)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 4 "Elements of an Effective Strategy for Democratic Transformation" (pp. 59-74)

  Total pages: 42

Additional Optional Readings:

"The Tax-Cut Con" by Paul Krugman, NY Times Magazine, September 14, 2003

  http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/14/magazine/14TAXES.html?ei=1&en=1b27864b8f18d083&ex=1065197
  294&pagewanted=all&position=   or

  http://www.pkarchive.org/economy/TaxCutCon.html or

  http://thomasmc.com/0913a.htm

"What is Strategy?" by Z Magazine

  http://www.creativeresistance.ca/toolkit/toolkit-what-is-strategy.htm or

  http://www.zmag.org/instructionals/rtinstruc/id61.htm

"Closed Hearts, Closed Minds" by Michael Lerner, Tikkun, September/October 2003

  http://www.tikkun.org/magazine/index.cfm/action/tikkun/issue/tik0309/article/030903a.html

"Tikkun Community: Core Vision and Founding Principles" Tikkun, 11.19.2001 — 26 web pages

  http://www.tikkun.org/community/index.cfm/action/community/article/1.html

Agenda:

Introductions

Check-in

Obstacles Exercise

- As a group, choose something we would like to change — write it in a box at the left of the board
- To the right of this box, brainstorm 2-5 obstacles that prevent that thing from changing. Put each of them in a box and connect them with a line to the original item
- To the right of each of these boxes, brainstorm 2-5 obstacles that prevent that obstacle from changing. Put each of them in a box and connect them with a line to the obstacle.

Brief presentation on Chapters 3 & 4

Discussion of Chapters 3 & 4

Evaluation

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 3

1. What stands in the way of us transforming our current society into a good society? Inciting Democracy lists five primary obstacles to positive change. Are these five really obstacles to change? Are they the most important five? Are there others?

2. Is there a ruling elite? If so, is it monolithic or are there many separate or overlapping factions? If there is an elite, how does it coordinate its effort?

3. How do people benefit from the current society? How do each of us benefit? Do we have some control over the current society? Are we part of the power structure?

4. How is information and culture passed along from one generation to the next? How can destructive aspects of culture be changed?

5. Who would suffer from social change and how? How might we suffer?

6. What money or effort must be expended to bring about change? Who can or should provide these resources?

7. How much can people change? How much have you changed? How much more will you change in the rest of your life?

8. How effective are social change organizations in bringing about positive change?

9. Is in-fighting a problem in social change organizations? Is lack of knowledge or skill a problem?

Chapter 4

1. Inciting Democracy lists ten traditional strategies for bringing about positive change. What are the strengths and limitations of each one? Which of these ten should we consider using now? Which should we not use? Are there others that would be better?

2. Inciting Democracy lists seven crucial characteristics of fundamental change efforts. Are these important? Are there others equally important?

3. Inciting Democracy calls for a strategy based on mass education and powerful, nonviolent social change movements. Is this a good strategy? What strategy might be better?

4. Inciting Democracy lists six essential components of an effective strategy. Are these important? Are there others equally important?

Session 3: Strategies for Social Transformation / The Vernal Education Project

Readings:

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 5 "A Strategic Program to Create a Good Society" (pp. 75-94)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 6 "The Vernal Education Program" (pp. 95-128) (skim over details)

Total pages: 54

Additional Optional Readings:

Thich Nhat Hanh's Mindfulness "About Thich Nhat Hanh"

http://www.iamhome.org/tnh.htm

"Thay's 14 Precepts" by Thich Nhat Hanh

    http://www.seaox.com/thich.html (bottom of page)

    http://www.prajnaparamita.com/newpage16.htm (bottom of page)

"The Five Mindfulness Trainings" by Thich Nhat Hanh

    http://www.spiritwalk.org/thichnhathanh.htm#writings

"Man is Not Our Enemy" by Thich Nhat Hanh   (only 1st three paragraphs and last two paragraphs)

    http://www.plumvillage.org/Vietnam/man_is_not_our_enemy.htm

A Dialog on Nonviolent Action

"Arresting Disobedience" by Jessica Azulay, ZNet Daily Commentaries, January 22, 2003

    http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-01/22azulay.cfm

"True Resistance/What Nonviolence Is" by Gordon Clark, ZNet Daily Commentaries, February 06, 2003

    http://www.zmag.org/Sustainers/content/2003-02/06clark_.cfm

"Revisiting Civil (Un)arrest and (Dis)obedience" by Jessica Azulay, ZNet Daily Commentaries, March 02, 2003

    http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-03/02azulay.cfm

 "Partnership Education in the 21st Century" by Riane Eisler, Encounter 15(3): 5-12

    http://www.partnershipway.org/html/subpages/articles/Partedencounter.htm

Agenda:

Welcome

Check-in

Brief presentation on Chapters 5 & 6

Discussion of Chapters 5 & 6

Spectrogram Exercise

    • For each of 10 change tactics, position yourself in the room along a spectrum according to whether you think the tac-
      tic is violent or nonviolent and on the other axis whether it is effective or ineffective. Why did you position your-
      self where you did?

Evaluation

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 5

1. Inciting Democracy describes a 4-stage program for change with each stage taking approximately 20 years.
    Does this program seem reasonable? What would be a better scenario?

2. How important is it for activists to transform themselves so their behavior is consonant with a good society?

3. How important is it for activists to develop their knowledge and skills?

4. How important is it for activists to form a supportive community?

5. How important is it for activists to work through the conventional power structure? How important is it to work
    outside the system (demonstrations, etc.)? How important is it to develop alternative institutions? How im-
    portant is it to rely on or control news and other communication media versus face-to-face discussions?

6. How important is leadership in social change efforts? What is the best model of leadership: a single, strong
    leader; a leadership group; or widely dispersed leadership?

7. What is the best kind of societal transformation: short and fast (less than a year) or long and measured (involv-
    ing many years of gradual change)?

8. What is the best kind of societal transformation: a revolution led by a small number of people, a revolution led
    by a large group, a massive change involving wide segments of the population, a transformation led by a
    majoritarian movement, or a transformation involving a unanimous movement of everyone in society?

9. Is nonviolence the same as pacifism? How do pacifists respond to oppression? Is pacifism the same as passiv-
    ism? How can pacifism change society?

10. How do nonviolent actions change society?

Chapter 6

1. Inciting Democracy describes a social change movement based on an education project (the Vernal Education
    Project) that would take a long time to implement. Does it make sense to spend so much time on education?

2. The Vernal Education Program relies heavily on self-education and mutual education in small groups. This makes it relatively inexpensive and puts most of the responsibility for learning on the students. What is good and bad about this strategy?

3. The Vernal Education Program includes social service work, exercise, and emotional support work. Are these important?

4. What do activists need to know to be skilled and knowledgeable? Do the Vernal Program study group topics and workshop class topics cover the important areas?

5. As described, does the Vernal Education Program adequately embody the philosophy of progressive education? How could it be changed to do so better?

Session 4: Societal Transformation

Readings:

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 7 "Building a Powerful, Democratic Social Change Movement" (pp. 129-154)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 8 "Melissa's Story" (pp. 155-162)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 9 "Transforming Society" (pp. 163-180)

  Total pages: 52

Additional Optional Readings:

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 10 "Implementing the Vernal Project" (pp. 181-192)

Inciting Democracy, Ch. 11 "Some Objections and Concerns" (pp. 193-210)

Agenda:

Welcome

Check-in

Brief presentation on Chapters 7, 8, & 9

Discussion of Chapters 7, 8, & 9

Evaluation

Discussion Questions:

Chapter 7

1. Do you believe that graduates of the Vernal Education Program would have the characteristics described in Chapter 7 of Inciting Democracy?

2. Inciting Democracy describes a variety of methods for changing society, typical tactics used, stages in typical movements, levels of activist success, and principles for organizing. Do these seem plausible, accurate, and complete?

Chapter 8

1. Does Melissa's story seem plausible? What parts seem far-fetched?

Chapter 9

1. Inciting Democracy describes a scenario in which tens of thousands of activists work for many years to bring about transformation of society. How important is it to have a vision of a viable scenario?

2. Does this particular scenario seem plausible? What is a more likely scenario?

3. This scenario assumes that society will eventually reach a "tipping point" at which point transformation would finally get much easier. Does this seem plausible?