

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD WITHOUT RUINING IT OR YOURSELF

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Once upon a time, people aspired to leave the world a better place. Once upon a time, that was the lesson young children were expected to learn, older children were expected to practice, their parents were expected to teach and live by, and their grandparents were expected to model and be judged by. That lesson once enjoyed greater popularity, but it has an inspiring history. And so I ask: How does one go about changing the world? Better, how does one leave the world a better place than how he found it? It's a very old ideal, at least as old as ancient Athens, whose citizens pledged:

We will ever strive for the ideal and sacred things of the city both alone and with many; we will revere and obey the city's laws; we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.

What follows are some ideas--if not guaranteed to change the world, not expected to make it any worse:

1. You are the beginning context. To change the world, you must change. To inspire others to change, you must change yourself. You can blame the callous society, a confused bureaucracy, or a mean adversary for evils uncovered. Your censure may even hit right targets; but if blaming other people and other institutions permits you to avoid personal confrontation with the problems we face in society, then you too contribute to the evil. Before the world can change, I must change.

2. You must remember what each of us tries hard to forget--your mortality. Of course, each of us knows that people die; but most of us live as if it simply won't happen to us. As William Saroyan remarked before his death, when he knew he

was mortally ill--at a time when he realized that it would happen to him too--
"Now what?" One shouldn't live his life without ever asking that most serious of
all questions? "Now what?"

3. People are people. Each human being is fragile, interdependent, at times, silly, at times even wonderful, often weak when it doesn't matter, and sometimes strong when it does matter. People are people. Those among us who understand that idea have strength that others don't share. Those among us who understand that idea understand that we too are capable of being the parents of a severely retarded child; we draw the cards of life in the way others do. When Marie Antoinette advised the people to eat cake, she at least admitted that they needed what she needed--food. The queen lives, then she dies. And near the surface of the splendor and pageantry of the funeral is the proof once again demonstrated that everyone dies. The wealthy couple shopping on Worth Avenue on Palm Beach, ducking in and out of the most exclusive shops while their Rolls Royce trails behind them, knows that it isn't only the poor man who needs to go to the bathroom, it isn't only the poor woman who has fears and anxieties, it isn't only the incomprehensible foreigners who do shameful things. But yet, on the surface--on the other side to the humble idea that "people are people"--is the arrogant claim that, while "Yes, people are people," the comparisons are made only when a joke is to be told or a point is to be delivered.

People are people. There's a saying among special educators that unexceptional people spend their lifetimes seeking ways to become exceptional, and exceptional people spend their lives seeking ways to become unexceptional. The ordinary want to be extraordinary, and the extraordinary want to be ordinary. The man in the street dreams of becoming rich and famous, and our rich and famous have romantic memories of anonymous lives when one could walk the streets unnoticed, eat a

meal uninterrupted, do the simple things which now mean so much to them--because those are exactly the things now denied them. But there's another way of looking at these flights from one's reality. Everyone is fleeing from his reality--not only the ordinary man looking for eminence, or the eminent man demanding to be left alone. Everybody is fleeing from the same things--the small and great irritations each of us must experience by simply living, the unhappiness each of us must face at some time during our lives, the disappointments even great men have; and we flee from our certain mortality. The grass is never greener on our side; that's why the grass is always greener on the other side. Man can no more escape his condition, than the zebra his stripes. Man is man. People are people.

The disease of professionals is that we think we are different from the clients, that we will never have the problems they have, that we will never face the dilemmas they face, that our children will be the smartest and the best, that our lives will be beautiful. And the disease of consumers is that they believe the professionals. But, in the end, people are people. In the end, we share the same destiny; and in the end, we have much in common. That's one reason why we should look for a special quality in our leaders. They should have that special quality if they presume to be leaders. Far more important than one's intelligence, one's personality, one's skills, is for the leader to be magnanimous, to bend over backwards in dealing with those who would follow him. There is always the "glass half empty" - "glass half filled" decision to be made. It's the most important decision to be made about people. We can improve the world immeasurably if we would but look for the best in each other. When we're tempted to ask how this terrible or stupid person was able to accomplish this or that, we should better ask how someone who has achieved something marvelous could have been so terrible or stupid. We should be more surprised than we are in the face of human stupidity,

and more expectant of human accomplishment.

4. Education is serious stuff. Socrates was sentenced to drink the hemlock because the leaders of Athens didn't like his curriculum. Socrates died for education. There should be those among us who would want to live and work for it. At least, to work for it. Of course, Education isn't everything. It's not even enough, although many people believe it's enough. Notwithstanding, this society doesn't suffer from an abundance of learning and wisdom. Better schools and a more educated people won't prevent all the problems we now have, and won't solve all of those which can't be prevented; but the institutions of education will better serve our efforts to improve this world than the institutions of ignorance.

5. Granted the need to improve our schools and other educational programs, we are an educated people. But, we must not be arrogant about what has been accomplished. Especially in our dealings with other cultures, we must learn to use our knowledge and technology more wisely, more generously, and more decently. But also, we must work harder to understand non-western cultures and their people.

6. What is the role of the teacher, the doctor, and other practitioners in the helping professions? To decide whether somebody can learn or not, to decide whether the patient will get better or not, to decide who shall be treated and who shall die? No, their roles should always be sharply focused on the desire to heal the sick person, to teach the ignorant person, to still the hurt of the distraught person, and to bring cheer to the despondent person. The job of the human service professional is not merely to observe whether a person can or can't change, but to make it come true that he can change. Our job is not to test the "Educability Hypothesis," but to make it come true, to demonstrate that capability is educable.

7. Educability is a two-edged sword. While we deal with our clients as if they will learn, as if they will be healed, as if their physical, emotional and intellectual health will be restored, the reason we must serve those clients is because they are entitled to receive our help. Anne Sullivan accepted the responsibility to teach Helen Keller, not because she expected the child to eventually attend Radcliffe College, not because she expected the woman to be a world-famous inspiration to people in every walk of life. The "miracle" of the Anne Sullivan-Helen Keller saga was exactly because no one expected things to turn out so marvelously well. By definition, that's the required ingredient for a miracle to occur. The paradox of the Anne Sullivan-Helen Keller saga, the paradox of any miracle, is that it must be unexpected, that Anne Sullivan necessarily had to have had other reasons for assuming responsibility for Helen, else there would have been no miracle, no story, no demonstration of Educability. Educability is a two-edged sword. It's true; but, even if it's a lie, the clinician must behave as if it's true.

8. Bands not only play at the Mardi Gras but also at funerals. So one had better be careful about what bandwagon he jumps on. Once upon a time, the treatment of choice in my field, the treatment of the best professionals, of the good guys, was "segregation" of the handicapped. Today, it's mainstreaming. We believe in mainstreaming. But you owe it to yourself, as well as to those you serve, to know which bandwagon you've jumped on--else you may find yourself going to the cemetery rather than to the festival. One must also be aware that the final paralysis may result from the tug between popular, if uninformed, advocacy and corrupt, often poisonous, authority.

9. Most people revere their freedom more than their very lives. In my field, we hear talk today about evidence needed to justify deinstitutionalization. Did

Lincoln require evidence to free the slaves--other than the belief that all people in this country, who were neither dangerous to themselves or others, deserved to be free? Did anyone ever willingly give up his life to improve reading scores in a class, or to enhance a group's vocational aptitude? But every day, all over this globe, people lay down their lives rather than submit to physical or political enslavement. The battle to evacuate institutions for the mentally retarded, or to integrate handicapped children in the public schools, is being fought on behalf of freedom for these people rather than improved clinical conditions and opportunities. The prepotent issue in this century will not be on the "right to treatment" but on each person's inalienable "right to freedom."

10. Technology isn't the answer, though it involves interesting and useful methods. Oftentimes, it's a lot of artillery to kill crab grass. Oftentimes, it can go as wrong as it goes right. Technology may be a good solution for some problems, but it's hardly ever connected with the significance of the problem. Chesterton wrote an engaging and powerful essay called, "Music With Meals," where he spoke to the idea that people don't need an excuse to listen to music. People don't need to make a case for music as an aid to digestion. Conversely, people do need to make a case for technology. While listening to music can be its own reward, the elevator becomes important only for those who want to go to the 4th floor. The SST is important only if we have sufficiently convinced ourselves that there are people in New York who need to go to London in three hours. We have to worry about a technology which continues to produce electric can openers (which make technology frivolous), and bicycles and rowing machines going nowhere (which makes us silly) especially in light of our concerns with energy conservation.

11. We must learn more from history, and it's not enough to find that the only thing we've learned from history is that we've learned nothing from history.

We must learn lessons from Nazi Germany. What did it mean when parents, who were given the choice to take their children home from institutions for the mentally retarded or know that they would be killed, oftentimes came for the last time to bid their goodbyes. And today, we still debate whether children have rights which transcend parental authority. We must struggle to better understand the lesson to be learned from Itard's Wild Boy of Aveyron. Is it that a wild boy, a mentally retarded child, can be made educable, or is it that all people are educable? We must also better comprehend the lesson from Rousseau's Emile. Is it that the child is noble, or that all people are noble?

12. What does the Biblical vision of the Brimming Cup mean? To make the world better is to transform the empty to the brimming cup. How does one transform one's empty life to a full life? Bigger isn't necessarily better; that is, "more" isn't necessarily better. The empty caldron "is not" the good life; that "small, full brimming cup" is the good life each person seeks. But there is yet another seeming contradiction. One's life is full when the corn has been picked, when the work is completed. But for the barn to overflow, the field has to be barren. So too throughout one's life. There will be necessarily empty places, as it is equally certain that there will be times when there seems to be too much. Some places are empty because the harvest has just been taken, and it's time for both land and man to rest. But other places are barren because they are neglected and, thus, may always be barren. Some places are filled because there is greed. But others are filled because there is hope and there is responsibility to care for one's family and neighbors. The brimming cup neither has much to do with the size of the cup nor the temporary nature of its contents. It's all in the mind and, for sure, in the soul.

13. It doesn't matter who fishes or who cuts bait, who rows the boat or who cooks the fish, as long as there is someone to do each important job in the community. The concept of community requires that there is a genuine place for everyone in the life of the group.

14. Giving people facts can change their behavior. If people are told the truth, they will not go off the deep end. They might even do something positive to correct the problems, or mitigate them, or at least understand them better.

15. Stories can kill people, so we must be careful about the stories we tell.

16. There is at least room here to argue the hypothesis that there are (or ever will be) sufficient resources in our society to serve all of the people.¹ There always was, there is now, and there will probably always be a significant discrepancy between what is needed to satisfy all of the people and what we have to satisfy them. Hard times merely requires us to work harder, to be more thoughtful, to substitute our hard work and wisdom for dollars (which we don't have enough of) or additional workers (which in this society only dollars can purchase).

17. We must work hard to deprogram our lives. Too many of us live rigidly segmented lives--where our work is separated from our recreation and, thus, where our work becomes drudgery and our recreation becomes escape. Once, long ago, there were people who didn't need to flee the workplace because it satisfied their needs which went well beyond the mere need to earn a living. Once, work and life were intertwined.

¹We must understand that such an argument has fundamental political contexts. For example, whether starvation and disease are inevitable components of the human scene may be discussed differently by those who favor population control or not, by those who favor capitalism or not, by those who favor colonialism or not--by those who eat too much and those who don't have enough to eat.

18. We must work harder. We seem to be guided by some sort of Law of Inertia-- i.e., it's either too early or too late to do something about a problem, it's either his fault or her fault, and "I have my own problems." It seems that many in this field aren't driven by blind ambition, or any other type. Possibly, that may be why the more things change in this field, the more they remain the same. But there's an aura, a feeling that things are changing. Possibly, it's because things today remain the same differently from how they remained the same before. For example, "everyone" in my field is for deinstitutionalization, but we have institutions. "Everyone" is for mainstreaming, but children are segregated in the schools. "Everyone" is for reforming diagnostic procedures, but children are still selected for special programs because they have low I.Q.'s. We have bureaucratized our values (hence, the smile and the handshake are merely programmed responses), and we have codified our advocacy and good intentions (hence, it isn't that we necessarily believe in mainstreaming but that the President of the United States will hit us with a big club if we don't go along with it). We must remember the Biblical admonition not to offer wild animals for sacrifice. Sacrifice must cost one something. We must offer things we will miss. We must give things we find valuable. Of course, the most valuable sacrifice is when one offers himself to a cause. Work. Work. Work.