

Perspectives

How to Change the World (Without Ruining It or Yourself)

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Burton Blatt is dean of the SU School of Education. Those who work with him, though, also know him as one of education's preeminent cheerleaders, an enthusiastic advocate for dedication and energy in all interpersonal pursuits.

With another year of academic give-and-take about to unfold, Dean Blatt has taken a moment to share some of his observations on the business of changing—changing students, changing colleagues, changing the world. It all leads to one of Dean Blatt's favorite nuggets of advice: "Work. Work. Work."

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, and their grandparents were expected to model and be judged by. Once that lesson enjoyed greater popularity. The Athenian citizens pledged this old ideal: "We will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

So I ask: How does one go about changing the world? Better yet, how does one leave the world a better place than he found it?

What follows are some ideas for world-changers—teachers, mentors, advocates—that, though not guaranteed to revolutionize the world, will at least not make it any worse:

The Importance of You

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. But, if blaming other people and other institutions permits you to avoid personal confrontation, then you too contribute to the evil.

2. You must also remember what each of us tries hard to forget—man's mortality. Of course, we know people must die, but most of us live as if it simply won't happen to us. As William Saroyan remarked before his death (when he realized he was going to die), "Now what?" A person shouldn't live his life without ever asking that question—perhaps the most serious of all questions.

3. People are people. Each human being is fragile and interdependent; at times, silly, and at others wonderful; often weak when it doesn't matter, and sometimes strong when it does. Those among us who understand that have strength others don't.

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 man in the street dreams of becoming rich and famous, and our rich and famous have romantic memories of anonymous lives in which they can walk the streets unnoticed, or eat a meal uninterrupted. But there's another way of looking at these flights from one's reality: Everybody is fleeing from the same things—the small and great irritations each of us must experience by living, the unhappiness each of us must face at some time during our lives, the disappointments even great men have, and our certain mortality.

The disease of professionals—many who are world-changers—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 all share the same destiny. And we can improve the world immeasurably if we look for the best in each other.

Serious Stuff

4. Changing the world 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 at least want to work for it, because the institutions of education will better serve our efforts to change this world than perpetuating those of ignorance.

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. We must also work much harder to understand non-Western cultures and their people.

5. The role of the teacher, the doctor, and other practitioners in the helping professions 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 change, but to make that change a reality. Our job, in other words, is not only to test the "Educability Hypothesis," but also to make it come true—to demonstrate that capability is educable.

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 basic



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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 and 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 its unexpectedness. By definition, that's the required ingredient for a miracle to occur. Had Sullivan not assumed responsibility for Helen, there would have been no miracle, no story, no demonstration of educability.

6. Be careful about what bandwagon you jump on. Today, what's in vogue is mainstreaming. But you owe it to yourself, as well as to those you serve, to know which bandwagon you've jumped on—or you may find yourself going to the cemetery rather than to the Mardi Gras.

Freedom and History

7. Most people revere their freedom more than their very lives. Every day, all over this globe, people lay down their lives rather than submit to physical or political enslavement. For instance, the battles to evacuate institutions for the mentally retarded and to integrate handicapped children in the public schools are being fought on behalf of freedom 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."

8. We must learn more from history. We must learn lessons from Nazi Germany, for example. We must struggle to understand better 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?

9. How does one transform one's

empty life to a full life? "A small, full brimming cup" is the good life each person seeks. But there is a seeming contradiction: One's life is full when the corn has been picked and the work completed. But for the barn to overflow, the field has to be barren. So, too, throughout one's life there will be empty places, just as there will be times of plenty. But some places are empty because the harvest has just been taken. Other places are barren because they are neglected and, thus, may always be barren. Some places are filled because there is greed. Others are filled because there is hope and responsibility for one's family and neighbors.

A Place for Everyone

10. There must be a concept of community. 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.

11. Giving people facts can change their behavior. If people are told the truth, they might do something positive to correct the problems, to mitigate them, or at least to understand them better.

12. There are not sufficient resources in our society to serve all of the people. 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 with which to satisfy them. Hard times merely require us to work harder, to be more thoughtful, and to substitute our hard work and wisdom for dollars (which we don't have enough of) or additional workers.

13. We must work hard to deprogram our lives. Too many of us live rigidly segmented lives in which our work is separated from our recreation. Work then 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.

Working

14. We must work harder. We seem to be guided by some sort of Law of Inertia—it's either too early or too late to do something about a problem, it's either his fault or her fault, or it's somebody else's problem. It seems that many in this field—education—aren't driven by blind ambition, or any type of ambition at all. Possibly, that may be why the more things change in this field, the more they remain the same.

We must give things. We must offer things we will miss. We must make sacrifices—the most valuable of which is offering oneself to a cause.

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