

Four Basic Premises for a Viable Social Ethics and an Effective Social Transformation Movement

There are many social transformation movements that are making significant contributions to the awakening and activating of the caring portion of the human family. No one of us even knows all the wonderful things that are going on. Nevertheless, I have a very strong impression that these many social transformation movements are like small streams looking for that one river that can make the truly needed impression upon our times. And within each of these movements, the various members seem to me to be working in their own trickle without a very clear picture of how their trickle relates to the whole river of social transformation and the whole drama of planetary history.

For example, let us say that a particular person or group of persons is doing wonderful work on water issues. (It might be forest issues or sewage issues or land management issues or ocean preservation issues or economic justice issues or restoring democracy issues, or any one of a hundred other good things.) If water is my specialty, what is needed from me is not giving up the special knowledge and work I do on water issues. Rather, I need to see my water work in the widest context. I need to be an evangelist for that widest context. When I give my speeches on water, I need to have a wonderful introduction to those speeches in which I call my audience to membership in that vast river of a planetary movement that makes significant all the smaller streams and trickles. I am not calling people only to work on water or to simply help me with my water projects. I am calling them to redirect the course of planetary history as members of a vast movement that can actually get that done.

Only the broadest context is deeply motivating. The following is a brief outline of how that master context might be put together. I have organized this outline into four major premises. These premises provide only a sketch of the wisdom needed for a thoroughgoing transformation, but they head the mind in an appropriate direction.

Premise One: The well-being of humanity is not the master context. **The well-being of the planet is the master context.** Humans, trees, oceans, and frogs are sub-contexts within the overall context of well-being for the entire planet. It is, however, humans who are constructing this new context and humans are one of our deepest concerns for the well-being of the planet. We are not envisioning a planet without humans, but one in which humans play a mutually enhancing role among all the life forms and geological processes that comprise this cosmic home. Viewed from this context, life on this planet is in severe crisis, including human life. The vision of a viable future that grows from this basic premise is foggy in many of its details but extremely clear in its general outlines. We humans cannot continue in the modes of social organization we have called "civilization." Nor can we return to the modes of social organization we have called "tribal." Learning from centuries of past experience as well as from our current experience, we have to, step by step, construct a new mode of social organization that is both post-civilizational and post-tribal. This new mode of social organization will emphasize grassroots democracy and be especially attentive to local geographical regions within which are constructed mutually enhancing relations among all the plants and animals and humans that live there. And each of these local regions cannot be isolated, but must cooperate in a planet-wide network of mutual respect, protection, and enhancement. Most members of the bioregional movement are clear about all or most of the elements in this overall context. Other movements are coming to see the primacy of this ecological context. Tons more could be said about all of this, but simple statements about it are also needed. Perhaps each of us who see ourselves as planetary activists need to be able to say this briefly, accurately, and convincingly to every person within our scope of influence.

But as we consider actually sharing this vision with the general populations of our era, we need to understand how alternative this vision is to the popular but obsolete vision that is consciously or unconsciously held by the vast majority of people. The beauty, glory and necessity of the alternative vision sketched above is eclipsed in the minds of those who still cling to the now obsolete vision that in its beginnings was called the "Enlightenment." The Enlightenment in its glory days was a needed deliverance from the "endarkenment" of a stodgy, obsolete, devil-infested, medieval Europe. In its current worn out form, this once enlightening vision might be characterized as the belief that perpetual economic growth driven by the free enterprise of technologically inventive humans will make kings and queens of all people. Those who rock along in this now popular delusion must be told that making six billion people kings and queens in accord with the middle-class standards of a developed industrial society would take the resources of several planets (at least 3, perhaps 20). Fresh water may be the most severe limit we face, but oil is also an interesting example that draws much commentary these days. Both the U.S. and China have exceeded the capacities of their home-produced oil; and for their still growing addiction to this convenient fuel, they depend upon the larger pools still cheaply extracted in the Middle East. In fact, we are seeing the grim drama of the U.S., England, France, Germany, Russia, China, India and other economies positioning themselves like thirsty wolves to drink from these pools their remaining billions of barrels of black wealth. A similar deadly and dangerous drama will develop around natural gas, coal, metals, water, arable land, forests, ocean fish, and even the air we breath. Lucid members of the well-to-do have already ceased to speak of "raising all boats." Many will settle for keeping their own boat afloat while knowing full well that the put-through of resources corralled by every millionaire results in pushing a host of others to the brink of survival. This trend of history is much worse than unsustainable; it is vicious, deadly, demoralizing, and ugly.

It is understandable that human beings have delayed facing up to the choice that must be made between these two visions, but delay means opting for the existing trajectory. The alternative vision will require the pain of vast changes in every area of human life, but it does hold the promise of a few billion people living in relative peace and safety and health on a planet that is capable of sustaining human life. The most pressing question that an awake and serious social transformation movement now confronts is how we lead humanity in making this basic choice and how we turn historical developments in this direction. In order to know what to do and how to do it, we must think through what is blocking positive movement.

Premise Two: We who would be part of an effective social transformation movement must identify the **core blocks** to meaningful and long-lasting changes in the overall direction indicated in Premise One. If we do not know what is blocking movement in this alternative direction, we cannot design the appropriate strategies and tactics to overcome those blocks. However painful it is to face these horrific blocks, the blocks are valuable to us. They guide us to appropriate and effective action. They enable inclusive action and thereby deliver us from being scattered into a plethora of pitiful pools of private piddling. Clarity on the core blocks is being talked about and written about quite widely. Here are four of the most important conclusions that arise from this discussion:

1. The main block to effective change is the inordinate power of an oligarchy of **transnational corporations** and those who control them. Primarily dedicated to their own profitability and growth, these bodies of vast social power control our economic, political, and cultural lives, destroy democracy, threaten virtually every natural environment, and frustrate even our quest for the simple truth.
2. A secondary but still important block is the various forms of what we might call "**reactionary pre-modernism.**" The Taliban and other Islamic medievalists are a prime illustration. Christian fundamentalists and similar movements in almost every religious community are also examples. Indeed, all of us, from time to time, may have attempted

to recover some idealized past. All these tendencies are a distraction and are potentially dangerous to the realization of our viable hopes for planetary well-being.

3. Our massively financed mainstream **information systems** are bought, controlled and censored by transnational corporations and/or reactionary pre-modernists. Getting out the truth on any key topic is very difficult. Money and talent and time must be assembled to create information systems that go around (or take the place of) the well established and grossly deceptive propaganda machines.

4. Fourthly, we face the **inertia of popular mindsets**. For example, the U.S. upper and middle classes have been so pampered that many (if not most) long to live in some sort of "Pleasantville" where no trouble or conflict exists. This makes these members of society, in spite of their education, surprisingly easy to deceive by smooth-talking propagandists of the status quo. And the poorer classes seldom possess the skills, the time, or the funds to fully escape these same delusions. Further, Christian fundamentalists (with their rejection of good science and their otherworldly preoccupations) are another massive cop-out from facing the sober truth and practical work called for in our times. As the true prophets of all ages have implied, bad religion is a much more dangerous addiction than cocaine or heroin. Powerful awakenment skills, nurturing means, and educational methods will be needed to overcome this block of interior inertia.

Premise Three: Our movements for effective social change need a **winning strategy and effective means** of social transformation. Here are some of the important areas in which confusion and disagreements tend to arise.

1. **Do we work within the existing structures of government and industry or do we work alongside those structures?** If our vision were merely to make a few major changes in industrial civilization, then working within the structures would be our answer. If our vision were to simply walk away from industrial civilization and allow it to finish collapsing while we restore some form of tribal society, then working alongside the structures would be our answer. But if it is our vision to build a whole new mode of society that is beyond both the civilizational and tribal modes, then we must work both within and alongside at the same time. Working only within the current systems will result in making them work better and last longer rather than being replaced by something better. But equally ineffective is the strategy of simply dropping out of the existing structures, doing pure-Green things, and then hoping that the mainline world will collapse without harming these alternative achievements. Our times are not as simple as were the times of the Mayan peasants who, when Mayan civilization collapsed, simply returned to the woods and reestablished their tribal modes of survival and culture. Today, there are not enough woods, certainly not for 6 or 10 billion people. Deeper still, tribal life is not what humanity truly wants. While humanity will have to give up the delusory hope that all of us (or even some of us) can be aristocratic persons with virtually unlimited resources, we need not (and probably cannot) give up our planet-wide consciousness, our educated ability to participate in democratic consensus, or our hope for basic economic security. All this means that we are committed to a post-civilization not a pre-civilization vision of the future. And strategically, this means that we have to both work within the existing structures and alongside the existing structures at one and the same time. We need to assist the existing structures to pass through a step-by-step, relatively safe, deconstruction. And we need to assist the new mode of society in its step-by-step emergence and replacement of structures we are phasing out.

2. **Do we attempt to avoid conflict or does conflict with the current society play an important role in our strategy?** I believe that we need open, attention-getting nonviolent conflict. Without such conflict, unopposed foolishness and corruption becomes by default the unstated consensus. Open, public, and highly imaginative conflict

serves to awaken and educate a population even when the stated goals of such actions are not being realized. The ongoing protests at the meetings of the World Trade Organization and other such bodies are prime examples of such awakening actions.

With very few exceptions, violent protests and armed opposition serve only to justify the oppressive forces in their desire to smash to oblivion every fragment of their opposition. It is true that the native people of Chiapas have used military means effectively in their fight for full participation in the Mexican nation. But this is a rare exception. Military means could not have been used successfully by African Americans in their fight against segregation. It was not needed to win the independence of India from Great Britain. Just as warfare should be a last resort for established governments, so violent means should be a last resort for disestablishment forces. This is especially true if we are doing a step-by-step deconstruction and replacement rather than hoping for a general collapse of some "evil empire." Today a large portion of the forces of Islamic extremism have opted for violent means. Their goal is to bring about the total collapse of the "devilish" modern world and thus clear space for the recovery of their patriarchal and medieval ideals. Both their vision and their strategy is misguided. Their terrorist attacks have called forth a flourishing of the most militaristic elements in industrial civilization. Indeed, they have made activating an oppressive, militaristic U.S. world empire seem patriotic and justified to many millions of people.

3. Is there a responsible use of police and military forces or do we need to phase out such institutions from our post-civilizational societies? On the one hand, it seems clear to me that we must discontinue our idolization of military means and stop counting on them to resolve problems they cannot resolve. At the same time, it is naïve to dream of doing away with these necessary social functions rather than think through what it would mean to create a democratically controlled police and military that ably perform responsible restraint. Scaling back humanity's overemphasis on military means is clearly needed, yet pure pacifism is illusory. Such pacifism results in types of inaction that permit military overemphasis rather than restrain it. The world community needs to have restraining forces that can police the worst impulses of humanity. But in order for these military impulses themselves to be restrained, military force needs to be subservient to democratically controlled civilian governments that are genuinely concerned to promote liberty and justice for all.

Some U.S. liberals have argued that we need to equalize the sacrifices of warfare by drafting the upper classes as well as enlisting the unemployed. But such arguments miss the main point. We don't need more cannon fodder. We need more well trained professional men and women who can be nation builders, diplomats, policing assistants, social order trainers, and the like. A volunteer military makes for a better military, and we need highly professional military personnel just as we need highly professional policemen and prison guards. A military organization made up of draftees becomes a moral morass unless we are truly in a huge World War that almost everyone agrees is necessary, just, and noble.

Certainly, we do not want to institute a draft in order to meet the ongoing demands of maintaining control of Middle Eastern oil reserves. That hidden policy has been maliciously mingled with policing terrorist networks. There is no "Third or Fourth World War" in progress. Indeed, there is no "War on Terrorism." This is all hype. What we have is some very angry Islamic malcontents who have selected horrific terrorist tactics for conducting some semi-valid protesting of the corrupt reign of corporate power. These Islamic extremists, who want to retreat to an idealized medieval patriarchy with an admixture of modern fascism, are indeed an enemy that someone must restrain. But this does not constitute a war. It only becomes a war when viewed through the panicky eyes of U.S. oil-addicted conservatives who want to make sure that cheap oil lasts through

their lifetimes. The so-called “War on Terrorism” is not against terrorism but for control of the needed resources to continue business as usual for another decade or so. And the hypocritical style of neoconservative war-making is increasing rather than reducing the number of terrorists. Indeed, the U.S. may run out of funds and willing cannon fodder before these expanding terrorist movements run out of suicidal bodies.

Furthermore, U.S. military preparations need to be redirected away from the current emphasis on next-generation, super-techno, magical equipment, including star-wars “defense” systems that are actually a militarization of outer space to zap potential threats to corporate rule. We need a military that is prepared for the noble calling of restraining genocide and protecting the innocent wherever in the world a modest employment of force can do this job. Taking over authoritarian governments and selling ourselves as liberators of people who possess important-to-us resource bases is not the appropriate mission.

Here is one more reason for a competent military. When the U.S. has a civilian governance that is truly committed to liberty and justice for all as well as ecological viability and long-range human survival, we may see terrorist actions by U.S. extremists. To handle such eventualities, we need skillful police forces and military personnel. This is another reason why the U.S. or any nation needs a quality, professional military who are trained in judicious means of restraint. All-out warfare is a practice that needs to go into the dust bin of history along with slavery. But ongoing, responsible restraint needs to remain an important part of our alternative social vision and an important part of our strategy for social transformation.

4. Is ordinary democratic politics a primary or peripheral strategy of action? I understand why awake people get discouraged with the voting process. They see the truth that they are often voting for the least bad of two non-solutions. Nevertheless, I believe that electoral politics needs to play a primary role in our strategic thinking. Democratic institutions, however flawed, are our only viable means of bringing discipline to the greedy anarchy currently practiced by our huge profit-making institutions. Rather than demonizing governmental regulation, we need to design truly ingenious regulations that create a fair playing field for economic activity and cultural renewal.

Using the U.S. political scene as an example, we need to clarify to U.S. voters that it is both patriotic and imperative to marginalize the neoconservative perspective that has currently hijacked the U.S. Republican party. This defeat is not assured. And it is not going to be accomplished by the Green Party, or by Ralph Nader, or by local organizing, or by dramatic protests. It is going to be accomplished by the Democratic Party. So, however nauseating becoming Democrats may seem to some transformation forces, these forces need to ditch their perfectionism and join liberal and moderate Democrats in winning elections within our current national, state, and local structures. Rather than organize third parties, we need to overrun the Democratic Party with new well-informed voters and candidates who will work to force corporation-coopted Democratic politicians to become Republicans. In this way, I believe we can also drive the neoconservative Republicans off the stage entirely. Within the U.S. two-party system that is so firmly structured in law, third party organization is often, if not always, a waste of effort. When we vote for “pure” candidates who voice our version of the truth, we often end up electing the worst of the electable options offered in this ruthlessly two-party system. If we could institute instant runoff voting, then third-party organization would be more meaningful, but even then it would remain mostly an educational function. Perhaps fifty to a hundred years from now, we might dream of having a vastly different political system in the U.S. But for now we have to work within the system we have, and this means becoming Democrats, perhaps radical Democrats, but Democrats none the less.

As the radical playwright Tony Kushner points out in an interview in the June 2004 Utne

Reader, the Democratic party is “the party of the people of the United State. It is ethnically diverse, it’s not all rich people, its platform is at least essentially progressive and decent. . . . it’s the party that passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Great Society and the Fair Deal.” In other words, this is a tradition that we can build upon. When the neoconservative delusions have been marginalized along the KKK, then the Democratic Party can split in two and the debate can be conducted upon a more progressive spectrum of issues.

Only the Democratic Party can be counted upon to institute public financing of political campaigns so that candidates will not have to be millionaires or friends of millionaires to run for the higher offices. Also, with Democrats fully empowered, we have a chance of making sure that the voter registration systems and vote-counting systems are updated and made pristinely fair. Even these easily doable reforms can only come about if masses of nonvoters insist on voting for Democrats, insist on having their votes counted, and insist on being given by the Democratic Party votes that make a difference. The Democratic party can, with work, be the party that favors government of the people, by the people, and for people rather than a second Republican party favoring government of the corporations, by the corporations, and for the corporations.

Politics is the art of the possible. Compromise and step-by-step changes are the essence of political action. Though this may be frustrating to many idealistic progressives, such ordinary democratic strategies are a necessary part of winning the long-range transitions we need.

5. Are our democratic court systems a viable means of social transformation or are they too locked into past traditions to promote needed change? I believe we need to use the courts to convict and punish severely any trace of corruption, pollution, or playing loose with the law. The corporate tyrants want law and order for everyone except themselves. They are extremely vulnerable to well conducted legal challenges. This legal work can culminate in denying corporations their current inappropriate status as legal persons. This will free the judicial structures to be even more effective in supporting needed changes. Sometimes the courts provide almost the only effective means of discovering those elements of truth that are so thoroughly suppressed by corporation-controlled governments and corporation-owned media outlets.

6. Do we need to work for social transformation from the grass roots up or from the top down? This has been a strong debate, so it may seem strange to say that the answer is both. Though we must avoid the old style, hierarchical, aristocratic, and dictatorial patterns, we need to transform all scopes of governance: planet, continent, area, region, and local. Some local developments need to be restrained and challenged by policies developed at the larger scopes of decision making. Nevertheless, it is also true that genuine democracy is rooted in local decision making. It is an important principle for the development of future political structures to insist that any decision that can be made at a smaller scope of governance should be. One of the reasons why local decision-making does not succeed in involving more people and generating real power is that local leadership and most people are not skilled in effective group methods. The processes of consensus building are not clearly understood. Many organizations have too little continuing structure to be effective. Other organizations have too little openness and encouragement of every-person participation. Simply stated, it is not easy to work with people at the grassroots level. Thus, too many activists opt to overemphasize topdown methods. They recruit celebrities and attempt to reach the grass roots citizenry through the mass media. While such work may be useful, the establishment can always outspend the disestablishment in mass media tactics. But in person-to-person grassroots organizing, the disestablishment has advantages, and these advantages need to be used in the transition period as well as built into the political structures of the future.

Premise Four: The inclusive vision, core blocks and strategical wisdom summarized in Premises One, Two, and Three are essential, but the first priority of our practical action is to build a **larger constituency**. Without masses of informed and dedicated people we cannot do the tasks that matter most. In addition to all the activities referred to in the six items under Premise Three, social transformation movements need to encourage arts centers and education centers; reinvigorate labor unions; promote worker-owned-and-controlled cooperatives; encourage the starting of more alternative construction companies, organic farms, land management groups, community organizations; etc. etc. It takes lots of people and lots of time to do these many important things.

So how do we radicalize, inspire, and nurture the millions of people it takes to do all the things required to transform postmodern society in a lasting way? I believe we have to learn how to powerfully tell the truth about the current world, and tell it in every corner of the society. We have to paint in dramatic detail our vision of the future and our clarity on the workable strategies that inspire people to see that significant long-range changes are possible. We need to do this in public not in secret. We need to write books, publish articles, hold courses and workshops, make speeches, and raise hell in every public forum to which we belong. This hell raising, inspiration, and education presupposes personally embodying the truth, the truth about how tragic our current trajectories are, the truth about what and who is promoting these trends, the truth about the kinds of organizations and actions that have a real promise of succeeding, and the truth about the positive potentials of human beings. If we believe that truth will win in the end, then our challenge is to learn what the truth is and dedicate ourselves to living it.

But any truth that indicates the need for far-reaching changes in the entire frame of society will not be as popular than the familiar practices. Societies are inherently conservative. Even when their very survival is at stake, the leaders and citizens of many societies have chosen to die rather than change. So how can a massive constituency for change arise? The starving are never conservatives; they prefer to eat. The neglected and oppressed are never conservatives, they prefer some attention and dignity. And as the poor realize that trickle-down economics is a lie, they will become a constituency for change. Local communities whose water, trees, air, and health are vanishing can consider changes that conserve such elemental values. Women (only somewhat delivered from centuries of oppression) can see that the oppression of nature and the oppression of the poor also includes the oppression of most women. Racial minorities (only somewhat delivered from structural racism) can see that the oligarchies that oppress women, the poor, and devastate nature are also the supporters of continuing racism. As the ecological crisis intensifies, the middle classes will be squeezed. Only a few will “advance” to retain their status as kings and queens. Most of the middle classes will be reduced to poverty. And with the middle classes vanishing, no buffer between rich and poor will remain, so the rich will have to barricade themselves into protective bubbles that are ever more vulnerable to puncture. As truths like these sink in, the conservation of our present trajectories become less popular in all sectors of society.

The key factor in engaging all these components of the population is the public actions of those who simply love the truth. If persistent, the lovers of truth can in time build that huge constituency we need. This is a realistic hope.

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I believe that these four premises, if further developed into the full clarity and consensus we need, can empower the lovers of truth to call forth that mighty river of social transformation that can actually meet the challenge of setting an appropriate course for human history.