

Chapter 8

The Three Types of Social Change

I want to delineate three types of social change. I will call them “Repair,” “Reform,” and “Transformation.” In this book I will be focusing on transformation; however, the other two types of social change are also important parts of our lives. In this chapter I will acknowledge the presence in our lives of repair and reform and affirm the need for them, even though I will not be elaborating on them fully in this book.

Repair

By “Repair” I mean all those social change activities that have to do with maintaining the existing society. For example, repair would include handling such needs as maintaining the highway infrastructure, the electrical grid, the zoning of property uses, the support for educational buildings and teacher salaries, and fairly conducted elections. Repair also includes enforcing the laws, policing corporation corruption, rooting out governmental corruption, and much more.

The members of every society must remain alert to all such matters and take care of these repair issues as they arise and impair the ongoing health of the society. Sometimes such matters may be of urgent importance. Sometimes such matters must be handled before a society can deal with the more profound types of society change I will be pointing to with the terms “Reform” and “Transformation.”

Reform

By “Reform” I mean an alteration of the basic policy or basic story that an existing social system chooses to follow. Where political parties in a electoral system differ greatly, they usually differ on how or whether the existing society needs to be reformed. For example, one party might affirm that the U.S. government needs to be the strongest military power in the world and needs to use that power to assure the economic interests of U.S. based corporations and the overall U.S. economy. This party might see itself engaging in reform if the nation tends to be isolationist or soft in its willingness to deploy military means to assure our interests and to remain the key leader in world affairs. Another party might think that reform means promoting to a story that is very different from being the world’s foremost imperial power. Perhaps this party proposes reforms having to do with becoming an exemplary democracy at home with a foreign policy that is multilateral, working out clear consensus with other nations and acting in concert with them on all matters of far-reaching planetary importance.

One of the most important reforms discussed by U.S. progressives is electoral reform. This is something more than repairing the voting machinery and registration procedures. Progressive promote reforms that entail limiting the influence of big money interests in the campaigning process. It may include proposals for the public financing of campaigns. It may include proposals for instant runoff voting, a process that gives third parties the possibility of being participants in the general debate without becoming spoilers in the outcome of the current two-party monopoly. Such reforms border on being transformations, for the two-party monopoly, strongly financed by powerful money interests, has become an entrenched aspect of the current social system of the United States.

But let us continue to view election reforms as “Reform.” Even extensive reforms in this arena are not systemic transformations but changes that enable the existing social system to participate for easily in systemic transformations.

Transformation

The adoption of the declaration of independence and the U.S. constitution was, in its time, an example of systemic transformation. An entire mode of governance, monarchy, was set aside, and a thoroughgoing alternative was installed. Most people in the current United States do not even want to think about doing anything so far reaching as that today. Perhaps other nations on the planet need transformation, they say, but not the United States. Indeed it is the common view of the U.S. population that the needed transformations on this planet are for other nations to become more like the United States.

The call of our times, however, for ecologically sustainable human societies on this planet includes a need for a huge transformation of U.S. practices. Indeed, the United States, being the largest per capita user of planetary resources, is probably the most urgent place for thoroughgoing ecological transformation to occur. Some have attempted to define a sustainable society as a society very similar to the society we have, but this is misleading. I will deal with this confusion in the next chapter. For now I will simply assert that finding a way to sustain the natural systems of lakes, rivers, oceans, air quality, soils, grasslands, forests, arable land, animal populations, etc. in a manner that assures a mutually enhancing relation between humanity and the rest of the natural world requires a thoroughgoing social transformation of virtually every aspect of industrial society.

Other social transformations that we might consider center around the need for further democratization, a democratization that includes the decentralization of decision-making power to more local institutions, a democratization that includes the sort of grassroots consensus building that genuinely makes a difference in the destiny of the planet.

Then there are cultural transformations. We are currently engaged in finishing a planet-wide effort to overcome patriarchy – to form attitudes, social customs, and morays that fully balance feminine and masculine components of human nature. This is a deep transformation, and it should not be minimized or assumed to be complete anywhere on earth.

Racism is another transformation arena. The imposition of religious uniformity on a nation or a region is another malady calling for cultural transformation. Individualism is also a current cultural malady, where “individualism” means twisting the valid Enlightenment and Reformation recovery of individual autonomy and honor and rights into being an island of consumer indulgence that is estranged from participation in local communities and in social-change groupings within which true social responsibility becomes possible.

A Spirit-based ethics must be primarily concerned with these and other social transformations. This does not mean that a Spirit-based ethics needs to neglect reform or repair. Rather, it means that a Spirit-based ethics must not limit its sense of social responsibility to these more moderate types of change. Also, it is these profound social transformations that call upon the deepest Spirit resources within our humanity. In all the chapters that follow I intend to clarify further the meaning of “Social Transformation.”