

Foreword

by Mary Catherine Bateson

Mark Clarke is committed for the long haul, proposing a sustainable approach to change. He reminds teachers that they are, willy-nilly, *change agents*, because this is part of the basic nature of teaching. But he invites them to go further and become *agitators*; by this he refers to discovering the leeway in the system and shaking it up, ever so gently. He speaks of reasonable success and sanity, of working quietly and patiently, of listening rather than preaching. But unlike the great majority of those working to improve schools and the experience of young people, he has set out to describe an approach that will not lead to the kind of burnout that has driven many reformers to despair and their colleagues to bewilderment and cynicism.

This sustainable approach to change is presented from two points of view, systems theory and uncommon common sense. Clarke introduces systems theory in direct, accessible language that makes it clear why institutions are so resistant to the unilateral imposition of change and so ready to revert to previous patterns. Schools involve many persons and parts, their common behavior linked by multiple factors and constraints; as such they function like living systems, with capacities for self-correction and self-healing to maintain familiar patterns and settings, so a bright new idea may sink like a stone in a pond or be rapidly reinterpreted to conform to older models. It should be

some comfort to realize that resistance to change is a sign of health and resilience, however infuriating. But living systems also have the capacity to adapt and learn, to adopt new patterns that will then be maintained, and it is this capacity Clarke would have teachers address, just as they do in the classroom. To do this, he invites his readers to examine their own efforts to change themselves and to learn from their successes and failures.

Systems theory developed as a way to think about organization at very different levels that have significant similarities: either a tree or a forest, a nation or a family, a classroom of children and their teacher learning along with them. Because there are similarities between these different levels of systemic organization, Clarke puts great emphasis on *coherence*: acting in ways congruent with (and therefore respectful of) other systems, including persons, ways that build trust. These essays suggest a way of thinking about a wide variety of issues, considering education as one of many related processes. One can ask of each chapter how it applies to environmental issues, to urban violence, to world peace? In every case, there have been efforts to solve problems that have made them worse.

In addition to exploring systems theory, Clarke seeks ways to present this material that will resonate with familiar experience. All too frequently, systems theory is presented as a form of engineering, with off-putting diagrams and technical terminology that give it a sort of modernistic glamour. However, it is best presented in ways that connect with the sense of what it is to be alive and with intuitions about how living beings can meet and learn from each other. Diagrams are useful and important, but they encourage mechanistic thinking. As our society has moved more deeply into its romance with change combined with an insistence on speed, we have begun to apply ever simpler epistemologies to bring it about—we want to find a button to push for each desired change, the social equivalent of a silver bullet. It is simpler to scapegoat teachers than to ask whether the society, as a whole, presses children into adaptations that work against learning. Punishment is easier than persuasion. Regulations are easy to pro-

mulgate but difficult to adjust to a living system, which may have an extraordinary capacity to circumvent them. Above all, it is easier to tell others that they need to change than to begin by changing oneself. Much of Clarke's presentation is deceptively simple, sounding like good old-fashioned common sense, which of course it is, good old-fashioned common sense that needs to be reconsidered.

The homespun quality of some of this wisdom should not be surprising. Indeed, it might be an interesting exercise to match each chapter of this book with a familiar proverb—and to notice how routinely such folk wisdom is ignored, for proverbs encapsulate a wide range of human experience, tested over many generations. The modern tendency is to pursue a goal through a simple lineal sequence of cause and effect rather than a complex and recursive unfolding, full of paradoxical reverses and unexpected side effects, that can sometimes gradually spiral into a healthier state. For some chapters you might find a pair of contradictory proverbs (“Look before you leap,” but “He who hesitates is lost”) that reflect two equally important aspects of the process, both to be respected. Unfortunately, when some desired change is not adopted, we interpret that as failure rather than as an invitation to reflect more deeply. “If a theory can't help you deal with life and death, what good is it?”

This book offers a subtle tool kit for moving toward viable strategies for educational renewal, ways of reflecting rather than answers. There is a need in our time for theory to guide reflection and action, and while some aspects of that theory have been around for a long time, others run against routine instrumental assumptions and the desire for the quick fix. There is much in the world today that is threatening, crying out for remedial action that often makes things worse. My own belief is that teachers have a critical role to play in creating a sustainable future for the next generation and for the world, for the way we move ahead in renewing education will implicitly transmit a way of thinking about change. Thus this book can be taken narrowly as an application of ecological ideas, based on systems thinking, to teaching; but it is also a modest reminder of

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the many examples of paradoxical effects produced by human efforts to modify the natural world, and a model for rethinking common errors in politics and economics.

Make no mistake, Mark Clarke is calling for revolution, but this is “a quiet revolution with shots not heard.”