

Introduction

This book was written for pragmatic idealists. People who can imagine a better world and are committed to working toward it. Individuals who are dissatisfied with the status quo and discouraged at the pace of change. People who are passionate about making the world a better place but realistic about what it takes to accomplish it.

The tone I want to strike is one of grim hopefulness—a reasoned balance between faith in people, particularly teachers, and awareness that we are living in dangerous times. We cannot escape the maelstrom of change that surrounds us, but we can position ourselves to respond thoughtfully.

Recently, in the midst of a class discussion, a young teacher declared passionately that she did not want to change her students but that she did want them to learn. A friend who is a counselor made a similar statement in response to a comment I made about his efforts to change his clients; he said that he preferred to think about his work as helping people grow. Parents want their children to be happy and well adjusted, but not at the expense of their creativity and originality. These comments reveal our ambivalence about change; we would prefer to think of people as autonomous and inner-directed, and we dislike the authoritarian implications that come from thinking we are working to change others. However, individuals cannot learn, or grow, or be well adjusted, without changing.

Most individuals whose work deals directly with other people must live with the fact that change is an important outcome of their efforts. We may prefer to use different terms when we discuss our work—coaching, counseling, learning, growth, development, curriculum reform, instructional innovation—but basically, if there has been no change at the end of a designated period of time, we count our efforts as a failure.

We also must learn to see the changes that we undergo as a result of our work. We are accustomed to thinking back on our youth as a time when we made lots of mistakes and learned (or not) from them, but only rarely do we look upon our daily work as an opportunity to change. The position taken in these essays is that the only person over whom we have any real control is ourselves—and even that is limited—so that the most productive approach to change efforts is to assume that we are the ones who are going to do the most changing.

These essays proceed from a single theoretical perspective—that provided by *systems theory*. Taken together, they provide a coherent approach to identifying problems and formulating strategies for solving them. But they do not provide a sequential, logical approach to effecting change. That is to say, the approach is not “logical” as this term is commonly employed in discussions of social and educational problem solving. Any attempt at setting in motion a “sequential” course of events is usually doomed to failure by the very nature of things. Indeed, I will argue that the customary way of viewing problems and approaching solutions is, in fact, part of the problem.

Bookstores are brimming with volumes of advice on how to make the world a better place or, at least, how to improve that part of the world where we live and work. Some provide guidelines for becoming more efficient, for using time better, and for improving productivity. Others offer advice on managing money more effectively, giving tips on investing, getting out of debt, and turning junk into treasures. A growing number will give you a hard body (or a marathon trophy or clean arteries or slimmer thighs) if you follow a set regimen of diet and exercise. Spiritual guides aim a bit higher; if you have lost your sense of oneness with the universe, they will help

you reclaim it through a program of inspirational reading, contemplative rituals, and activities designed to improve your sensitivity. Moving beyond the improvement of self, other books provide a foundation for living that encompasses all aspects of life—family, work, worship, recreation. Several best-sellers offer frameworks and procedures for improving company productivity through a heightened awareness of chaos theory—the nonlinear, recursive nature of change.

The numbers of such books, and the extent to which self-improvement (perhaps the most pervasive synonym for *change*) is featured in the popular press (recently, while waiting in line at the grocery store, I counted 15 articles in five magazines that dealt in one way or another with the topic), are an indication of the importance of change in people's lives today—or, at least, of the perceived need for a sense of control over the changes that are occurring. Indeed, an observant visitor from another planet could be forgiven for thinking that we are obsessed with change.

What is interesting, however, is the fact that I have found no appreciable intersection of books on personal change and those on organizational or educational change in spite of the fact that lasting change in society or its institutions will require corresponding changes in individuals, including the individuals instigating the change. Throughout these essays I treat individuals and groups as examples of the same phenomenon—open systems. What is true for individuals is true for groups, although one may have to adjust one's perspective in order to accommodate the number and complexity of interacting variables. Most important, throughout the book I emphasize the need for personal change. The essays are intended as resources for individuals who are trying to change things, and my assumption is that people who are working for change are willing to change themselves as part of the process.

An important result of this approach to changing things is that I do not take the view that organized change—what is called “innovation” by most scholars—is necessarily healthy. This is not a handbook for administrators so much as a mental-health guide for conscientious

professionals. This book is intended for individuals who are motivated by ideals, who are working from a framework of personal values and commitment. I assume that your formal training and practical experience provide leavening for your zeal but that you are in the teaching profession because you feel strongly about issues of right and wrong. I take it for granted that you conscientiously examine the merits of proposed innovations and that you will not fall in line behind an “innovator” merely because she or he has the formal title of professor, principal, or assistant superintendent. Indeed, history teaches us that it is often necessary to resist the commands of a leader. These essays are offered both as a guide for effecting change and as a source of strategies for *principled resistance*.

This book contains no prescriptions, other than the paradoxical admonition that there are no prescriptions. However, the essays were written to provide individuals with resources for change. The one piece of advice that I have found helpful comes from my grandfather, who said that the only good advice is the advice you take. I think what he was trying to say is that it is easy to give advice but that the person who has to live with the consequences should be given the courtesy of deciding what constitutes good advice.

Teaching is portrayed here as a higher calling, a vocation in the original sense of the word. I do not believe that teaching is a role we play in front of students or that to be a good teacher we must develop a special persona. I do not think we should strive to be someone different in the classroom or faculty meeting from the person we are “in real life.” The same values and strategies should guide us in all spheres of our lives. Our students and colleagues should not be surprised when they encounter us in an unfamiliar setting—the behavior they observe there should be consistent with their impression of us. In fact, I believe that the most important teaching we do is that which is often called “modeling”—the unconscious messages we send merely by acting the way we act. You have heard the admonition, “Do as I say, not as I do.” This reveals our culture’s ambivalence about the disparity between the ideal and the real. I think we should be working to make them one thing. This alignment between our values and our

behavior is referred to as *coherence* in these essays, and it figures prominently in all the arguments I make.

The book is an example of this approach. All of the essays examine the same issues from the same point of view, but at differing levels of complexity and with differing focuses. Each essay was written to be read independently of the others, and for this reason there is some redundancy. The argument I am making requires a recursive reading, a cycling back to themes and topics from different angles, and for this reason each essay needs to be complete in itself. You can read them in any order, but to the extent that there is a linear progression of topics, it is represented in the order in which they appear. Here are brief summaries of the essays.

1—The Way Things Are: The Rationale for This Book

This essay presents a brief summary of systems thinking and an introduction to its key concepts. All living organisms and groups of organisms are systems and behave according to the same general principles. For this reason, whether we are talking about personal, organizational, or societal change, we should be using the same frame of reference and the same strategies for action. I identify six principles that help me keep the complexity of systems in mind without becoming overwhelmed. They are: (1) Systems have no purpose, in the conventional sense of a universally agreed-upon goal for their existence. (2) Systems cannot be controlled directly and unilaterally. (3) Systems function in cycles, which means, among other things, that if we can identify the cycle, we can improve on our attempts to change things. (4) Systems function on the basis of internal and external information. This requires us to appreciate the nature of information and to acknowledge that an individual's history and perceptions are just as important as external pressures as we attempt to understand events. (5) Systems cannot be understood independently of their contexts. And finally, (6) systems require a budget of flexibility; in our change efforts we need to create environments for change and give ourselves and others room to operate.

2—A Systems Perspective of Changing, Teaching, and Learning

Presented here are implications of systems thinking for the daily grind. I work from three assumptions: that teachers are change agents, that they are guided in their efforts by a dedication to the greater good, and that it's all one thing—the rules for teaching are the same as the rules for living. Because systems theory can get a bit abstract, I develop a number of assertions about the nature of change, teaching, and learning that can serve as guidelines for daily activity, touchstones for decision making. The list is an effort to connect the grand sweep of the cosmos with the mundane details of my waking hours. I remind myself that I have limited influence over the big issues but that what control I do have is not insignificant for the individuals involved. I recognize that I am the individual who has to do most of the learning and changing and that patience is required and pain is expected if the cause is just. In particular, it is important to create environments in which people can make good decisions, and this requires getting a lot of good people involved in the effort.

3—Elements of the Change Process

Change is the natural result of living, and all change can be seen as a variation on life. That is the central theme of this essay. If we can find a way of understanding all aspects of our lives—work and play, teaching and learning, partnering and parenting—as essentially the same process, then we increase the probability of success in all of our endeavors. I identify seven elements of the change process and explain how using these elements as lenses or touchstones can provide a sense of coherence in otherwise chaotic times. The seven elements are: (1) the problem; (2) the issue; (3) the solution, or innovation; (4) the players; (5) evidence of change; (6) activity cycles; and (7) constraints and strategies. The tendency is to focus in on one aspect of a change project and to become frustrated when it does not yield results. I argue that we need to remain flexible in our efforts and that

having seven ways of approaching a project provides us with a structure that encourages flexibility.

4—Changing Things: The Rhythms of Reform and Resistance

Considered from a systems perspective, “reform” and “resistance” are expectable tensions in life, and from your position as a change agent, change and persistence occur as a rhythmic pattern, one that you need to understand if you are to be successful. I anchor my analysis in two brief vignettes about systemic change efforts, one in a school and the other in a church. I then explore aspects of systems theory using the vignettes as sources of examples. I extract a number of guidelines for you to keep in mind as you work: Change yourself. Learn the players. Don’t preach. Don’t lay blame for problems, and don’t take credit for solutions. Form support groups without becoming isolated. Create disturbances and force wobbles in the system. Work for effects. Work for policy reform. Be content with small changes; be patient. Work quietly. Another guideline that emerges from the discussion is: Leave the system if you discover that your efforts are being wasted. Life is too short and the opportunities for doing good elsewhere too abundant to continue where hope for change in your lifetime is slim.

5—Coherence: Aligning Thought and Action in Teaching

I was part of a research team that studied three elementary teachers over a period of three years. We were amazed at the similarities of their success despite dramatic differences in their methods and materials. We concluded that what mattered was the relationships they established with their students and their ability to work from a set of core values as they responded to different situations and events. We dubbed this alignment between thought and action “coherence,” and the concept has shaped every aspect of my work since then. I have

taken the idea beyond the boundaries we originally set for it, and in this essay I attempt to show how efforts at aligning behavior and beliefs cut across all human endeavor. The ways that we organize our teaching are just one indication of this relationship; we must also consider the organization of the school day, the relationships we have with our colleagues and the parents of students, school-community interaction, and the nature of assessment. The key point is that this is not a matter of working out your philosophy in detail and then enacting it in your teaching. It is far more complicated than that, because what you believe is just as much a function of your experiences as it is of your reading, research, and contemplation. In other words, you need to work for balance between the facts of experience and the facts of theory.

6—Empowerment: Issues, Constraints, and Cautionary Comments

Reform advocates call for “empowerment” of linguistic minorities and educational minorities, as if power, self-confidence, and efficacy were *something* we could give to others. When we look at empowerment from a systems perspective, however, we see that individual “power” is a complex phenomenon that is inextricably intertwined with societal and organizational constraints. In this essay I argue that we need to decide what the issue is—societal inequity, organizational or bureaucratic inertia, individual incompetence, for example—as we develop an action agenda. Then, we need to understand that empowerment is not a causal phenomenon; rather, given the fact that human beings and organizations are open systems, we need an approach that relies on communication and influence rather than carrot-and-stick strategies. I present an adaptation of Gregory Bateson’s “cybernetic explanation” and give an example from my own decision making in a graduate course. This is an approach that requires an understanding of constraints, rather than causes, in change efforts. I conclude the essay with an examination of cautionary comments: “Empower” and “liberate” are not transitive verbs. Empowerment will not come quickly or easily. Empowered individuals cause trou-

ble. Attempts at liberation education must be individually and culturally appropriate. Skill development is not, by itself, empowering.

7—Finding a Place to Stand: Teaching in Dangerous Times

In this essay I attempt to understand what the massacre at Columbine High School and the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have to do with my values and behaviors as a teacher. At the time of the events, I wrote letters to teachers who were using early drafts of this book in an attempt to put the two tragedies in perspective, and I include those letters as an appendix. The letters, written in the vortex of confusion and apprehension, provided me with a sense of comfort in the moment. Now, in retrospect, and in an attempt to develop a more stable perspective on teaching in troubled times, I explore ways that we might position ourselves in relation to the violence that is too much a part of the world today. I argue that violence is natural—literally, a phenomenon of nature—and that global violence and local violence are merely different in terms of scale and perspective. We cannot ignore violence, and we cannot isolate ourselves from it. At the same time, we need to be realistic about what we can do about it. The essay constitutes my own effort at finding a place to stand in troubled times. I use the elements of change developed in chapter 3 as the framework for describing my own efforts at organizing in- and after-school activities for urban youth in the context of university/school/community collaboration.