

Social Change 2.0

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>>> A BLUEPRINT FOR REINVENTING OUR WORLD

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DAVID GERSHON



PRAISE FOR *SOCIAL CHANGE 2.0*

“David is a brilliant social architect who is able to see key patterns and principles between levels of change—from the individual, to the household, to the neighborhood, to the community, to cities, to states and nations, and to the entire planet. His knowledge about the process of social innovation and diffusion and his discoveries over decades of experimentation and research in large system change efforts merit serious consideration by all of us who seek a more hopeful future for our human community. His work illuminates our common yearning for connection with others, and provides the practical tools needed to achieve it at every level necessary to invent our world anew. I loved the way this book stimulated my thinking and spirit.”

—Juanita Brown, Co-Founder, The World Café

“David Gershon, an unusually talented and effective organizer, has spent most of his adult life teaching people how to take control of their destinies. The world has changed dramatically during those years, and David has been astute and nimble enough to change with it. His attitudes and techniques are different today from when I first met him a quarter-century ago, though his values remain intact. *Social Change 2.0* is an insightful summary of what David has learned during a career of helping to build a better world. Anyone who wants to effect change—whether to promote a global clean-tech revolution, or to organize a preschool program in their neighborhood—will find valuable truths here.”

—Denis Hayes, CEO, Bullitt Foundation, and Co-Founder, Earth Day

“I met David twenty years ago when he was the inspiration behind the Global Action Plan sustainable lifestyle movement. With *Social Change 2.0* he demonstrates that he has lost none of his brilliance in the intervening years. I predict that this book will become the defining resource for those wishing to create sustainable, low carbon communities, and social change in general. It is a must-read for helping us traverse the challenging times ahead.”

—Lawrence C. Bloom, Chairman, World Economic Forum,
Global Agenda Council on Urban Management

“Governments have limitations in leading complex social change, and increasingly progressive leaders are recognizing that such challenges can only be effectively addressed through the innovation and passion of grassroots people power. In *Social Change 2.0*, David Gershon offers us a way to draw on this power to make a difference in the saving of our planet. In doing so he argues for nothing less than a reinvention of the way we think, value, and do things. It’s a big ask and it’s not going to happen overnight—but Gershon offers us a compelling blueprint and a doer’s toolbox of social marketing strategies and empowerment tools, which, if used by enough communities, might just get us there. Simply, he helps make our global future something we can act on.”

—John Cole PH.D, Professor and Director, Centre for Sustainable Business and Development, the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, and formerly Chief Officer, Office of Clean Energy, Queensland Government

“*Social Change 2.0* is a visionary and pragmatic book that strikes at the essence of what is needed right now to help our social systems, which are at long last opening to transformative change, achieve it. It offers those of us on the front lines of that change—in my case of America’s health care system—the invaluable resource of a tested roadmap and toolkit for social transformation. David’s book should be read by all those ready to seize this extraordinary time for change in society.”

—Kenneth J. Abrams, M.D., Senior Vice President, Clinical Operations, North Shore-LIJ Health System

“For those of us in the community-capacity-building sector, David Gershon is not only a dear and trusted resource, but also a living reminder that the work to which we have dedicated our lives can have important tangible outcomes. Building capacity among community members is a complex and intense process that often progresses at a glacial pace. *Social Change 2.0* enables community organizers to take this work to the level of craft. Reading this book re-energizes our conviction not only that this work is important, but that it really is possible to help communities transition to a new paradigm. Thank you, David, for your life’s work!”

—Daniel Homsey, Director of Strategic Initiatives and the Neighborhood Empowerment Network, City of San Francisco

“In *Social Change 2.0* David Gershon presents an inspiring vision and a realistic roadmap for how we can reinvent our world through empowering grassroots leaders. The proven strategies, practices, and tools Gershon provides are powerful and will deliver results. I wish I’d had access to them when I was mayor.”

—Graham Richard, mayor (2000-2007), Fort Wayne, Indiana, and author of *Performance is the Best Politics: How to Create High Performance Government*

“This book offers an inspiring evolutionary blueprint for transforming our social systems, and provides some of the most effective organizing principles, empowerment processes, and movement strategies that are emerging in our time. For our rising generation of Millennial activists, student organizers, and young social entrepreneurs, *Social Change 2.0* will unquestionably play a significant role in bringing forth the next great wave of social change.”

—Joshua Gorman, founder of Generation Waking Up

“*Social Change 2.0* is the call to a new generation of leadership, a generation that feels instinctively what David teaches explicitly: that the progress of our society requires us to rebuild our communities house by house and neighborhood by neighborhood. And this book shows us how! If enough change agents apply the highly effective strategies and tools in this book, it will be a game changer for our world.”

—Rob Garrity, Executive Director, Massachusetts Climate Action Network

“This book is a voyage of discovery and learning. Not only does it describe the journey of one man’s life and his commitment to broad-scale systems change, it captures his and others’ learnings about what it takes to create the generative changes so needed in our communities, institutions, and world at this unique moment in time. David’s writing provides a wonderful invitation to reflect on our values and aspirations for the differences we want to make. He then proceeds to provide insights, ideas, and a tested framework for action, for those who aspire to truly reinvent the world.”

—Charles Homes, Learning Strategies Group, Simon Fraser University

“We all know we need to change our social systems, but few of us realize that the means for this change lies untapped in us all. David’s genius lies in knowing how to access the innate resources each one of us holds, and his book is a guide to awakening these possibilities and helping us shift our society to be truly sustainable for the next seven plus generations.”

—Gregor Barnum, Director of Corporate Consciousness, Seventh Generation

“*Social Change 2.0* shows us how to release the human intangibles of hope, aspiration, and vision, and combine them with the processes needed to achieve sustainable behavior change at the personal, organizational, community, and social system levels. This book is a major contribution to all who wish to bring about change in our world.”

—Kathy Castro, Director, University of Rhode Island Sea Grant Program

“Gershon writes from the front lines of social change with practical information flowing off the pages. Like a social change superhero, he demonstrates on every page the power of living with a no-limitations philosophy, showing us how we, too, can be the architects of a better world. This book will influence every project I take up in my life. I now know there is a pattern language for making social change happen.”

—Craig Hamilton, New Dimensions radio host, former editor of *EnlightenmentNext* magazine, and founder of IntegralEnlightenment.com

“David Gershon is one of the most accomplished social innovators alive today. This timely book offers the rare gift of proven and transferable solutions that can be applied to a wide range of problems confronting humanity. I have seen and experienced firsthand the effectiveness of this social change model. If you wish to change the world, I cannot recommend this book too highly!”

—Michael Dowd, author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*

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DAVID GERSHON



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To those called to the great adventure of reinventing our world

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INTRODUCTION

REINVENTING SOCIAL CHANGE

Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society—its world view, its basic values, its social and political structures, its key institutions—rearranges itself. We are currently living through such a time.

—Peter Drucker

In my dream the angel shrugged and said, if we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination. And then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand.

—Bryan Andreas

I came of age in the 1960s, when, with the music of the Beatles serving as the soundscape, America was stirred by antiwar protests, civil rights marches, and dreams of a better world. This heady time impressed on my young psyche both the firm belief that we can change the world, and the equally firm desire to do so. My favorite Beatles song, although he was not still a Beatle at the time, was John Lennon’s “Imagine.” I loved the song then, and I still love it today, because it is unapologetically visionary and optimistic about what is possible for our world. Its power comes from Lennon’s willingness to dream and his courage to share his dream with others. “You may say I’m a dreamer,” he told us, “but I’m not the only one.” (In a 2007 global jukebox poll “Imagine” was voted the world’s favorite song ever. In fact, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter once remarked that when visiting

countries around the world “you hear ‘Imagine’ used almost equally with national anthems.”)

Like John Lennon and so many others, I dream of a world that is possible but does not yet exist. In large and small ways I have spent most of my adult life attempting to create such a world. Along the way I discovered the secret of being a dreamer. If your dream is compelling enough it draws forth your passion and this keeps you motivated to stay with it even when the odds are against you. And if you stay with something long enough, eventually you wring out the truths needed to bring it to fruition.

I also draw inspiration from how Thomas Jefferson handled the assignment given to him by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin to write a statement declaring America’s independence from Great Britain. Jefferson transformed what could have been a mundane document into a transcendent vision of possibility for how human beings might live. His dream for America stunned Adams and Franklin and became the rallying motto of the American Revolution. Thomas Jefferson was inspired. He tapped deeply into his imagination and crafted a document that would come to epitomize the American dream and inspire many to seek this country’s shores in search of it.

He courageously envisioned the world anew and then helped create it. Some have called the creation of America one of the great social innovations of human civilization. The boldness of this dream inspired him and stirred the blood of his fellow patriots. With this inspiration they were willing to release their attachment to a known but deeply compromised reality and embark on a transformative journey to create a world of fresh possibilities.

It is time to dream again. So many of the assumptions we have been operating with as a human community have proved faulty that this generation must literally re-envision them. And with the accelerating unraveling of our planet’s life support system and the deterioration of so many of our social systems, we are being called to create *rapid* transformative change. But the current social change tools at our disposal—passing laws, adjusting tax policy, and public protest—were designed for slow-moving incremental change.

We are being called to reinvent not only our world, but also the process by which we achieve this reinvention. If the current social change tools of carrots, sticks, and protests are not sufficient, what else do we have? Are there assumptions we might rethink about what motivates people to change? Taking a page from Jefferson’s playbook, might we be able to motivate people

to change because of a dream that inspires their imagination, enlivens their sense of possibility, and lifts their spirit as human beings? Or to ask this question in a more tangible way, how might we empower people to voluntarily adopt new behaviors that help them, their community, and their organizations operate at a higher level of social value so we can realize more of our potential as a human species?

I have been attempting to answer this question over the past three decades, at the individual, local, national, and international levels; working with government agencies, nonprofit organizations, corporations, and ad-hoc community groups; in developed and developing countries alike, and around a multiplicity of issues.

My research has taught me that **people are willing to change if they have a compelling vision and are provided tools to help them bring it into being.** The vision must touch their core to engender the necessary passion and commitment needed to overcome the inevitable obstacles on the path of realization. They need others of like mind going on the journey with them to stay motivated. And with a well-designed transformative change platform that is replicable, these behavior changes can be widely disseminated throughout a community, organization, country, and across the planet.

I have also seen that when individuals become personally part of the solution it creates a new dynamic in the way we tackle large societal challenges. We are able to see beyond the traditional social change formula of business as the problem and government as the solution, with nonprofits lobbying government for better regulations against business and citizens sitting on the sidelines complaining about the coziness between politicians and business.

When citizens are empowered to adopt socially beneficial behaviors, such as a green lifestyle, for example, an opening can occur for traditionally adversarial relationships to establish new arrangements of cooperation and collaboration in service of this new voting constituency and purchasing community. When all the parts of a system begin working together and there is no “other” to combat or protect against, more innovative and generative solutions start to emerge. I call the process of bringing the whole system into collaboration building a *unitive field*.

The model of social change that I have been describing represents what systems theory calls *second order change*—change that transforms and reorganizes a system to a higher level of performance. When the

easier-to-implement change solutions are exhausted and prove inadequate for the magnitude of change required, the system goes into stress and must either evolve or breakdown. This book represents an attempt to expand the parameters for social change solutions so that we can evolve our social systems. I call it "Social Change 2.0." It stands on the shoulders of "Social Change 1.0"—command and control, financial incentives, and protest—because it could not function optimally without the rule of law and a democratic form of government that allow for free expression. But it is designed to go beyond the constraints purposefully built into this more incremental approach to change.

The Social Change 2.0 framework aspires to tread in the territory where some have thrown up their hands and wondered if change was really possible. It addresses issues that are complex and require many people to change fundamentally; issues for which there are no easy solutions and those that exist are exceedingly difficult to implement and require the cooperation of the whole system; issues which if not adequately addressed will cause an ecological or social system to break down. These issues include global warming, depletion of our nonrenewable natural resources, chronic poverty, disease epidemics, terrorism, ethnic and racial animosity, the disenfranchisement of women and minorities, and overpopulation.

Global warming is a prime example of the need for a second order change solution. Al Gore calls this a "planetary emergency" because our future well-being as a human species is at stake. Jim Hansen, NASA's chief climate scientist, says we have at most ten years to start turning global warming around or "suffer a planet that is not conducive to human life." The *New York Times* says the "climate crisis is at its very bottom a crisis of lifestyle. The Big Problem is nothing more or less than the sum total of countless little choices. Most of them made by us (consumer spending makes up 70 percent of our economy) and most of the rest of them made in the name of our needs and desires and preferences."

In a democratic society we can't legislate the kind of lifestyle change that would be necessary to have a major impact on global warming. Passing a law that commands people to change their behavior and then penalizing them if they don't is not acceptable or practical. Offering people financial incentives to change is sending the right signal, but people are still free not to avail themselves of these incentives. If people are not already predisposed to changing, financial incentives have a limited effect. And even when people aren't averse to changing, financial incentives take us down a slow, politically

cumbersome path not well suited to making the major and rapid transformative changes scientists tell us are needed.

Social protest is a gift of our democracy that has allowed Americans to speak out against injustice and government policies with which we disagree. It contributed to ending an unpopular war in Vietnam and furthering the civil rights of the disenfranchised members of our society. But as important as social protest has been and always will be in a democratic society, it is reactionary and defined by the problem. It is a great tool for objecting to what is wrong in society, but not for creating what is right. Saying no to global warming and lamenting the lack of bold and effective political leadership are very different from providing a viable alternative.

I have no pretensions to believe that the Social Change 2.0 design principles and practices described in this book are the solution for any of these enormous challenges facing us as a human community. The nature of these problems defies any single approach to change. And this framework is still very much a work in progress. But I have seen enough evidence applying these tools over the past thirty years to believe that they can make a contribution, either in whole or in part, to tackling issues requiring fundamental transformative change.

It is also my hope that this book will contribute to a revolution in thinking about the very nature of social change itself and spawn many more second order change solutions. This will require a special type of thinking which I call "social creativity." The objective of social creativity is twofold: to evolve the existing social systems and institutions we have created, which in turn have created the boundaries of our assumptions and expectations of what is possible; and to generate the new social innovations that are now needed by society.

This is the type of thinking that Jefferson and his fellow founders employed to create the social experiment of America. But Jefferson went one step further. He provided us with a core design principle for his social change philosophy considered so important by future generations that they etched it in stone on the fourth panel of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. He said:

Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances,

institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the same coat which fitted him when a boy, as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

In short, we must continually evolve our social systems to reflect the changes occurring in our world and humankind's development. To be able to do this successfully with the civilization-threatening challenges we now face will require us to dig deep into our reservoir of social creativity. But humanity's survival instinct and inventiveness have always been at their best when backed against the wall. That is why we are still here as a species. It is also during these times of greatest need that the most visionary, talented, and passionate among us are aroused to action. That was the case in Jefferson's time and it is happening once again.

This book is written for these people. It has a simple and some might say radical premise: that the natural starting point for changing our world for the better is *us*. That taking personal responsibility to make the needed changes within ourselves and our communities is the foundation for changing our institutions, not the other way around. That people are willing to make these changes if empowered by a personal vision and the means to bring it to fruition. That these changes can be accelerated and reinforced with the right laws and financial incentives, but it begins with us.

In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning book on the history of human civilization, Jared Diamond describes two principal methods by which ideas have been disseminated over the millennia. One he calls "idea diffusion" and the other "blueprint copying." He said the least effective method is when you just get the idea and you have to figure out the rest on your own. The most efficient is when you get the entire blueprint. Those civilizations that received language blueprints versus just the idea for instance, were able to accelerate the development of a written language by thousands of years. The intention of this book is to describe a transformative social change blueprint in enough detail so it can be both understood *and* put into practice. It is organized into three parts: stories, principles and practices, and game-changing strategies.

In the first part I share four in-depth stories that I call experiments in societal transformation. Each reflects a different scale of change, from the individual, to the block, to the community, to the planet. Each looks at transformative social change through the prism of a foundational societal

issue for the twenty-first century: environmentally sustainable lifestyles, livable neighborhoods, disaster-resilient communities, and peaceful coexistence on our planet. Each is described in enough detail that it can be a useful blueprint for similar or complementary social change initiatives. And each describes my personal journey of learning and growth, illuminating the social entrepreneurial challenges, pitfalls, rewards, and strategic thinking process.

The second part describes the five design principles that undergird these experiments and collectively represent the Social Change 2.0 framework. It amplifies these principles with practices and lessons learned from these four social change stories and others. The five design principles and practices described are:

- empowering people to voluntarily adopt new behaviors beneficial to themselves and society
- transforming dysfunctional or marginally effective social systems so they can achieve a higher level of performance and social value
- inventing and implementing transformative social innovations
- building a more collaborative playing field to maximize the potential of a social system or social innovation
- leveraging and disseminating social innovations at larger levels of scale

The third part addresses three major rites of passage human civilization must pass through to avoid collapse and evolve to the next level of our potential: the ability to address global warming effectively, to transform the paradigm of war, and to build the leadership capacity to bring about the needed societal transformations. In this section the new social change framework described in Parts One and Two is put through its paces to address these issues.

And for readers wishing guidance in applying the principles and practices described in this book to a specific social change initiative of their own, I have included questions at the end of each chapter to stimulate your thinking. I call it a “Social Change 2.0 Practitioner’s Guide.”

I have great faith in humanity’s imagination, ingenuity, and will to create our world anew. My work is grounded in the belief that many people will be inspired to serve in this noble endeavor if their odds for success are

increased. *Social Change 2.0* seeks to increase these odds by providing a blueprint for transformative social change. Changing the world is not for the faint-hearted, so it also attempts to provide fire for the soul of those embarked on this great transformative adventure.

The human species—willingly, or fighting and kicking—will need to engage in momentous change over the next decades. How we fare on this journey will determine the fate for generations into the foreseeable future. Whether you are a social activist, social entrepreneur, or community organizer; elected official or civil servant; foundation program officer or social venture capitalist; business leader responsible for developing a corporate social engagement strategy or running a social benefit division; teacher or researcher of social change; Boomer looking for a way to give back; or a Millennial just starting your first career and raring to go, it is my hope that this book will help raise the quality of your contribution. It is time to reinvent the world. Let's get started.