

**A BETTER WAY**

**ELIZABETH WHITEHOUSE**

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Dedicated to my much-missed husband

David Bryn Whitehouse  
1941-2013

who for 38 years generously shared with me his love, his life, his wit, his wisdom and his extraordinary wealth of knowledge. He showed me how to think critically, how to look at both sides of an issue, how to persuade, how to negotiate. He encouraged my enterprises and supported me in my failures. He was a truly gentle, highly principled, gentleman.

He would have approved of this initiative  
because in many ways his motto was  
"There is always a better way."

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## PREFACE

The conclusions presented here are mine and mine alone. Almost invariably they were sparked by someone else's ideas (and I have frequently quoted the original), but they are ideas that have percolated through my mind and come out through my mouth, or pen, or keyboard.

I have no doubt that some of the things I say will offend some of my readers. I have no doubt that, with hindsight, I will regret having written some of them. But should I ever run for office and be challenged by an opponent – it happens you know – I will defend every word of this book as being the best I could come up with, based on what I knew at the time.

I am critical – highly critical – of many systems and even of individuals. My great hope is that any individual who feels unfairly criticized will talk to me and explain why. It could be very beneficial for us both.

The point of this initiative is to get people from all walks of life to talk, to think. To think about their daily lives, their interactions with others, their way of doing business. Using the wonderful line from *The Economist*, I want everyone to THINK RESPONSIBLY.

I want you to ask yourselves whether your grandchildren will be proud of the way you lived your life, or could there be a better way.

Obviously, I think that there is.

This book is part of an initiative I'm calling A Better Way. There are three parts: a lecture intended to inspire, this book, and a website which is itself in three parts: inspirational information, opinion and resources.

Part of the inspiration is the lecture/sermon/motivational speech that I gave in Corning on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015. You can find the recorded Powerpoint presentation at [abetterway.world](http://abetterway.world) Information consists of why we need to be inspired to act, and a blueprint for action; opinion consists of a blog where many parts of the book are posted for comment; and the resources section gives a very incomplete listing of individuals and organizations already active in many areas of progressive action, where progress is defined as doing something positive to mitigate the effects of climate change. You are all invited to add more data.

In the lecture - and I choose that word because there is a certain element of finger-wagging, and several quotes from my mother - I talk about the number one problem facing planet earth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: climate change. If you don't get that this is a problem, you might as well stop reading right now, because nothing I say will make any sense.

The earth is warming, the sea is warming, the ice is melting, water cycles are disrupted and as a result we are experiencing more frequent and more violent weather events - storms and floods, yes, but also longer and longer periods between rain events, leading to dry conditions favoring fires, and droughts. When the rain does come the earth is so dry that the water just runs off, creating more erosion.

Warmer temperatures have moved upstate New York half a climate zone in the past 30 years from Zone 5 to Zone 5.5. This may not seem like much, but it is significant because the peak period for plants and pollinators is often out of sync. Exotic species are more comfortable in a wider range, often becoming invasive in areas that were previously inhospitable. Tropical diseases are spreading as more areas begin to have higher temperatures.

Crops are suffering. Just as people suffer in extreme heat - the heat wave in Europe in 2003 caused, depending on how one counts, from 35,000 to 70,000 deaths - plants also suffer from heat stress and crop yields are lowered.

And there is growing consensus that we have entered the Sixth Extinction. Three of the past five have been climate related, but only this one has been caused by a single species. That would be humans. Species, both plant and animal, are dying off at 100 times the base rate for the past couple of centuries. The prediction is that before this Sixth Extinction is over, up to 75% of the species on this planet could be gone for good. I think that we can safely assume that elephants, rhinos, polar bears, tigers and many other large mammals will not survive. I think that we can safely assume that cockroaches and most types of bacteria will survive. Humans? Who knows?

My guess is that humans will survive, but that most of us alive today - at least in the Western world - will not be very happy with the conditions in which we find ourselves. I think that unless there is a massive movement to address climate change, the world that our grandchildren inherit will not be a very pleasant place to live.

There is a simple solution: we stop burning fossil fuels. But before there is any chance of that happening we have to re-evaluate and reform several of the systems on which our civilization is based.

And we need to do it now. Not by 2100 as the G9 suggested; not by 2050 as Denmark has pledged; not by 2030 as so many have suggested. We need to strive with everything we've got to get serious reforms in place by 2020. That may seem totally unrealistic, but as my late husband liked to say "Strive for the stars; you might just end up with the moon." In this case, the moon might be a fossil-free world by 2030. But if your goal is not until 2030, you may not get there until 2050. We have no way of knowing how bad the effects of climate change are going to be but I, for one, am not going to just wait and see. I am not going to hear my grandchildren and great-grandchildren ask me why I did nothing.

*It's 3:23 in the morning and I am awake  
Because my great-great- grandchildren won't let  
me sleep.  
My great-great- grandchildren ask me in dreams  
"What did you do when the earth was unraveling?  
"Surely you did something when the seasons  
started failing,  
"As the mammals and reptiles and birds were all  
dying?  
"Did you fill the streets with protest when  
democracy was stolen.  
"What did you do, once you knew?"*

Thank you, Drew Dillinger for an immensely powerful poem. A Better Way is my way of making sure that no one can ever say, "I didn't know."



## THE INITIATIVE

*"Man is the problem, mankind is the answer."* Me.

### A BETTER WAY

Mission: to save the human race from itself; to save our civilization; to save the natural world.

Vision: to get people from all walks of life to talk to each other in an open and civil manner, to listen, not to judge, and to say "tell me why".

Goals: Yours: whatever you want them to be.  
Mine: listed below.

Action: make a private personal pledge to be nice to everyone you meet; pledge to carry out as many of your personal goals as you can by 2020; pledge to involve many others because....

*"The future depends entirely on what  
each of us does every day."*

Gloria Steinem

**My better way for everything is simple:**

**BE NICE**

**Then do something positive to help  
Then spread the word far and wide,  
in every language and every land.**

In essence, A Better Way is all about finding a way to improve the quality of life for all creatures on this planet. It is also what the fight against climate change is all about: if we don't do something major in the next five minutes, the quality of life for all of us is going to be drastically diminished.

Yes, even the one-percenters, in their ivory towers, are going to feel a difference. They are the ones who can *make* a difference. That 1% of the people who control half the world's wealth? What if they were to commit to making their homes and businesses independent of fossil fuels? If you are part of the one percent, it makes no difference to your quality of life if your electricity is supplied by coal-fired generators or wind turbines. But it makes a big difference to the people who live next to a coal mine. It makes no difference to your quality of life if your lights are incandescent, compact fluorescent or LED. So why not go with LED in every fitting and reduce the amount of energy you use?

Would it alter your quality of life if you set up a local grid to supply your energy, and that of your neighbors? Would it destroy your business if you retrofitted your buildings to be energy efficient? No, of course not. You would actually save money in the end. People really need to understand that energy efficiency is not living with less to use less. That's conservation. Energy efficiency is getting more from less!

Quality of life, of course, involves a lot more than energy. There's this little pursuit of happiness clause from the Declaration of Independence. I don't remember anything about my happiness is more important than yours because I have more money.

Mattieu Ricard, is a French Buddhist monk living in Nepal, who has been given the title of the happiest man in the world, and he is the author of (what else?) "*Happiness*" and "*Altruism*". Using different words, he says exactly what I am trying to say. I'm

suggesting that we just try to be nice to each other; Ricard suggests that compassion can save the world. I say to be kind; he suggests good deeds. Compassion is a much better word but “be nice to each other” seems easy to absorb. It’s also something that anyone can do, without permission, without special tools, no funding needed.

Behavior modification is not easy, even with the help of a therapist, but you can do it with very small steps. First of all, bite your tongue. If you can’t say something nice, say nothing. On the other hand, if you can say something nice, say it. A genuine compliment will make the other person’s day.

How many of you remember *The Bernstein Bears Forget Their Manners*? The cubs are being rude and unruly so Mama Bear gives them a good talking to about the importance of good manners and being polite. As kids sometimes do, they reacted by exaggerating, thinking that they were making fun of her. So dinner time became: “Oh, my dear, dear brother would you please be so kind as to pass me the wonderful salad that our kind mother has prepared for us”, or, “Sweet sister, would you do me the great favor of allowing me to use your inflated plastic sphere.”

I’m paraphrasing (and exaggerating a bit myself), but you get the idea. Before long all the exaggeration became a bit tedious and they fell back on, “Please pass the butter”, and “May I borrow your ball.” Which is, of course, what Mama had wanted all along? No great effort and everyone happier.

Part of being nice to others is being respectful. This can be really hard sometimes. The fifth of the Ten Commandments, that is the first of the ones dealing with our relationship with humans, rather than with God, says, “Honor your father and mother”. I certainly honored my father who was an honorable man of great integrity. My mother, not so much; she was a racist, bigoted, control freak. I still wonder what I could have done to make our relationship less

acrimonious. With hindsight and my new-found, save-the-world wisdom, I think I should have tried harder to understand her. I should have, respectfully, asked her why she felt the way she did. I should have asked her if she had thought about the effect of her actions on others.

She treated her servants as well as anyone else in South Africa in the 60s and 70s. They were housed and fed (modestly but adequately), if they were sick she called her doctor, they had a month's leave a year and she paid their rail fare to go home. But there was one issue that always divided us: I argued that a day off meant a day off - you do not report for work at all. She thought that the full day off started after she had had her breakfast served to her in her bedroom. Did you notice that that sentence contained two "she's" and three "her's"?

I don't know how one deals with such self-centeredness. But, I know one needs to try. The issue comes up later in the chapters on politics, religion and greed, also called the taboo subjects. But they need to be talked about in a way that does not immediately antagonize your interlocutor (a lovely word much used in French and Italian, but rarely in English). I respectfully suggest that a good way to start the conversation is to say that you understand where they are coming from, but you wonder if they have considered all aspects of the problem. Do they really agree with all aspects of their religion or their political party?

In other words, respect the person but not necessarily the religion; respect the person, but not necessarily the party.

That said, "respect" is defined as a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements. So do not feel that you have to respect someone who has no noteworthy abilities, qualities or achievements. But you can still be nice to them. And polite.

You are the center of your universe. You may not be able to change where and when you were born, or how people treat you. But you can change how you react. You have the power to be nice; you have the power to deflect nasty.

You may not be able to actually walk a mile in another man's shoes, but you can ask him what it's like.

Then you can ask yourself whether you, in some way, contributed to his condition, either positively or negatively. He just might tell you.

### My Goals

In my outline of this initiative I talked about personal goals. With the date of 2020 in mind to achieve them, these are mine:

- In order to make the world a better place
- ❖ I will try to talk to people from as many walks of life as possible; I will not insult anyone
- ❖ I will be kind to animals
- ❖ My house and place of business will be at least 80% chemical free, be fueled by renewable sources, reuse gray water and be zero-waste facilities
- ❖ I will have divested from all companies that exploit the commons,, and I will invest in companies that are not extractive, not exploitative and give us products we can feel good about
- ❖ I will use energy-efficient modes of transportation (foot, bike, bus, train, hybrid/electric car, greener airplanes)
- ❖ I will boycott industrial agriculture and support local farmers
- ❖ I will be informed and active in my community and vote only for candidates who are prepared to sign the Climate Mobilization pledge
- ❖ I will challenge authority (including religious institutions) where it is not in the best interests of the people, and I will work with local authorities to streamline regulations

- ❖ I will work to take a close look at the US Constitution, trying to bring it up to date to better serve Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
- ❖ I will poke the TSA in the eye (or work to get airport security methods improved.)

I included the last one before I had the epiphany which led to the perhaps crazy idea that the way to save the world is by being kind to one another. This came about at Marseilles airport. (My sister vacationed for 20 years and now lives in the Luberon Valley; I have visited at least 15 times so I know the airport well.) Airport security has been a thorn in my side since 2001. I am not alone, of course.

A few days after 9/11, my sister (her name is Sue and she appears from time to time) declared, "The terrorists have won." She was right. Not in the sense that they brought down the United States, but in the sense that reaction to that dreadful day robbed us of many rights and freedoms we had previously taken for granted. Freedom of movement is just one of them. Yes, we can still get on a plane and go anywhere we want, within reason. But before you get on that plane you have to have your passport and boarding card checked by half-a-dozen different functionaries; shuffle through long, snaking lines to get the security checkpoint, where, oh joy, you get to strip – shoes, jackets, belts, glasses, jewelry, reveal to the world what you carry in the way of toiletries, how much loose change you carry in your pocket and whether your laptop and/or cell phone is the latest model.

Even then, you are likely to be patted down. Returning from a GAS Conference in Amsterdam, my daughter Julia was wearing two pairs of thongs, one on her feet, and one around her lady parts, and a spaghetti-strap sundress. She was so obviously a security risk that she had to be wanded and patted down.

On another occasion, Sue was leaving Elmira to fly to San Francisco. Our little airport is such that those waving goodbye can see everything that happens. First, a TSA official inspects your ID and boarding pass and then you move 20 feet to the security check where another person inspects your ID and boarding pass, you divest yourself of half your clothing and belongings entrusting them to the beady eye of the X-ray machines, while you walk through the magic gateway.

Sue set off the alarm and was sent back. The alarm went off again, so some woman appeared with her wand and waved it. It beeped. So she waved it again and it still beeped. We could see Sue talking to her and pointing at her chest. No good. Wave. Beep. Wave. Beep. Finally, my buxom sister lifted her shirt and screamed, "It's the wire in my bra!" It was touch and go, but they eventually let her on the plane and went home to tell their families about the simply awful day they had had.

This is all setting the scene. One of the chief reasons that my blood pressure goes through the roof at airport security is the unpredictability of it all. In theory that is good. At Lima airport for example, they decide whether to check your bags depending on a button, which randomly comes up red or green. If there is a fifty-fifty chance that you will be inspected, you think quite carefully about what you put in your suitcase.

But there is no continuity between airports and countries as to what you can carry or when you can keep your shoes on. Going to another GAS Conference, Julia and I flew from Elmira to Philly and on to London. We changed planes and flew to Singapore where we stopped for a couple of days. The flight to Sydney touched down in Cairns. Julia was into beaded jewelry at that time and travelled with her very fine, metal crochet hook. This highly dangerous weapon was taken away from her in Cairns.

I'm getting there, I'm getting there! Since I acquired a lovely Vera Bradley toiletries bag, which has three zippered compartments and plastic fronts, I have found it easier to put it in my checked luggage and not bother with the stupid baggie stuff. Last January I was in Italy – at language school in Siena – and took a short side-trip to France to see Sue. For some reason, I kept my toiletries in my carry-on. At Fiumicino (Rome) I just put the entire bag face up in the bin. No problem. Great.

As I said, I know Marseilles airport as well as any other on the planet and I should have known better, but I tried the same thing on the way out. The officious woman on duty insisted that I had to put the liquids and gels into the standard baggie, which she was helpfully proffering. In my steadily improving French, I asked why. She was not convinced that a zippered, clear-plastic designer bag was adequate. So with a very bad grace I began transferring shampoo, face-cream and toothpaste, etc. My blood pressure was already through the roof when she picked up my toothpaste tube and peered at it as if it was pure nitro-glycerin. I knew instantly what the problem was: 110gr instead of the permissible 100grams. Before she could point out my unacceptable transgression, I snatched it out of her hand and threw it into their large garbage receptacle. Luckily, it was a good throw, because, to have missed would have been very humiliating. As it was, I gathered up my belongings and intact dignity and stormed off, shaking with rage.

But, by the time I had dressed and repacked, I was feeling ashamed of myself. My indignation had not achieved anything; the system was not going to change for me. All I had done was to make an unpleasant scene and, quite likely, spoil the day of a woman who is either too stupid or too poorly trained to realize that a certain amount of thoughtful discretion is not going to endanger passengers. From her point of view, she was just doing her job – what was my problem?

Maybe, if my attitude had been different, I could have said to her something like, "Oh my God, I didn't realize the toothpaste tube exceeded regulations. Bad, bad me. But most of it has already been used. And I still have about eighteen hours of travel ahead of me. Please can I keep it to clean my teeth?"

What do you think? Would I have been able to keep my organic toothpaste? Would she maybe have thought about the validity of the many restrictions they are required to impose? Might she have asked her supervisor whether it is necessary to have everything in a Ziploc bag, or whether, perhaps any see-through bag would be acceptable? Maybe we would see a more sensible approach to security. All because I was polite, instead of rude.

I had another unnecessary encounter with security just the other day. To put it in perspective, I'll tell you a little joke from South Africa. It did the rounds for some time and provided everyone with a jolly good laugh, except that it really happened. I knew the woman driving the car, and the exact location of this shocking misdemeanor. It was just down the road from our house where there is a long gentle curve. Another road comes in at the apex of the curve from where you can see 200-300 yards in each direction. A yield sign would be entirely appropriate, but there is in fact a stop.

So Mrs. B-J approaches this intersection, sees there is not another car in sight and rolls past the stop sign. Officer Van der Merwe (that's the obligatory name for the butt of any South African joke) leaps out from behind a bush and flags her down. The conversation goes: "You didn't stop at that stop sign." "Er, I know, but there was nothing coming." "You're supposed to stop at a stop sign." "Yes, but I did at least pause." "Lady, that sign says S-T-O-P, not P-A-W-S."

So, I was going to give a tour at The Corning Museum of Glass. I was prevented from parking in the empty spot two places from

the road (still don't know why) so I drove past the entrance ramp and parked further on. As I walked back the security person on duty accosted me with "You missed the stop sign" as though I had deliberately mown down half a dozen visitors. He was quite right that I had only slowed briefly, but there was not a pedestrian in sight, and his attitude really ticked me off.

What if he had started by saying, "Excuse me, Ma'am"? I'd have listened. Then perhaps he could have said something like, "Did you not see the stop sign?" I would have replied, "I know this area and I am well aware of the stop sign. But, I could see quite clearly that there was no one close to the crossing." I might even have told him the joke, and apologized, and we would both have continued to have a nice day.

I collect quotes and sayings that resonate with me. Doing a little research to find the origin of one I found this legend:

*An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy.*

*"It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too."*

*The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"*

*The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."*

Isn't that beautiful? It says quite clearly that we can choose to be good or evil, a pleasure to know or someone to avoid, someone who is happy or someone who is bitter and twisted. And we don't need a god to tell us how.

My starting point for my initiative is that we should be nicer to each other. And I say this as an atheist whose only belief is in myself, and whose only morality is asking myself if my behavior has a positive or negative effect on other people, and other species. This is the basis of just about every religion that has ever been. It is certainly the basis of Christ's teachings. What a tragedy that so many self-proclaimed Christians have little idea of what being nice to others means!

This is the perfect place to include my most recent letter to The Editor provoked by the statement by our Congressman that Planned Parenthood should be defunded until a full investigation into their activities has been conducted. He did acknowledge that there would be a negative effect on a large number of people in his district:

*(Congressman X)'s latest comments about defunding Planned Parenthood make me think of the anonymous declaration: "The best way to tell a Democrat from a Republican is to present someone requiring food and shelter. The Democrat will want them housed and fed, even if they be faking need. The Republican will gladly see them starve until all doubt is removed."*

*So yes, let's cut off all funding until all doubt is removed and too bad about the "12,000 folks impacted, potentially, by this decision." You don't have to be a Democrat to do it the other way around; you just need to be a decent human being.*

My plan may be too simplistic to have any hope of making a difference, but I can't help thinking that if people stop to think about their actions, and perhaps ask themselves whether their grandchildren would be proud of them - and like them - then maybe problems like abuse and intolerance and inequality would go away.

It can't hurt to try being a decent human being.



## HOW I GOT HERE

If I had not written a letter to the Editor in July of 2012, this book probably would not have happened. This initiative might not have been born.

As I write, I am sitting at my kitchen table looking out at a perfect summer day: blue skies, puffy white clouds over my voluptuous garden and the tree-covered hills beyond and an avian Victoria Station in the foreground – blue jays, sparrows, cardinals, grackles, juncos, chickadees, wrens, occasionally a nuthatch and a little woodpecker, constantly visiting my bird-feeders. It seems perfect.

It's not. There are also squirrels stealing the bird food and my tomatoes! But that is the least of my worries.

The Southern Tier of New York may be the last place to be affected, but the world is warming inexorably and the results are increasingly catastrophic. I don't need to go into the impending devastation we can expect if global warming is not curbed: if you were not at least slightly concerned you would not be reading this book. What I want to address is the systems that have contributed to the situation we find ourselves in.

All systems currently in place seemed like a good idea at the time. A few are still a good idea, but many need to be re-evaluated. That is what I hope to do. Or at least I hope to get you to evaluate the systems by which you live, ask yourself if they are still a good idea, and make changes accordingly.

This book consists of random writings about subjects that have caught my attention and about which I felt I have something

meaningful to say. But there are also newly written essays covering the issues that are most affecting my life today. I may be trying to save the world, but I am not entirely selfless!

On the contrary, this is very much about me. How does climate change affect me, what am I doing? You can skip the next section if you like; it is just explaining who I am and how I got to this point in time.

I am a citizen of planet earth and I do what I can.

I'd like to tell you how I got to this place and it is very much to do with the little creature sitting on my shoulder in the photograph on the back of the book. She is a bamboo lemur, one of Madagascar's 90 species threatened with extinction. We met when I was volunteering at the zoo in Antananarivo. I was gathering up dead leaves from the floor of her cage when she ran across my back. I straightened up and she jumped on to my shoulder and then crept down my arm until I was cradling her like a baby. I said to the keeper (who amazingly had a camera in his pocket!) – I suppose she does this to everyone. He said no, he'd never seen it before. What an incredible experience it was: a wild creature had made an overture of friendship to a member of another species and shown complete trust.

I have always had an affinity with animals and I think that is because I do not consider them inferior. They are bearing the brunt of climate change, and suffering terribly because of the causes of climate change, like habitat loss.

On January 19, 2010, I caught "compost", a non-life-threatening, but very persistent infection. My sister and I were dining across the valley from Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano, and she told me about a village in Zambia where the population had forgotten how to grow food. I just had this crazy thought that if I could teach them to make compost, the problem would be solved. I

immediately founded Compost International (a woman, a website and a dream) with the stated intention of saving the earth, one compost heap at a time. I'm doing what I can, but the going is slow, especially as I caught a secondary infection called "climate".

That came about in November 2011, when a friend suggested that I attend a daylong symposium on renewable energy, mostly so that I could meet one of the organizers.

In an effort to become well-informed about my "infections", I went to Maine Compost School, and wrote a slim volume called "Spread It Around - Going Green through Garbage"; attended two local symposia on Renewable Energy and Solutions for Sustainability; actively joined People for a Healthy Environment; trained as a Leader for Al Gore's Climate Reality Project; signed hundreds of petitions, wrote hundreds of letters to editors, politicians and climate change deniers; attended a Solar Energy conference in Cuba (with Ruth), attended two "Where we go From Here" conferences at The Omega Institute; toured recycling, composting and landfill facilities; lectured on climate change, composting, gardening and growing your own food in and around Corning, as well as in Rochester, London, Rustrel (France) and Kuhlina (Bangladesh).

I took a Permaculture Design Certification Course and walked eight miles through Manhattan as part of the People's Climate March. I have protested and rallied wearing a red hat covered in anti-fracking buttons. My car is covered in bumper stickers. I have read extensively, watched TED talks, started a blog, and corresponded with a large variety of online commentators. Most recently I attended a conference called Biodiversity for a Sustainable Future.

As I soaked up all this information, it became obvious that even if we manage to reduce the CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere to 350ppm, we will not be out of the woods: the systemic problems which have

led us to the brink of environmental disaster - and the very real risk of the collapse of civilization as we know it - must also be addressed.

That is what I am trying to do. And this is the letter that started it all:

*I have lived in the United States since 1984, but I am still a British subject, a fact which shocks many Americans who are convinced that the entire world wants to be American. This is not so. I have not taken out citizenship because, quite frankly, I do not want to be known as an American. I do not want to be a citizen of a country which is defined by greed and animosity. I do not want to be part of a system that allows 6 people (the heirs of Sam Walton) to control as much (unearned) wealth as the bottom 30% of the population.*

*The vast majority of Americans go along with the idea that the United States is the greatest country that has ever been. Please define greatness. To my mind, a great country is one where the people can live their lives free from bigotry and oppression; where they can earn a decent living doing the work they are most suited to; where they contribute as much as they can to the good of the country; and where they have the expectation that if things go very wrong for them, there is a safety net to help them recover. A country like New Zealand, or Denmark, where there is 100% literacy and virtually no poverty.*

*A great country does not have 15% of its population living in poverty and therefore hungry; a great country does not squander and destroy its natural resources in pursuit of profit; a great country does not assume that its ways are the best for everyone else as well; a great country does not throw its weight around just because it can; a great country does not destroy smaller nations in pursuit of an ideology. And socialism is not the end of life as we know it. Current policies may be.*

*A great country does not allow slander, mudslinging and venomous attacks against someone whose only fault is that they belong to a different political party. My political philosophy is definitely left of center, but I simply cannot espouse blind devotion to a party on the strength of name alone. I cannot support anyone for whom being elected and staying in power is more important than representing constituents. I cannot support anyone who sees elected office as a lucrative career rather than service to country.*

*On Election Day in November, I beg citizens and voters of the Southern Tier to look carefully at the candidates that affect us most – Tom Reed or Nate Shinagawa, President Obama or Mitt Romney. Don't be swayed by publicity. Do some research and think for yourself.*

*Ask yourself two simple questions: Is he for us or for himself; if he is elected who stands to benefit most – him, or me.*

There were a lot of replies, many of them suggesting that I should pack my bags and go back to the UK (not, in fact, home!). However, one of them sent me a link to the first few minutes of The Newsroom, which had aired a mere ten days earlier. The lead character, Will MacAvoy, is – what else – a news anchor. He is at some college at the end of a symposium. The wrap up question is “What makes America the greatest country in the world?” The pat answers from the other two panelists are diversity and opportunity, and, freedom and freedom. MacAvoy resists answering, but eventually says, “It’s not. Yes, Professor, that’s my answer. America is not the greatest country in the world.”

Then he lists the reasons why ending with, “We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real and defense spending, where we spend more than the next 26 countries combined, 25 of whom are allies.”

There is a long pause while the audience sits in stunned silence. Then he says

*"It sure used to be."*

*"We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reason. We passed laws, struck down laws, for moral reason. We waged wars on poverty, not on poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were and we never beat our chest. We built great, big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases and we cultivated the world's greatest artists AND the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, acted like men. We aspired to intelligence, we didn't belittle it. It didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election and we didn't scare so easy. We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed... by great men, men who were revered. First step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore."*

If I seem excessively critical of the US, it is because I never knew a country that made war on poverty not on poor people. I have only known one that is bitterly divided on just about every topic that matters. The two party system sort of ensures that, because one half of the country is always dissatisfied with whichever party is in power. The Electoral College and gerrymandering (and occasional support from the Supreme Court) make it possible for a minority of voters to elect a majority. Of course apathy and the feeling that government is so corrupt that it really doesn't matter who is running the country also affect the outcomes of elections. I am at the point where I wholeheartedly agree with the Independent Senator from Vermont:

***"I am no longer accepting things I cannot change.  
It is now time to change the things I cannot accept."***

*Bernie Sanders '1*



## HOW WE GOT HERE

I blame Reagan.

A while back, I suggested online, somewhat provocatively, that Reagan was the worst President ever. I got surprisingly few responses. Just one, which said:

*Reagan the worst president? Really? - 20 million new jobs were created -- Inflation dropped from 13.5% in 1980 to 4.1% by 1988  
Unemployment fell from 7.6% to 5.5% - Net worth of families earning between \$20,000 and \$50,000 annually grew by 27% -  
Real gross national product rose 26% - The prime interest rate was slashed by more than half, from an unprecedented 21.5% in January 1981 to 10% in August 1988*

*Saving the American economy, bringing down the Soviet Union, freeing 350+ million people from Communism, creating 20+ million jobs. That makes him the worst President? I think Obama and Jimmy have a firm lock on the first and second worst Presidents ever.*

*Please, whatever you are drinking and or smoking, stop.*

The last part is quite amusing, but on the negative side, if his supporters are to be believed his (admittedly very good line) *Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall*, was the one and only reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Of course, it wasn't, any more than American disinvestment in South Africa was the only reason for

the collapse of the Apartheid regime (and incidentally it rhymes with hate, not light).

Both regimes collapsed because their leaders saw the writing on the wall, and to their very great credit, Gorbachev and De Klerk willingly gave up power and transitioned to a more democratic style of government. They both got Nobel Peace Prizes – Reagan did not.

But I am blaming Reagan for everything, so let us give him credit for bringing down Communism. It was probably not a good thing.

I say that because in even the most cursory reading of history one phrase jumps out again and again: balance of power. Once the Soviet Union crumbled, the US was left as the only power that mattered, at least until Europe united and China flexed its muscles. But more significantly, the fall of communism was not a victory for democracy; it was a victory for capitalism. And the PR machine for capitalism is far more persuasive than that for extreme socialism. The result is that through the miracle of globalization, capitalism is now dominant to the extent that, as reported by Oxfam, referring to 2016, “1% of the world’s population will own more wealth than the other 99%”. Put slightly differently, “Eighty people hold the same amount of wealth as the world’s 3.6 billion poorest people”.

Eighty people! The top five are Bill Gates, Carlos Slim, Armancio Ortega, Warren Buffett and Larry Ellison. The Koch brothers come in at six and seven because they are only worth 40 billion each, but combined they outrank Gates. And if you take just three of the Waltons, they top the lot with a staggering 104 billion dollars. I mentioned the Waltons in my letter: *I don’t want to be part of a system that allows 6 people (the heirs of Sam Walton) to control as much (unearned) wealth as the bottom 30% of the population.* The responses I got showed that many people do not actually think

about what they are saying, or understand what they are reading. The common thread was "Good luck to them, they worked hard for their wealth." They may have worked *with* the money they inherited; they certainly didn't work *for* it. That is what Capitalism does; it grows money to the exclusion of all considerations of fairness, equality, workers' rights, environmental issues or the future of the planet. Money makes money and the rich get richer. The money going into their pockets has to come from somewhere, so the poor get poorer. Trickle-down economics just has not worked. Bill Maher sums it up perfectly: *Trickle-down economics is like having three dogs, giving one of them a wiener and expecting him to share it with the other two.*

There is much more to be said about capitalism, but here I am busy blaming Reagan for the ills of the world. So moving on.

From the Straits Times of Singapore:

*"Mr Ronald Reagan was not universally beloved in the 135 countries of the developing world, nor was he especially well understood. His presidency was often perceived as a swaggering statement about American military and political pre-eminence in a world in which the erstwhile Soviet Union was already imploding. And yet, far more than any post-war American president, Mr Reagan influenced emerging countries, their markets and their governance. In many ways, he can be rightly called the father of contemporary globalization."*

PBS's The American Experience had this to say:

*"As the economy rebounded strongly from the recession of 1981-82, (Reagan's) ratings began to soar even higher. More Americans were working than ever before. New businesses were being started up and Wall Street was robust with activity. Still, worried voices pointed to a ballooning federal deficit as a sign that tax cuts, coupled with increased defense spending was a recipe for disaster. And while "Reaganomics" was helping to produce more and more*

*millionaires, the disparity between rich and poor grew greater and greater. Reagan challenged his fellow citizens to "dream heroic dreams," but made no mention of making sacrifices for the benefit of future generations."*

So now we have rampant capitalism, globalization (two sides of the same coin) and a rising oligarchy controlling the world. FDR's comment on that was: *That, in its essence, is fascism - ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power.* Lenin's comment was a little more ominous: *fascism is capitalism in decay.*

But he wasn't done yet. As The New York Times noted in 2011:

*More than any other labor dispute of the past three decades, Reagan's confrontation with the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, or Patco, undermined the bargaining power of American workers and their labor unions. It also polarized our politics in ways that prevent us from addressing the root of our economic troubles: the continuing stagnation of incomes despite rising corporate profits and worker productivity. Air travel was significantly curtailed, and it took several years and billions of dollars. And just incidentally Reagan led the actors' strike of 1952.*

I blame Reagan for setting the stage for climate change denial. Why in heaven's name would anyone think it progress to remove solar panels from the White House roof? I can see the President not getting around to such a forward-thinking move, but to actually turn back the clock and take them off? A slap in the face to Carter who had installed them? A sop to his friends in the fossil fuel business?

I blame him for setting back educational progress. Hidden among his better known quotes is this one: *Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?* Oh, I don't know. Maybe because that is

what leads to innovative thinking, the sort of stuff that made America great? Reagan proposed eliminating the Department of Education and halved the federal budget for education, while seriously eroding the power of local school districts.

I blame him for messing around with taxes. Reagan started the idea of tax cuts for the wealthy, part of his trickle-down economics. For the rest of us he raised taxes eleven times and tripled the federal deficit.

I blame Reagan for exacerbating the dire population situation. We have Jesse Helms to thank for the ruling that the United States government will not give any monetary assistance to family planning clinics around the world that offer abortion services. Ronald Reagan introduced the global gag rule in 1984 to prohibit foreign NGOs from receiving US family planning assistance even if they try to circumvent the Helms amendment by using non-US funds to provide abortion services, counseling, or referrals, or engage in advocacy within their own countries to liberalize abortion-related policies. I'm not sure how that rule is implemented but the population when Reagan took office was 4.438 billion. It is now over 7 billion and expanding daily. It is frightening.

I'd like to blame Reagan for voter suppression and the incredible divisiveness there is in the country, but I can't find enough evidence. There is enough evidence, however, to blame the Republican Party. I heard President Clinton in 2013 say that they launched a campaign 40 years ago to become the permanent majority. As Paul Weyrich, one of the creators of the Republican-Religious Right Alliance, a founder of ALEC, and a founder of the Heritage Foundation, famously said: "We don't want everyone to vote. Quite frankly, our leverage goes up as the voting population goes down". So much for democracy. So, When I read another Reagan quote: *The world's hopes rest with America's future*, I have to disagree. I think there is a better way.



## THE CONSTITUTION

*“Whenever a **taboo** is broken, something good happens, something vitalizing. Taboos after all are only hangovers, the product of diseased minds, you might say, of fearsome people who hadn't the courage to live and who under the guise of morality and religion have imposed these things upon us.” Henry Miller*

In order to address the most important of the systemic problems we are facing, I am going to have to talk about the three subjects my mother always said one did not talk about at dinner parties: religion, politics and money. I did my best not to listen to her when she was alive, and I am not going to hold back now, because there is no way to solve a problem unless you first acknowledge that it exists.

Then there is a fourth subject that no one wants to talk about, one which will have many people jumping up and down and calling me a traitor. That’s OK. I can’t be traitor to a country of which I am not yet a citizen. I could be deported, although such action would be so much against the First Amendment – and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – as to confirm my assertion that the only way to solve the problems raised by the trifecta of religion, politics and money is to change the Constitution.

This will not be easy because: *No man with four aces howls for a new deal.*

The US Constitution was written by very well-intentioned men as a way to launch a new country. They produced a remarkable document and launched a remarkable nation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But we are now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Times have changed in ways that the Founding Fathers could not have imagined in their wildest dreams. At least one of them – that great intellect and visionary Thomas Jefferson – acknowledged that developments in the future would necessitate changes to the Constitution. Jefferson suggested, with little support, that the Constitution should be revised every generation (at that time considered to be eighteen years). That means we should have had some 13 REVISIONS by now, not just the 27 amendments that have been ratified.

It might be helpful to look at the country as a not-for-profit organization with a board of directors (Congress) governed by a set of bye-laws (the Constitution). Members of the Board serve a fixed term, usually without remuneration, for the good of the organization. Bye-laws are revised as and when circumstances change. New bye-laws need to be approved by a quorum of the membership, in this case the US public.

There are many thinking people who acknowledge that this country has problems which cannot be resolved with the Constitution as it stands. However, few are willing to take on the challenge of changing it. The biggest stumbling block is determining who is qualified to draw up a new document.

I believe that there is a remarkably qualified group of men (and a few women) who could do the job. They have been acclaimed as leaders in their field by impartial, non-political, external sources. They are, ipso facto, highly intelligent. Their expertise covers the full range of human endeavor, and the criteria for inclusion in the group are quite clear.

They are the Nobel Prize recipients currently living in the United States.

I have already written to half a dozen of the most prominent. If they ask me for suggestions, I will be more than happy to oblige. That may not happen, so I'll go through some of the changes that I would make.

The first and most basic would be to rewrite the whole document in modern language. At the same time, one would take any part that had been altered over the years and replace that with the relevant amendment(s). So, for example, the part which says who can vote would be supplanted by the XVth (The right to vote shall not be denied on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude); XIXth (... on account of sex); and XXVIth (age) amendments, and throw in sexual orientation for good measure. Only trouble is, I can't find the part which says who is eligible to vote. It was just assumed to be land-owning white men over 21, as had been the custom before the Constitution was written. I would make it quite simple: *Any person over the age of 16 living in the United States may vote.* If at the age of 16 you can quit school, move out of your parents' home and drive a car, you can vote. And if you are living here, I think you should have a say.

I might even go further and **require** voting from the municipal level up. As George Jean Nathan said "Bad officials are elected by good citizens who do not vote." In case you are wondering, as I did, who George Nathan was, he was a drama critic and editor, associate of H.L. Mencken, and he died in 1958.

The First Amendment has largely been superseded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The US should probably still have some sort of freedom of speech clause, but as written it has given enormous power to lunatic religious groups and ignorant bigots, a situation which I will address under "God".

The Second and Third (does anyone know what that says?) can go because there is now a standing army and the National Guard so

no need for citizen militias and it is a long time since the army sought to quarter soldiers in private houses.

Of all the things I dislike about the United States, the Second Amendment is perhaps the worst.

*"By our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim, we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes." - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

*A great democracy does not make it harder to vote than to buy an assault weapon. -Bill Clinton*

*Only in America can protecting children from guns be a **losing** political issue.*

It wasn't always that way. I would like to blame Reagan as well for the rise of the NRA, but again I can't find the evidence. But I can blame one of his Hollywood compadres and fellow really bad actor: Charlton Heston. I was never a fan, but I went off him in a big way when he won Best Actor for "Ben Hur". The Oscar should have gone to Jack Lemmon for his perfect 10 performance in "Some Like It Hot". Not that that has anything to do with guns. I take it back, the whole story revolves around the St Valentine's Day massacre – lot's of guns.

Following some fairly acrimonious online "discussion" about guns, I got to wondering why, exactly, was this gun ownership thing included in the Bill of Rights. Because it seems like a strange, offbeat thing to have. I did a bit of research and I came across a fascinating insight into the history of the Second Amendment.

This report appeared in the NEW YORK DAILY NEWS on Wednesday, December 19, 2012:

THE SECOND AMENDMENT YOU DON'T KNOW:  
THE FOUNDERS' ORIGINAL INTENT WAS AS MUCH  
ABOUT REGULATING FIREARM POSSESSION AS  
ENABLING IT.

*By Saul Cornell*

*In the coming months, as the nation begins a serious discussion about gun regulation, the meaning of the Second Amendment – the statement that “a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed” – will be much discussed.*

*It is vital that Americans separate myths from realities, because what many of us seem to have forgotten is that, in the vision of the founders of the United States of America, the right to bear arms carries with it enormous burdens and responsibilities.*

*In fact, if we restored the Second Amendment to its original meaning, it would be the NRA's worst nightmare. Invoking the Second Amendment ought to be a more effective argument for increased regulation than it is against it.*

*In 2008, a closely divided Supreme Court abandoned more than 70 years of precedent and for the first time in American history affirmed that the Second Amendment is about a right to have a handgun in the home for self-defense. Lost in most of the commentary then and now is that this is almost the exactly (sic) opposite of what James Madison, the primary architect of the amendment, intended, and is hard to reconcile with the way most ordinary Americans would have read it in 1791.*

*In 1776, most of the original state constitutions did not even include an arms-bearing provision. The few states that did usually also included a clause protecting **the right not to bear arms**. Why? Because, in contrast to other cherished rights such as freedom of speech or religion, the state could not compel you to speak or pray. It could force you to bear arms.*

*The founders had a simple reason for curbing this right: Quakers and other religious pacifists were opposed to bearing arms, and wished to be exempt from an obligation that could be made incumbent on all male citizens at the time.*

*When the Second Amendment is discussed today, we tend to think of those “militias” as just a bunch of ordinary guys with guns, empowering themselves to resist authority when and if necessary. Nothing could be further from the founders’ vision.*

*Militias were tightly controlled organizations legally defined and regulated by the individual colonies before the Revolution and, after independence, by the individual states. Militia laws ran on for pages and were some of the lengthiest pieces of legislation in the statute books. States kept track of who had guns, had the right to inspect them in private homes and could fine citizens for failing to report to a muster.*

*These laws also defined what type of guns you had to buy – a form of taxation levied on individual households. Yes, long before Obamacare, the state made you buy something, even if you did not want to purchase it. (The guns required by law were muskets, not pistols. The only exceptions to this general rule were the horsemen’s pistols that dragoons and other mounted units needed.)*

*The founders had a word for a bunch of farmers marching with guns without government sanction: a mob. One of the*

*reasons we have a Constitution is the founders were worried about the danger posed by individuals acting like a militia without legal authority. This was precisely what happened during Shays' Rebellion, an insurrection in western Massachusetts that persuaded many Americans that we needed a stronger central government to avert anarchy.*

*Many people think that we have the Second Amendment so that we can take up arms against the government if it overreaches its authority. If that interpretation were correct, it would mean that the Second Amendment had repealed the Constitution's treason clause, which defines this crime as taking up arms against the government. In reality, in the first decade after the Constitution, the government put down several rebellions similar to Shays - and nobody claimed that they were merely asserting their Second Amendment rights.*

*So if the Second Amendment does not have much to do about owning a pistol for self-defense, does that mean the founders did not esteem this right? Obviously the answer to that question is no. Not every right valued by Americans was expressly protected by a constitutional provision. The right of self-defense was part of the common law, a long tradition of rights defined by the English courts over a period of centuries.*

*But rather than invoke the Second Amendment in the coming months, Americans need to learn something about the historical origins of this part of our constitutional tradition. The bottom line is simple: the Second Amendment requires more gun regulation, not less.*

Cornell is the Paul and Diane Guenther Chair in American History at Fordham University.

I have included the full article, because it presents a far better argument than I ever could. An even more convincing – and much funnier – argument comes from Australian comedian Jim Jefferies. I wish that I could include his 20-minute rant, but it is difficult to put a video in a book. I looked for a transcript, but the best I could come up with was an article in The Independent of June 20<sup>th</sup> 2015. I added the bit not in italics:

*Before Port Arthur, where 35 people were shot dead at the resort and former prison colony, Australia had one gun massacre per year. Following the attack, which prompted Australia to introduce tougher gun control laws - "That's it, no more guns!" such killing sprees have not happened, Jefferies says. The response from Australians was "Yeah, alright then, that seems fair enough".*

*Jefferies compares this to the reaction of the USA to the Sandy Hook massacre: "Your government said, maybe we'll get rid of the big guns?"*

*There is "one argument alone" for the lack of gun control in America, Jefferies says. It is "F\*\*\* off, I like guns. It's not the best argument, but it's all you've got."*

He goes on to say, in his crude and possibly offensive style, that in any audience there are going to be 10% who are f\*\*\*\*g furious, and the reason they are so mad is that he is making good points. He is.

I think that it should be a requirement: you have to watch this video before you can buy a gun. And it should run on a loop in the NRA offices.

Seriously, I wish that the NRA, those who want to overturn New York's SAFE Act, and other fanatical defenders of their second amendment "rights" would stop and think about their objections

to regulations. No one is trying to take their guns away (well, if I could, I would). Is it so unreasonable to ask that gun owners are subjected to the same sort of licensing, registration, *insurance*, and training requirements as apply to car ownership? Cars may be instruments of death, but that is not their primary purpose. Perhaps we could have a DBC (Department of Ballistic Carriers) as part of the DMV, along with a DVR (Department of Voter Registration). One stop shopping for registration.

Is it so unreasonable to ask that if you are going to buy a gun (primary purpose – to kill), you at least tell the rest of us why you want a gun, what you plan to do with it, and that you know how to use it.

Bloody hell, if I am expected to submit to a background check to show people around a museum or teach Italian, then you gun owners out there can show us you are not some psychopath intent on shooting your entire family, or a theater audience, or a few dozen class mates or.....

If you look at the statistics, the US is so far ahead of the rest of the civilized world in the number of shootings that one needs Al Gore's ladder to point to the top of the graph. True there are countries where more people own guns, or more people shoot each other or more people top themselves without the use of firearms. All arguments put forward to defend the idea of guns for protection.

But you know, that doesn't really matter. This country proclaims itself the greatest nation in the history of the world. And that claim means that the US must hold itself to a higher standard.

The Second Amendment could be considered an Achilles' Heel. The perceived right to own firearms has led to a culture in which guns are glorified, and violence is so pervasive that hardly anyone notices. When my grandson was 5, his mother's boyfriend gave

him a BB gun as a present from the Easter Bunny, and no one besides me and my son thought this was a problem.

The horrible shootings in Charleston, or Sandy Hook, or Binghamton, or Columbine, cannot entirely be laid at the door of guns. I take that back. Yes they can. It is only with guns that you can kill a lot of people in a short space of time. That's what they were designed for.

These shootings raise many questions about the shortcomings of America in 2015. Racism is unacceptably pervasive. Mental health issues are ignored or swept under the table. The country is divided. There is an unacceptable level of hatred and animosity towards the "other side" or "them", whoever they may be.

It is true, I suppose, that guns by themselves do not kill people. But disturbed, indoctrinated, hate-filled people with free access to guns do. Far too often.

There is a lovely bit doing the rounds of the internet currently, in which the Queen rescinds US independence. Among other things, she says: "You will learn to resolve personal issues without using guns, lawyers, or therapists. The fact that you need so many lawyers and therapists shows that you're not quite ready to be independent. Guns should only be used for shooting grouse. If you can't sort things out without suing someone or speaking to a therapist, then you're not ready to shoot grouse." Funny, but disturbingly true.

(PS. For those who like to keep track of where tax-payer money goes, it has been estimated that gun violence costs the US \$229 billion a year.)

The Fourth to Eighth amendments could be combined into one short section of the main document. Similarly IX, X and XI could be combined and re-written to mean something. I have no clue

what they are trying to say. Twelve deals with the election of the President and Vice-President – lots of room for improvement, but this should be an article, not an amendment. Ditto the Eighteenth, Twentieth, Twenty-Second and Twenty-Fifth.

Thirteen is the abolition of slavery. While it may seem redundant, perhaps there should still be mention of involuntary servitude. Nevertheless, it would be better as part of the more general civil rights amendment, number fourteen. As this was added in 1868, quite a lot has changed, and the civil rights mentioned need to be extended to everyone, not just 21-year old white males.

Amendment sixteen is short enough to quote in full: *The Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on income, from whatever source derive, without apportionment among the several States, and without regard to any census or enumeration.* So there. The States are lucky if they get anything. I think there is huge room for improvement here. If it were up to me, I would not tax income derived from honest work; that is, wages and salaries. But I would tax all other sources of income – bonuses, capital gains, interest, mining royalties or any other exploitation of the commons. And a progressive sales tax wouldn't be a bad idea.

Amendments XVIII and XXI are an embarrassment and should be expunged from history, and at the same time the prohibition against marijuana (imposed at the same time as the prohibition against liquor, but never repealed) should be lifted. More on that under Justice.

Amendment XXIII deals with suffrage in the District of Columbia. I don't have any useful ideas on that; someone else will have to figure out how you keep a capital district without disenfranchising its residents.

XXIV – poll taxes. Really? XXVII – congressional salaries. Not a bad idea, but should be part of how Congress is elected and run.

The US Constitution is the shortest in existence, but I think it should be shorter still, and written in a way that anyone 16 years or older can understand. In order for that to be possible one may want to look at Benjamin Franklin's views on education:

*The good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise Men in all Ages, as the surest Foundation of the Happiness both of private Families and of Commonwealths. Almost all Governments have therefore made it a principal Object of their Attention, to establish and endow with proper Revenues, such Seminaries of Learning, as might supply the succeeding Age with Men qualified to serve the Publick with Honour to themselves, and to their Country.*

He was saying, in effect, that a good education is a pre-requisite for being a good citizen, as one needs an education to make informed decisions at election time. According to a study conducted in late April by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read. That's 14 percent of the population. 21 percent of adults in the U.S. read below a 5th grade level, and 19 percent of high school graduates can't read. But they can watch Fox News.

[First Church of Polydeism: "If a tree falls in the forest and Fox News isn't there to cover it, is it still Obama's fault?" and, paraphrasing Mark Twain : "If you don't watch news, you're un-informed. If you watch Fox news, you're mis-informed."]

Perhaps education should be addressed somewhere in the Constitution, as a civil right maybe.



## GOVERNMENT

*The great object [of political parties] should be to combat the evil: 1. By establishing a political equality among all. 2. By withholding unnecessary opportunities from a few, to increase the inequality of property, by an immoderate, and especially an unmerited, accumulation of riches. 3. By the silent operation of laws, which, without violating the rights of property, reduce extreme wealth towards a state of mediocrity, and raise extreme indigence towards a state of comfort.*

James Madison, Fourth President of the United States.

*"The people who cast the votes don't decide an election, the people who count the votes do."*

Joseph Stalin

*"The end of democracy and the defeat of the American Revolution will occur when government falls into the hands of lending institutions and moneyed incorporations."*

Attributed to Jefferson, but refuted by Monticello.org.

A good line nevertheless.

*We have the best government money can buy.*

Mark Twain

The 10% of the population who still approve of the job Congress is doing, must not watch the news or read newspapers very much. Members of Congress seem to spend very little time actually in the House (just look at the empty seats even during a high profile

debate, if debate is the right word); they are either planning their re-election campaign or schmoozing with lobbyists.

This country is no longer a democracy. It is not so much an oligarchy (although the 1% certainly are in control) as it is a corporatocracy, to coin a phrase. Corporations buy politicians who will then enact the legislation that serves their interests. Corporations even get to write the legislation they want through ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, a nonprofit organization of conservative state legislators and private sector representatives that drafts and shares model state-level legislation for distribution among state governments in the United States. According to its website, ALEC "works to advance the fundamental principles of free-market enterprise, limited government, and federalism at the state level through a nonpartisan public-private partnership of America's state legislators, members of the private sector and the general public". I'm not sure when the general public gets a chance to comment. And I'm not sure it is a good idea to have a consortium of big businesses writing the laws that will benefit them most. In theory that is not too terrible as a starting point, but when those big businesses have a serious lobbying wing and very deep pockets, the results are not good.

Republicans rail about government overreach and how smaller government is the only way to move the country forward. This is one area where I actually agree with them as the rules and regulations we are subjected to are unnecessary at best and oppressive at worst. However, the cynical among us tend to agree with this idea put out by the proponents of virtuous cycle economics: *"Small Government" is Conservative code talk for Corporate dominance. Boardrooms don't have to listen to a thing you say. They will eradicate every law on the books except those that protect and increase their wealth and profit.*" The Supreme Court even wrote it into law with the Citizens United ruling.

Steven Spielberg's movie Lincoln was a fascinating look at the man and the times. I can't call it a great movie because I can only remember two parts of it. One was buying votes to get abolition passed; the other was the couple who had traveled half-way across the country to petition the President. What a great idea! Modern-day lobbying, however, has taken a good idea and perverted it into a way to buy influence.

The simple way to eliminate both the time and money wasted campaigning; cut the influence of money in politics is to set term limits. Or rather term limit - one term only. The term can be quite long 8, 10, 12 years, but one term only, with the possibility of recall if the incumbent turns out to be a real dud. This would apply to the President, the Senate and the House of Representatives and down to the local level. As things stand now, if you want to be a Representative, you have to wage a protracted and obscenely expensive campaign to get elected, you spend a few months settling in, and then you start campaigning again for the next election which is a short 18 months away. You are besieged by lobbyists who promise support in return for favorable votes for their special interests and you are pressured by your party to vote along partisan lines if you want party support in the next campaign.

If re-election is not an issue, each member of Congress is free to make a reasoned, unbiased judgment each time a vote is called for. In effect, each member is an independent, who can pick and chose which way to go. In effect, each member can weigh each vote on its merits and vote his or her conscience, influenced only by the will of the people in his or her constituency.

And that first election campaign? Three months, tops. If you can't get your message across in three months, then you don't have a lot to say. Because we are striving here to have elected officials who actually represent the people, it is a given that campaign contributions are limited to individuals, and limited in

size. No \$100,000 contributions from corporations or influential individuals. Up to, say, \$5000 per person. The number of contributors says a lot more about how you represent your district than the size of the donations. Besides, with a short campaign, you don't need all that much money. Why has this not occurred to people seeking office? Of course, one would need to do away with primaries. Without that little hurdle, anyone could enter the race at the last minute and gallop to the finish line, provided, of course, that he or she had a good platform.

A long campaign would not be necessary if there were some public funding for equal air time, giving everyone who wishes to serve their country a chance to run for office. Holding public office is a chance to serve one's country, to do some good, to make a difference. It is very much akin to serving on the Board of a non-profit organization. You give your time for a number of years and then make way for someone else. It should not be a career.

To quote Jim Hacker in the incomparable BBC programme "Yes Minister"

*"Being an MP (Member of Parliament) is a vast subsidized ego-trip. It's a job that needs no qualifications, it has no compulsory hours of work, no performance standards, and provides a warm room, a telephone and subsidized meals to a bunch of self-important windbags and busybodies who suddenly find people taking them seriously because they've got the letters 'MP' after the their name."*

Because no one else seems to be doing anything to improve the electoral system, I actually drafted The Election Reform Act of 2012.

*United States citizens may run for elected office under the following circumstances:*

- *An election campaign will begin no earlier than three months before election day*
- *The candidate may be affiliated with a registered political party, but that party may not contribute funds to the campaign*
- *The candidate may run for office if he or she has received the support of no less than 10% of the residents in the district over 18 years of age, as shown by petition.*
- *It is incumbent upon all residents in the district to vote. They may vote for a candidate or spoil their paper to register lack of approval of any candidate.*
- *A vote by mail is allowed two weeks before Election Day, and must be postmarked no later than the previous day.*
- *The successful candidate will serve for one term only, the length of that term to be determined by the relevant jurisdiction.*
- *Television and ads using other media, may not mention by name or image anyone except the person paying for the ad.*
- *No person or entity may contribute more than \$500 dollars a month to any campaign*

What do these 200 words achieve? At a stroke Citizens United is eviscerated, The power of lobbyists is seriously curtailed, negative advertising and smear campaigns are a thing of the past, the ability of one party to stymie the activity of the other is limited, political office becomes service to country, not a lucrative career; every official is elected on merit, not money; every official is essentially independent to vote his or her conscience; power is returned to the people.

So that just about takes care of Government. If only it was that easy.



## GREED

*Advocates of capitalism are very apt to appeal to the sacred principles of liberty, which are embodied in one maxim: The fortunate must not be restrained in the exercise of tyranny over the unfortunate.*

Bertrand Russell

*"We have a system that increasingly taxes work and subsidizes non-work."*

Milton Friedman

What happened to the America Dream? Greed happened.  
Me, rather than we, happened.

Some call it consumerism, some call it capitalism. By whatever name, it is one of the least appealing aspects of the United States. It is what gives the United States a less than stellar reputation in the rest of the world. It is why I was reluctant to bring my children up here. I have to tell you that the inequities and frequently reprehensible money-making practices in this country are making communism seem very attractive. I don't mean Marxism or Maoism, or even the hippy communes of the sixties. But life based in and on communities is increasingly appealing.

Most Americans think that capitalism is the best and only possible economic system, because socialism, one of the alternatives, has been equated with communism, and is therefore bad, and definitely un-American. I wonder where that idea came from.

Possibly from the same business people and economists who decided, post World War I, that overproduction could and should be solved by increasing consumption so that economic growth could continue. Manufacturers wanted to keep expanding production so as to increase their profits, and therefore had to find new markets.

The alternative view, held mainly by intellectuals, labor leaders, reformers, educators and religious leaders, was to decrease work hours and share the work around until production met current needs and the economy stabilized. It has been suggested that employers were afraid of such a future because of its potential to undermine the work ethic and encourage degeneracy amongst workers who were unable to make proper use of their time. Increasing production and consumption guaranteed the ongoing centrality of work. Yeah, right.

*"Anyone who believes exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist."*

Kenneth E. Boulding

As there are a finite number of economists in the world, I guess we have to accept the fact that there are a lot of madmen, and a growing number of madwomen. The belief that exponential growth is possible has led to a United States which has: the steepest grade of differentiation between rich and poor in the world; mass layoffs at work; jobs that are predominantly part-time, temporary, and low wage with no benefits; a spiraling rate of home foreclosures; a large percentage of homeowners with mortgages under water; repeated cuts to social services and employment benefits; a collapsing infrastructure of roads, bridges, sewer systems, underground gas mains; mass public school closings and rise of charter and private schools; rising costs of food, gas, energy; wage stagnation and a sevenfold increase in the rate of bankruptcies between 1980 and 2004.

I was shocked to read a few years back that the basic principle of the Harvard Business School is that the only thing that matters in business is profit. What an utterly appalling idea. But how widely it has been adopted! Ethics, concern for the worker or the environment, fairness, equality be damned. All that counts is the bottom line.

This idea has turned the United States into something that is far from a democracy, if by democracy one means majority rule. Dubya was not elected by a majority. That is a fact, but not one that I can easily tie to my current theme of greed. I can't actually point to any one special interest group that bought his election. That is due to my ignorance, not to the fact that it didn't happen.

*And... The idea that government is essential to the function of complex societies should be immediately evident to any thinking person. It is similarly clear that letting money-seeking transnational corporations rule as best suits their financial interests has disastrous societal consequences.*

*Entirely missing from the debate is the extent to which it is the growth of corporate size and influence that creates the need for big government to limit corporate excesses, clean up their messes, subsidize their operations, and field the military and police forces required to protect their global and domestic properties. The subsidies include welfare for underpaid employees, unemployment for those whose jobs they outsource abroad or displace with robots and migrant workers, and medical insurance for those they fail to insure.*

*Without the burden that monopolistic and predatory corporations place on society, government, particularly national government, could be dramatically downsized and public debt largely eliminated.*

*An abstract debate over the size of government is a pointless distraction – as those who promote it are likely aware. We should instead ask, “Does our federal government represent the interests of the United States and its people and is its size appropriate to that task?” Tragically, the answer for the United State is no.*

*Although the American people pay the bills, it is a government of, by, and for the United Corporations of Planet Earth and their needs, not a government designed to meet the needs of our people. We could do nicely with a far smaller federal government, if we limited the size of corporations and structured their ownership to assure that they are accountable to the people of the communities in which they do business.*

How I wish that I had the knowledge and the skill to have written the above words! They were actually written by David Korten, co-founder and board chair of YES! Magazine, and author of *When Corporations Rule the World*, now out in its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition. What a pity we didn’t listen to him two decades ago.

There are many people we should perhaps be listening to. Take Anand Giridharadas, whose recent speech at the Aspen Institute’s Action Forum included this passage:

*The Aspen Consensus, in a nutshell, is this: the winners of our age must be challenged to do more good. But never, ever tell them to do less harm.*

*The Aspen Consensus holds that capitalism’s rough edges must be sanded and its surplus fruit shared, but the underlying system must never be questioned.*

*The Aspen Consensus says, “Give back,” which is of course a compassionate and noble thing. But, amid the \$20 million second homes and \$4,000 parkas of Aspen, it is gauche to observe that giving back is also a Band-Aid that winners stick onto the system that has privileged them, in the conscious or subconscious hope*

*that it will forestall major surgery to that system – surgery that might threaten their privileges.*

*The Aspen Consensus, I believe, tries to market the idea of generosity as a substitute for the idea of justice. It says: make money in all the usual ways, and then give some back through a foundation, or factor in social impact, or add a second or third bottom line to your analysis, or give a left sock to the poor for every right sock you sell.*

*The Aspen Consensus says, “Do more good” – not “Do less harm.”*

Quite obviously, he thinks that it should be the other way around, as do I. Also obviously, my idea of “Be Nice” is far too simplistic to solve the world’s problems. But it may make a difference. If you consider that being nice includes not doing any harm, as do I, then it is almost impossible to be a dedicated capitalist or a dedicated Republican and still be nice.

As Giridharadas suggested, we live in a world of winners and losers. Another way to express the “be nice” idea could be: always try to find a win-win situation. A bit more of we, not just me.

I have to say at this point that I grew up in South Africa with considerable privilege. If we had lived in the US, our family would undoubtedly have voted Republican. My father ran (and was chief shareholder in) the largest media company in Southern Africa. In terms of influence, he was compared to Lord Beaverbrook, although I like to think that he was a considerably nicer person. He certainly treated those who worked for him much better and he did not use his position to accumulate wealth. He died when I was 15 and the next thirty years of my life were dominated by my mother, who announced that she would never

remarry as she was going to devote the rest of her life to her children. Oh God, we said and fled.

When I left South Africa, my situation changed for two reasons: it was then almost impossible to get money out of the country and I married an almost penniless archeologist. Not surprisingly, his views were considerably more Socialist than mine, but it did not take him long to convert me. He just asked me how I would have felt if our then infant son had been born with a terrible deformity, or had suffered a terrible accident. Wouldn't I want the state to help out with caring for him so that the rest of us could carry on leading more or less productive lives? The answer was, yes, of course I would.

We had a few lean years, first in Rome and then here, but eventually it became apparent that he was quite an asset to the Museum, and his salary was bumped up to the level that put us, not in the top 1%, but definitely in the top 2%. (The difference is exponential). Without David's salary, my income has dropped considerably, but I am still in the top 5% and live in a five-bedroom 3000 square foot house. I find this quite embarrassing when I am talking to people in less affluent parts of the world, or indeed less affluent people here in Corning, of whom there are many.

My quality of life is such that I feel a moral obligation to try to improve the lives of others. And I try very hard to do no harm.

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I suppose one can't actually eliminate the stock exchange, although I wish one could. It is irrelevant to the vast majority of Americans who do not have any disposable income to invest, while small investors are at the mercy of speculators who manipulate the market for their own gain. The price of stocks can so easily be affected by positive or negative reports (which may or may not bear any resemblance to the true situation) that the real

value of a company is often obscured. Have you not noticed how a good report from a company is almost always followed by a drop in the stock price? WTF, as modern-day texters are wont to say.

So is the Stock Exchange actually a good idea? It has become one giant casino, a word carefully chosen to represent not only a gambling den where the odds strongly favor the house, but also the less well-known Italian meanings: casinò = the gambling place; che casino = what a mess, guadagnare un casino = to earn a helluva lot of money and casino = a brothel. So whores earning too much money and making a mess, just about sums it up.

The concept of the stock exchange was one of those that seemed like a good idea at the time. But it has deteriorated to the point where it has allowed gamblers (sometimes called hedge fund managers or junk bond traders or derivatives managers or crooks) to make huge amounts of money. It is no longer the mechanism to invest in promising or successful businesses. Rather it has become a market for speculators who don't make anything and don't build anything. (Remember "Pretty Woman"?) They mess with other people's money to make themselves rich. And they are aided and abetted in this largely legal but definitely unethical scheme by the government which gives tax breaks for gambling debts and other financial losses, while capping the tax on capital gains at a mere 15%.

Maybe one way to curb greed is to tax all unearned income (including inheritances and stock options) at, say, 80%, as has happened in the past. A small per transaction tax on stock trades wouldn't hurt either.

In December 2011, I was bored. As something to do, I signed up with Freelancer.com. This business came out of Australia and was intended to outsource work to cheaper countries. The work covers many fields from computer programming to writing

academic papers (which I refuse to do). Over the next three years I wrote thousands and thousands of words on subjects ranging from Keurig coffee makers (my first) to free marijuana seeds to cufflinks. The first part of one of these articles titled “How much is enough for your emergency fund?” is relevant here:

According to the title character in Ben Jonson’s 1606 play, *Volpone*, there is never enough. He was, of course, talking about overall wealth and not the contents of your emergency fund. His method of accumulating wealth was to pretend that he was dying, drop hints about an heir and gratefully accept expensive gifts from greedy friends and relatives currying favor in order to become that heir.

Stockholders could be considered the modern-day equivalent of *Volpone*’s heir. After all, *America is not a country, it’s just a business*, as a character in the movie “Killing them Softly” says.

Why is it not possible for the founder of a company to say to himself (or possibly herself), we are doing pretty well. I can pay all my employees a good salary. I am living well; life is good. Why is it necessary to go public and acquire stockholders to whom you are then beholden? Obviously few CEOs know or care about Andrew Carnegie’s belief that “*Surplus wealth is a sacred trust which its possessor is bound to administer in his lifetime for the good of the community*”. Community has been replaced by stockholders.

(Ironically, one of my biggest Freelancer jobs was to act as translator for an Italian who was trying to launch a social media network specifically for the financial industry. Another of my big jobs was also translating from Italian. This was a first novel that we are now trying to get published in the States. The author’s philosophy is eerily similar to mine: the only way to save the world is to treat others well. She goes further to say that it is the

power of the individual that will bring about peace. And, oh yes, the Vatican sells all its assets and gives the money to the poor!)

There is no shortage of corporations whose greed and reckless disregard for the effect they are having on the economy, the environment and political stability is bordering on criminal. I am not among the 58% of Americans who believe in the Devil, but there is one corporation that is truly evil. One which we'll call They Who Must Not Be Named, because otherwise they are likely to sue.

This corporation's development and marketing of genetically engineered seed and bovine growth hormone, as well as its aggressive litigation, political lobbying practices, seed commercialization practices and "strong-arming" of the seed industry have made the company controversial around the world and a primary target of environmental activists. As a result of its business strategies and licensing agreements, the company came under investigation by the U.S. Justice Department in 2009. (Thank you Wikipedia for a very well-documented entry).

This company is nasty. It is the epitome of the "we're here to make money and damn the consequences" mentality that is destroying the fabric of American life. They have chuckled gleefully (on tape) over their price-fixing policies and feel that they "should not have to vouchsafe the safety of biotech food (because their only) interest is in selling as much of it as possible. Assuring its safety is FDA's job." The FDA can cite and chastise, but when you have the deep pockets and huge legal department that Mon..... (oops) has, you fight every case and if necessary pay some pathetic little fine and move on.

I wrote to their CEO, a Scot named Hugh Grant. Surprisingly, I got a reply, which, unsurprisingly, told me that they were a great company with only one concern - the farmer. I wish I could have copied his somewhat more famous namesake: I think the actor

needs to know what is happening in his name. But it is incredibly difficult to find addresses for the rich and famous. Sealed in their worlds of wealth and privilege, it would seem that they absolutely do not want to hear what the rest of us think.

Other nasty corporations are banks. We – stupid us – lend our money to banking institutions so that they can play the markets and make lots more money. I don't have a huge problem with that as a deal, but in return I would expect a few basic services, such as giving me access to my money when I need it. I have a problem with a bank that cannot move my money somewhere else when I ask it to, that speeds up my withdrawals and slows down my deposits so that it can charge me hefty NSF fees on multiple withdrawals because they process the largest check first. And that is just at the very small, local level. What they do globally is appalling.

Stories of bank insanities are legion and they are all about giving back to the depositor the least possible amount of his or her money. None of this nickel and diming is necessary, as long as the banking institution is content with good profits instead of usurious ones. We have a flourishing (the second largest building in town) Credit Union, which offers excellent customer support and every service that a depositor could possibly wish for (but even they have difficulty moving my money to foreign parts because of more and more onerous "security" regulations.) Last year I tried three banks to transfer payment to a hotel in Ethiopia (How do you spell that? Where is that?). In the end I went to Western Union. Ten minutes and one quarter the fee.

And I won't even touch on insurance companies because the very thought sends my blood pressure soaring and I almost start to froth at the mouth. (I froth a bit in the chapter "Liability")

#Occupy Wall Street underlined the evils of corporate greed very well and the movement raised many questions that need to be

considered carefully, including What will the workforce of 2020 look like, where are the jobs? Is capitalism the only way to go? And what about the common good? And so on. I don't know the answers to these questions, but I would sure like to see people talking about them. As long as it is talking in a thoughtful, inquiring, respectful manner and not the odious "discussions" one gets from so-called pundits on TV which are little more than shouting matches and have no hope of ever changing the other person's mind.

"Why" is a question that is not asked nearly enough. For example, why do you support this candidate? Years ago when I was tutoring in the Migrant Education Program, a 10-year girl said out of the blue, "George Bush is so cool, I wish he could be President for ever"! What had she heard from her parents? How I would have liked to ask them just what made him "cool". I would have liked to ask why they thought that "cool" was an appropriate description for the President of the United States. The follow-up question to "why" is, of course, how do you know? I'm sorry, but I saw it on Fox News is not an acceptable answer. Nor is the Internet.

I do not trust any source where there is money involved. To quote Upton Sinclair: *"It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!"* That idea infiltrates so many areas. I am not anti-science, I suppose, but I do not trust "scientific" studies which support a product when the study was commissioned by the manufacturer.

One evening David accused me of being a Luddite. "I am not," I defended myself hotly, then sneaked off to look up what he meant. Of course, he was right. Was he ever wrong?

The day my MacBook refused to take a charge and was essentially dead, I had a full-blown panic attack – hyperventilating, unable to stay still, invoking the deity I don't believe in. It was bad.

We are so dependent on technology that it is hard to remember a time when we were not hooked up, tuned in, wired, wi-fi'd, GPS'd, online, on a cell phone, or talking to a machine. Not that all technology is bad. Until something goes wrong. I am absolutely lost without my computer. The meltdown happened on a Friday afternoon, the day before I was leaving for Europe so I would not be able to get to an Apple store until Monday. I was fully expecting to have to leave my machine there for possibly lengthy repairs. Fortunately I had printed out the text of a book I had just finished translating, so I could spend my travel time proofreading the old fashioned way, with pencil and paper.

You may be asking what all this has to do with greed. Machines are more efficient than people, and you don't have to pay them. The original Luddites were absolutely right: machines steal jobs. Machines replace skilled workers with much less skilled machine operators. And fewer workers, period. It is quite true that consumers benefit because the machine made products tend to be cheaper. At the same time it is very good for the proprietor – fewer pay-checks, lower pay-checks, increased productivity and money in the bank.

I much prefer the attitude at St. Pauly Textile in Farmington, New York. I toured their facility with a group from NYSAR3, the New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse and Recycling. St. Pauly collects used clothing and shoes all over the state, sorts them, bales them and ships them to non-profit organizations which distribute them to the needy here and abroad. One of our group, observing the five or six workers feeding a single baler asked our guide why they didn't get another baler. To his very great credit he said, in effect, "I could but that would put half the team out of work. I can't do that to my friends and neighbors. They need the jobs and our community needs them to be working."

His answer gave me goose bumps. I have mentioned elsewhere that eighty people hold the same amount of wealth as the world's 3.6 billion poorest people. I have mentioned *Volpone* earlier, but it is worth repeating in a greater detail.

Way back in my youth I saw a movie called *The Honey Pot* with Rex Harrison in the lead role as a millionaire (it's on old movie!!!) based on the title character in *Volpone*, Ben Jonson's early 17<sup>th</sup> Century play described as a "a merciless satire of greed and lust". I think that the play needs to be revived and widely performed, but perhaps it is enough to quote the pivotal line from the film. Cecil Fox - *Volpone* being translated, of course, as a large, or sly fox - is asked, when will you have enough money. His quite chilling, and immensely prescient answer is THERE IS NEVER ENOUGH.

I am not against entrepreneurship: I could be called an entrepreneur as much as a Luddite. But I have never been very successful because making money was not my priority.

*A petty criminal is someone with predatory instincts but insufficient capital to form a corporation.*

Clarence Darrow

*The wealthy have controlled this country by convincing chickens to vote for Colonel Sanders, turkeys to vote for Thanksgiving, and middle class voters to send their own jobs overseas.*

(Found on Daily Kos as the tagline of one dcnblues.)

There is already a huge groundswell rising from the bottom up against income inequality, but for that to have much effect, it is going to need a revolution, not just a few Occupy's. Given my still tenuous immigration status I should probably not be espousing revolution as I am quite likely to be thrown out of the country for sedition.

I tend to see things very much in black and white and I think that we should just abolish capitalism altogether. Bye, bye Stock Exchange, bye, bye stock options, bye, bye hedge funds, bye, bye eight-figure executive compensation, etc, etc, etc.

Perhaps David Korten's idea of limiting the size of corporations is a more practical solution. Perhaps corporations could regulate themselves without the need for the masses to attack them with pitchforks a la the French Revolution as Nick Hanauer suggested in a provocative TED talk, viewed so far by 1.1 million people. But I doubt it.

Capitalism doesn't just create enormous wealth; it also creates abject poverty. An excellent article by Jason Hickel, Joe Brewer, and Martin Kirk explains how England and the Industrial Revolution are largely responsible, followed by colonialism, and free trade.

*(A)fter the ravages of colonialism were over there was a time when things started getting better for poor countries. During the 1960s and 1970s, poor countries made careful use of trade tariffs and subsidies to build their economies with great effect. Incomes grew quickly and the gap between rich countries and poor countries began to narrow. In fact, some poor countries became almost as wealthy as their Western counterparts.*

*But these two decades of hope were brought to a crashing end in the 1980s. (Reagan again?) The World Bank and the IMF began to impose "structural adjustment programs" on developing countries as a basic condition for receiving international finance. These programs forced poor countries to abandon their tariffs and subsidies, and required them to sell off most of their public services and assets to foreign companies.*

*Similarly, in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement forced Mexico to cut barriers to imports from the US. As cheap American corn flooded into Mexico, some 2 million farmers were*

*forced to leave their land. Many had no choice but to seek work in the sweatshops that sprang up along the border.*

And now we are looking at the Trans Pacific Partnership which includes provisions for countries – and corporations – to sue other countries for perceived lack of earnings. So a company like Norse Energy could blame their bankruptcy on New York’s moratorium, and now ban, on fracking and sue for what they could have earned if they had been allowed to drill.

It is not hard to extend these arguments to other parts of the world. We in the West have a lot to answer for, and we have little right to criticize the Chinese for trying to replace the cultures of places like Tibet and the Uighur Autonomous Region with the predominant Han ideology, while we very successfully impose capitalism on so much of the world. And reap the benefits. Make no mistake; the US does not promote democracy around the world. It promotes capitalism. Investments in foreign countries.

If more people thought the way that the wonderful people at St Pauly Textile do, the world would be a much, much better place. A Better Way is an attempt to get more people to think that way.

By the way, the reason that my high-tech computer ceased to function was ridiculously low-tech. The magnetized port for the charger had picked up a used staple, which fitted perfectly around the terminals. Result, no contact. I didn’t even need to see a Genius; the first line greeter diagnosed and fixed the problem in about fifteen seconds. I was so overjoyed that I said I wanted to hug him. Well, OK, he said. So I did.



## GOD

*"It's a strange myth that atheists have nothing to live for. It's the opposite. We have nothing to die for. We have everything to live for."*  
Ricky Gervais

*"Atheism is a non-prophet organization."* George Carlin

*I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires. -- Susan B. Anthony*

What I am doing in this section is asking all of you who practice a religion to look carefully and thoughtfully, not only at what it is that you believe in, but also what effect your beliefs have on others. It is a long section because religion has been, and still is, the most divisive force ever. There is no way that the problems of the world will be solved without men and women of different faiths talking to each other as individuals and not as members of a rival religion. It's trite, but true, to say that we are more alike than we are different. However, it is often difficult to see how alike we are when beliefs get in the way.

This section may well be difficult to read as it may seem that I am belittling all that you hold dear, but I really encourage you to read through to the end, where I hope you might find something of value.

Not long ago I read an op-ed piece entitled “Man Made Gods” by J. Anderson Thompson and Claire Anhofer. In it there were two mind-blowing assertions.

The first, and I quote, scientists “have produced robust theories, backed by empirical evidence, that support the conclusion that it was humans who created God, not the other way around”.

I have known this to be true for more than 50 years. What is absolutely stunning is that the idea was first suggested to me by a 14 year old girl in 1959. Reading the article produced a very strong sense of déjà vu. What she said then, they are saying now.

She wasn't a friend exactly. We attended the same girls' only boarding school in Johannesburg where she had committed some terrible sin (being cleverer than the teachers I suspect) and so was demoted. This meant that she had to spend three weeks in a dormitory with girls 2 or 3 years younger than herself.

Her name was Susan and she was brilliant. How did she come up with ideas that are only now being published? Perhaps more to the point, how did she have the courage to express them?

Thompson and Anhofer say “We easily expand that inborn need for protectors to authority figures of any sort, including religious leaders and, more saliently, gods. God becomes a super parent, able to protect us and care for us even when our more corporeal support systems disappear, through death or distance.”

Susan said that we all need someone to look up to, and when there is no one left on earth, we invent another realm – heaven – with God presiding over it. Not her exact words, but the general gist. I don't know how she came up with these ideas, but I do know that I have been an unwavering, and mostly silent, atheist ever since.

The second stunning phrase in the article was talking about John Lennon's "Imagine". As they put it, imagine that we might have a world where politicians *no longer compete to prove who believes more strongly in the irrational and the untenable*. What a wonderful thought!

The First Amendment begins: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*. With respect to the first half, there are no laws that I know of, but there sure is a lot of pressure. Theoretically, the country abides by the second half as well, except ..... What it is actually taken to mean is that you are perfectly free to observe whatever religion you like, as long as you observe. There is no place in the American psyche for someone who does not believe.

Just look at this jaw-dropping exchange between a reporter and Bush senior: **Sherman**: Surely you recognize the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists? **Bush**: No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

Well, it has been since 1954, when a campaign by the Knights of Columbus, prompted Congress to add the words, 'under God,' to the Pledge, turning it from a patriotic oath into a public prayer. Neil DeGrasse Tyson recently reworded it into a biting indictment of how the country stands: *I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Divided States of America, and to the Pacts for which it stands, one nation, at odds, divisible, with Liberty and Justice for some*.

Incidentally, The Pledge was written in 1892 for public school celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Its author was Francis Bellamy, a Baptist minister, Christian socialist and cousin of socialist utopian novelist Edward Bellamy. Christian socialism maintains, among other ideas, that capitalism is idolatrous and rooted in greed, and the underlying cause of much of the world's social inequity. They got that right!

In my view, being at odds may be manifested as a political reality, but the division is based on religious beliefs. I don't care what deity a person espouses, prayer and other forms of worship (even the euphemistic "invocations") belong in church, chapel, meeting house, synagogue, temple, mosque or some other location where like-minded people gather to pursue their rituals. There, at least, when asked to pray everyone is praying to the same incarnation of the same deity, that is, they pursue a common. Religion has no place in public life, period. Harry Truman agreed: *I'm not very much impressed by men who publicly parade their beliefs. I've always believed a religion is something to live by and not to talk about.*

Shortly after coming to the United States in 1984, I found myself running (unopposed) for Secretary of the Carder School PTA. At the subsequent swearing-in ceremony, I was taken aback when the School Board representative suggested a prayer.

It was not having to twiddle my thumbs while she spouted her mumbo-jumbo; after all, I had done just that for 12 years at my strictly Anglican school. No, it was the arrogant assumption that every person present was a believer who would want to join a complete stranger (and lay person at that) in *her* sort of prayer. She later apologized to me in that puzzled way that people have when they haven't the slightest clue where they gave offence. Just imagine if the roles had been reversed and I had invited those present to join me in invoking the spirit of the large tree to the left of the front door!

Those of you who believe in some god or other have no idea how offensive it is to non-believers to have god shoved in your face fifty times a day. We are supposed to put up with it out of respect for the other person's beliefs. Well what about ours? Non-belief, of course, gets no respect at all.

I may be taken to task for calling religious observances insanities, but I stick by my choice of words, given that insanity has been

defined as doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result (attributed to Einstein and others) and more formally by law.com: *Insanity*. *n. mental illness of such a severe nature that a person cannot distinguish fantasy from reality.*

Faith is an insanity, if you define insanity as being out of touch with reality. By definition it is not rational. Is it consistent with everyday life to put one's faith in an unseen, immeasurable, unknowable "being" that supposedly micro-manages one's life and - if you are very good, and pray very hard - will give you what you want, including that ultimate reward, a place in heaven?

Is it really sane to believe that there is a place where some ethereal part of you goes after death - *if* you are a believer and *if* you've been very good? What if you've been very, very good, but don't believe in Heaven and all that goes along with it? Is God so vindictive that he sends an exemplary - but free-thinking - human to hell? And what about animals? Do they have a soul? Where do they go after death? Obviously not Florida as my son has told his very young children. Perhaps where Will Rogers is: "*If there are no dogs in heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went.*"

Besides, what do you do for eternity? Your body stays here on earth; it is your spirit or soul that goes to heaven, let's say, where you will be reunited with your loved ones. How do you find them? And what do you do when you do find them? You have no arms to hug, no lips to kiss, no tongue to talk. All you can do is communicate on a spiritual level. And that you can do with your corporeal feet still planted firmly on the earth. The dead are not truly gone as long as we remember them.

The Old Testament is a collection of writings assembled to try to explain the mysteries of the universe by people who did not yet have much knowledge of the world around them. That was then. This is now. As Ben Cohen of the Daily Banter wrote, talking

about Justice Scalia's reliance on the Bible to get the age of mankind: *Knowing that he takes the text of a book based on 5th hand accounts of fairy tales told by goat herders in the Bronze Age more seriously than scientists is frankly shocking.* I agree.

Genesis is a creation myth similar to those found around the world. There are creation myths in all cultures. I found a website listing some 4000. Many have been rejected, quite rightly, as they make no sense at all. Richard Dawkins takes the idea one step further. In "The God Delusion" he argues:

*"The fact that orbiting teapots and tooth fairies are undisprovable is not felt, by any reasonable person, to be the kind of fact that settles any interesting argument. None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further."*

How one interprets one's own creation myth determines one's view of life, which is fine as a way to run one's own personal path. But frankly, I despair of the human race while the vast majority continues to run its life according to some unsubstantiated ramblings by long-dead loonies whose only qualification was that they knew how to write. Loonies may be a bit unfair, but I cannot think of an alternative. Perhaps they should be compared to the framers of the Constitution: intelligent, thoughtful and well-meaning, but ignorant of scientific explanations for the mysteries of the universe.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states, among other things, that it prohibits the making of any law respecting an establishment of religion, or anything that would impede the free exercise of religion. That is all well and good, but

in effect it is saying that you are free to worship in any way you choose, but, by God, you had better worship! (I'm repeating myself here, but it is something I feel quite strongly about).

To give credit where credit is due, the framers of the Constitution drew up their quite remarkable document before Darwin. Before Darwin, a Creator, a supernatural being looking out for us, seemed like the most likely explanation for life as we knew it. But the theory of evolution changed everything. It explained clearly and succinctly how we came to be here - no God necessary.

Unfortunately, by then religion of one sort or another was deeply entrenched in most cultures. And passed on from generation to generation, delusions and bigotry intact. No child comes into the world with religious beliefs in place. Each child absorbs the beliefs of its parents. The powerful song from "South Pacific" shows how this leads to prejudice against "them", with them being just about anyone outside our own faith:

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,  
You've got to be taught from year to year,  
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear  
You've got to be carefully taught.*

The US does not have the deadly divisions as in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine or the Sunni/Shiite rift of Islam. But it does have continuing racism, bigotry and intolerance, which manifests itself in hatred of gays, and violent opposition to abortion.

Once again I will turn to others whose words are so much more powerful than anything I can come up with. First, a blog post immediately after *Obergefell v. Hodges* and the unseemly, hateful reactions that followed:

*We gave those who live outside of our faith tradition, very little reason to move any closer. By choosing to be rude and argumentative and hateful, we made Jesus fairly irrelevant; an*

*option not really worth considering. Make no mistake, the eyes of the world were fully on the American Church this week, and too much of what they saw was a pretty lousy testimony to a God of love. Many people looked at the rotten fruit of our faith and simply turned away for good.*

John Pavlovitz on what Christians lost after Supreme Court decision on gay marriage. I don't agree with his devotion to god, but I like this man. Being argumentative and hateful gets you nowhere.

Next, testament from a Catholic nun, Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B. about the gauche attempts to demonize and defund Planned Parenthood and the hypocrisy in the 'pro-life' movement:

*I do not believe that just because you're opposed to abortion, that makes you pro-life. In fact, I think in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth. We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is.*

To her very moving words, I would add "a child loved". The world is a tough enough place as it is; without the love and support of parents or other caring adults, how is a child to survive.

Not surprisingly, this matter generated a lot of discussion on the Internet. Not surprisingly, I weighed in. I offer just one of the exchanges that resulted:

Someone called Ralph Ellison to me (unedited): *I am not a religion persons, however I do have spritual beliefs. That said, I must say I am offended by your usage of the phrase "...so-called Christians.." You appear to be doing what liberal claim to abhore -*

labeling and profiling. Let's review some points 1) birth control is readily and affordably available throughout the country and no-one (with the exception of the Catholic Church) is trying to resist it (regardless of what Elizabeth Warren says). 2) If the doctors and nurses didn't enjoy the work they do, they would probably take their great skills and move to a more enjoyable environment. 3) Other than risk to the mother's life what is the "Lesser of the two evils"? Adoption? 4) so, better dead than unloved (so sad you said that.) And whose decision is that it to predetermine the quality and value of an unborn baby's life? 5) When it comes to global climate change, liberal love to point to science. However, science says that once a human egg cell is fertilized by a human sperm cell, all the human DNA exist. Theologically, I don't necessarily believe that life begins at conception, but scientifically it has been proven. So, how is it that liberal can believe so strongly in the scientific theory of man-made global climate change and be so in denial of the scientific fact of the beginning of human life. Sound like another "true" liberal scam to emotionally control the loving and caring people that think they are liberal (but really haven't though it through). Have a great day.

My reply, also including typos: I think that taking offense usually implies that the offended person is not really sure that his or her position is tenable. I used the term, so-called Christian not to belittle Christianity (although I could do a pretty good job of it if I so chose) but to point out that a disturbing number of people who call themselves followers of Christ show absolutely none of the compassion that he expected from his followers.

To address your points:

1) Affordable contraception is not as readily available as you seem to think, and there are a good many people (usually belonging to the Tea Party) who are doing everything they can to make it more difficult for low-income women to access what is available. That is what this thread is all about - the threat to defund Planned Parenthood. Other posters have suggested that PP is unnecessary

because of Obamacare, which is true up to a point, but the Republicans have voted more than 50 times to repeal Obamacare. If they got their way there would be no Obamacare and no Planned Parenthood. Then what would women do?

2) Doctors may become doctors because they see it as a lucrative profession. Nurses may become nurses because it is an in-demand job. Most of them, however, enter the medical profession because they want to help the sick and the needy. Working in an emergency room is hardly enjoyable, administering chemotherapy is not great fun. If you are in the medical profession, you work where you see the greatest need, not where you are going to enjoy yourself most.

3) adoption is great for childless couples, and would be a great thing all round if all children were adopted. But they are not. I do not see adoption as a good solution to an unwanted pregnancy. It requires that the woman carries her child to term. This is a very intimate relationship which works extremely well to forge a bond between mother and child. Those women who do not have the courage to abort an unwanted fetus, or who are persuaded by life-is-sacred zealots to keep the child then have to go through the pain of giving birth and immediately say goodbye to their offspring. And spend the rest of their lives wondering what happened to their son or daughter. This is cruel and unusual punishment.

4) I didn't actually say better dead than unloved, but yes, that is what I think. It is not so much dead as never alive. There's a difference. Monty Python in the Life of Brian had a great song Every Sperm is Sacred. Why?

5) I sort of get the impression that you think the idea of climate change is a load of hogwash, but we will leave that for another day. You do not need science to prove that if human sperm combines with a human ovum you will get something that is human, rather than a mouse or a monkey. But it is only potentially human. So many things can go wrong. If they do, I think abortion is the most humane way to go. Why does every conception have to be taken to term? Is it not possible that quality of life is more important than just life?

And thirdly, the wise, wise words of a man who I hope will continue to influence life in America, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey:

*Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; before you tell me how much you love your God, show me in how much you love all His children; before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give.*

These sentiments were echoed by one Jay Smith commenting on an NPR story:

*I think it's about time we put aside our mythological crutches as a society and start thinking about how we can make the world a better place than religion has left it. I was raised in the church, but as an adult I came to my senses and came out of the fog. Now 32, with children of my own, I understand how religion has been used for millennia to subdue, misdirect and distract the population. I say it's time to put our fairy tales and myths to bed and focus on reality. How much longer are we going to bicker and kill each other over such stupid differences?*

I'm guessing that the vast majority of you reading this were brought up as Christians or Jews. I wonder who has seen the Book of Mormon. The musical has been described (accurately) as lewd, crude and blasphemous, but it is also widely acknowledged as the best musical of the century. It is. And it's funny! But don't start feeling smug that the writers were just making fun of that rather odd religion, Mormonism. As Neil Diamond said in one of my favorite songs of all time "Well except for the names and a few other changes, if you talk about me, the story's the same one."

That's why you should keep your views to yourself. Especially if you hold public office. In a list of the world's top atheists, Ricky Gervais, the rather charming, self-effacing British comedian quoted above, came out on top (edging out my hero Richard Dawkins). He puts it, somewhat crudely (comedians can get away it):

*Everyone has the right to believe anything they want. And everyone else has the right to find it fucking ridiculous.*

The First Amendment gives you the right to believe whatever you choose, but it does not give you immunity from criticism. Your beliefs do not give you the right to flaunt federal or state laws. They do not give you the right to interfere in the lives of those whose beliefs - or lifestyles - are different from yours. And I can't for the life of me see why religious organizations should enjoy tax-free status!

I am not saying, out and out, that you must give up your religion. That is really hard to do. I have met a number of people, including clergy, who quite obviously no longer believe in the god of the Bible, but who just can't let go of a lifetime of devotion. I understand that. Having been an atheist (although I prefer the term anti-theist) since I was a pre-teen, I have nothing to give up. I imagine that it is like giving up smoking. Some are able to quit cold turkey; others yearn for a cigarette for the rest of their lives.

I quite understand that the fellowship of a congregation can be very important. I quite understand that many people need the support and reassurance that everything will be all right as long as they just follow the rules.

But I am saying that you should take another look at your religion and what it stands for. Is there a chance that by sticking to a narrow range of beliefs you are actually fostering hatred and intolerance of others? What about the extreme views that are held

in your religion's name? It is worth remembering that Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all inspired by the Old Testament.

Trey Parker et al had a hoot making fun of Joseph Smith whose ideas, let's face it, were a little out in left field. But the Book of Mormon is no stranger than any other. I suggest that you go back and read the Book of Genesis.

To paraphrase the proverb that introduces Robert Ruark's book: "If you take away a man's beliefs, you must give him *something of value* in return." In return for debunking your beliefs, I am giving you something infinitely more important and powerful. I give you: Yourself.

In the words of the Italian philosopher, Remo Bodei:

*Regardless of whether he is religious or not, only faith in his own potential can make a man's life better.*

Faith in yourself is incredibly powerful. You really can do anything you set your mind to. I have a young friend in Bangladesh who has this tagline on his Skype page: *If you think you can, you can, and if you think you can't, you're right.*

I suggest that you find a philosophy that appeals to you (and I must say that Jesus' basic do unto others idea is not a bad one; it's pretty much what I am advocating with A Better Way) and live your life accordingly. I suggest that you base your actions on what other people think of you, rather than what a non-existent god expects of you.

To put it another way: if you were to be hit by a bus tonight, would you be satisfied with how you spent today, your last day on earth? Would your grandchildren agree?



## WATER

*Day after day, day after day,  
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;  
As idle as a painted ship  
Upon a painted ocean.*

*Water, water, every where,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, every where,  
Nor any drop to drink.*

Anyone who has read Coleridge's poem will remember that The Ancient Mariner was blamed for their situation because he shot the good-luck albatross that had been following the ship. Who do we blame for the fact that the world is rapidly running out of fresh water? We could start with Nestlé and Wal-Mart who continue to use water from drought-stricken California to put into plastic bottles and sell back to residents at a huge mark-up.

I will go thirsty rather than drink bottled water. Even, or perhaps especially, in places without reliably safe water. Bottled water is the ultimate exploitation of the commons and a major contributor to pollution. A mere 30% of plastic water bottles are recycled; the rest end up in landfills, along roadsides, in water-ways and eventually the ocean. Everything ends up in the ocean, including rainfall which runs off concrete and asphalt and dry compacted land instead of sinking into the ground to replenish aquifers.

97° temperatures in Alaska; 120° in Australia; 128° in Pakistan. These are not the most frightening effects of global warming. The most chilling (if only) effect of warmer temperatures is the disruption of the water cycle. It begins with the fact that the warmer the air, the more water vapor it can hold. This leads to less frequent but more violent rain events. Al Gore calls it the bathtub effect: huge amounts of water gather in the air until there is a slight cooling in one part of the cloud system. The result is exactly like removing the plug – all the water rushes out of the tub in a torrential downpour.

Upstate New York has an average annual rainfall of 34-40 inches, plus quite a lot of snow. Theoretically, we have abundant water. But we have just been through 28 days without significant rain. That is disturbing. Having grown up in South Africa, I am no stranger to drought and imaginative ways to use less water. During one drought, the reservoir that supplies water for nearly one quarter of the country's population fell below 17% of its capacity. There was a competition to see who could come up with the best water saving tip, and the winner was "bathe with a friend". A few years later, the UK suffered a drought – it didn't rain for three weeks – and they had a similar contest. One very daring woman suggested: "Shower with your husband". Well, you can't believe the uproar it caused – shocking, immoral, and decadent. All the while the South Africans were happily bathing with their friends without showing significant moral decline.

More recently Sao Paulo had a similar crisis with their reservoirs down to a mere 3% of capacity. In both cases rain saved the day, but there are two billion people living in water-stressed areas where the struggle for water is constant. According to water expert Maude Barlow, "...unless we change our ways, by the year 2025, two thirds of the world's population will face water scarcity. The global population tripled in the twentieth century, but water consumption went up sevenfold." If the population increases by

another 3 billion as is predicted, by 2050 “humans will need an 80 percent increase in water supplies just to feed ourselves. No one knows where this water is going to come from.”

I think it has to come from the oceans. Well, duh, the idea is a no-brainer: where else is water to come from?

Obviously, desalination technology has to be improved. The biggest objection to present technology is that it is too expensive and uses too much energy. This is true if you use fossil fuels to run the plants. But, what about the sun? It must be possible to design a solar still that can be used at the personal level (in Bangladesh, for example, where the only source of water in the dry season is increasingly saline rivers) or for communities, even whole regions. The left-over salt can be used for batteries. As Wikipedia tells us:

*Thermal batteries use an electrolyte that is solid and inactive at normal ambient temperatures. They can be stored indefinitely (over 50 years) yet provide full power in an instant when required. Once activated, they provide a burst of high power for a short period (a few tens of seconds) to 60 minutes or more, with output ranging from a few watts to several kilowatts. The high power capability is due to the very high ionic conductivity of the molten salt, which is three orders of magnitude (or more) greater than that of the sulfuric acid in a lead-acid car battery.*

Batteries are important to store energy when the wind is not blowing or the sun is not shining. I'm hoping that the other salts present in the sea water do not compromise the workings of the batteries. If they do, perhaps they can be extracted for other uses. In fact, it is possible that the water could be mined for useful minerals before the desalination process starts.

The sea is already being used to host wind farms, to provide tidal energy and to support desert greenhouses. There may still be a

long way to go, but already the Sahara Forest Project is designed to utilize what we have enough of to produce what we need more of, using deserts, saltwater and CO<sub>2</sub> to produce food, water and clean energy. This is done by combining already existing and proven environmental technologies, including saltwater-cooled greenhouses, concentrated solar power (CSP) and technologies for desert re-vegetation around a saltwater infrastructure. The synergies arising from integrating the technologies improve the performance and economics of the system compared to those of the individual components.

Apart from providing energy, and fresh water, pulling water out of the oceans could perhaps keep sea levels from rising to catastrophic levels. Desalinating/purifying/decontaminating the oceans may just help preserve the coral reefs and plankton and fish colonies on which we depend for sustenance.

While that is going on, we need to introduce extensive water conservation projects. Let's start with water borne sanitation. This seemed a good idea at the time when the population was quite low, and water quite abundant. In this day and age, we need to take quite seriously the words of one of my heroes, Joe Jenkins whose book, "The Humanure Handbook", contains the unbelievably powerful statement: *"The world is divided into two categories of people: those who shit in their drinking water supplies and those who don't."* We need to move as soon as possible into the second category.

Sanitation is a huge problem worldwide, but flush toilets are not the answer. We simply do not have enough water to wash away the amount of human excrement that 7 billion people produce. Have you seen "away", and isn't there perhaps a better way to deal with this problem?

If you live in a high rise building in the city, there may be no alternative, but the toilets must be the most efficient possible, even

if it means replacing every single one, as happened in Texas a few years back. The city of Dallas gave rebates to citizens who exchanged their water-wasting toilets for more efficient ones. What do you do with thousands of porcelain toilets? Malcolm Beck - a mega-composter - took on this most unusual challenge. Obviously they can't be composted, but he ground them up in some monster "slow-speed grinder" to reduce them to the size of gravel or sand and he sold them to landscapers.

The next step is to ensure that the sewage is not discharged into water-ways, but gets to an efficient treatment plant. The remaining sludge should then be turned into fertilizer, something the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District has been doing since 1926. Or it can be composted as happens at the Lewiston/Auburn Water Pollution Control Authority in Maine, among others. Both of these municipal organizations sell their products at a slight loss, which is more than offset by what they save in tipping fees.

Manure from all sources can be considered a disgusting mess, or a valuable resource, and there are many ways to turn it from the former to the latter, including composting and compost toilets. The former are quite complicated structures that compost in the house. The latter are nothing more than buckets. When they are full (of excrement and sawdust) the contents are emptied into a substantial compost bin and covered with straw.

I don't really see them catching on in the US. Even I haven't yet had the courage to install my Lovable Loo in the house (it is still in the garage, used occasionally when I am outside working in the garden.) In practice, what is stopping me is that I need to build the compost bin first. But I mention these waterless options to show that there are alternatives, and to stress that sanitation projects in poor countries must address the shortage of water and opt for the many substitutes for flush toilets.

The Gates Foundation has been financing research on what they call Omni Processor, various systems which separates the water, and uses the fecal sludge to produce energy to purify the water.

There are many water conservation measures that will reduce household consumption, but they represent a drop in a bucket compared to the amount of water that is wasted or contaminated by industry, including industrial agriculture.

And a quick word to those who have access to well water and think that you can use as much as you like because it is free, no you can't. Wells tap into underground aquifers and excessive use can lower the water table, which affects us all. It is just plain irresponsible to waste water, regardless of its source.



## AGRICULTURE

*Industrial agriculture is a key driver in the generation of greenhouse gases (GHGs). Synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, heavy machinery, monocultures, land change, deforestation, refrigeration, waste and transportation are all part of a food system that generates significant emissions and contributes greatly to global climate change. Industrial agricultural practices, from Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) to synthetic fertilizer-intensive corn and soy monocultures, genetically modified to tolerate huge amounts of herbicide, not only contribute considerable amounts of GHGs, but also underpin an inequitable and unhealthy global food system. Modern conventional agriculture is a fossil fuel-based, energy-intensive industry that is aligned with biotech, trade and energy interests, versus farmer and consumers priorities.*

Ryan Zinn of Organic Consumers

I am not able to put it any better than that. Mr Zinn has summed up the problems with agriculture in one short paragraph. Of all the systems under consideration, this is the one most in need of reform, and in some ways, the easiest to reform. The reform has already started and each of us can do our bit to make sure it continues here in the USA. The influence of American Agribusiness on the rest of the world is another matter.

Dictionary.com defines agriculture as “the science, art, or occupation concerned with cultivating land, raising crops, and feeding, breeding, and raising livestock; farming.”

In this context, the word “science” raises huge red flags for me. I just don’t think that science and agriculture fit comfortably together. These may seem like a stupid comparison, but I have been several times over the past few years to see eye doctors to explain why I don’t see very well. The answer has been that there is no problem, I test so close to 20-20 that glasses make no difference. I passed enough exams to get a degree in Mathematics yet two weeks later I could not even define cosine. Tests, even the most rigorously controlled ones, do not always translate into success in the real world. Perhaps that is because of the rigorous controls: there are always things in nature that you can’t control.

I will talk about three “scientific” breakthroughs that, in my opinion, have put food security and adequate nutrition back many years, and contributed significantly to pollution of the environment, greenhouse gas emissions and the increasing scarcity of water. I am talking primarily about agriculture in the United States, but we all know that what happens here is transferred – for good or bad - to the rest of the world. They are potting mixes, NPK fertilizers and GMOs. I should say from the start that I have come to accept that even GMOs are not intrinsically bad, but all three “breakthroughs” have encouraged monocultures and discouraged the return of organic matter to the soil.

The first “It seemed like a good idea at the time” breakthrough was the introduction of soilless potting mix. This was developed at Cornell in the early 60s. As I understand it, the idea was that a soilless mix, that is, a sterile mix, would be good for emerging plants as there would be no danger of disease. True, but there are also few bacteria in a soilless mix and, as we now know, bacteria are the mechanism by which nutrients are transferred from soil to plant. Well, that’s OK, the thinking went, we will just add nutrients. And the fertilizer industry took off. To be fair to the scientists at Cornell, synthetic fertilizers have been around for a

long time and poor farming practices pre-date their developments.

But at a stroke, the nature of growing plants for the home gardener changed. Even I have to admit that highly fertilized plants out-perform others. However, I compare them to athletes on steroids.

I have worked at a garden center where the plants were watered every day (sometimes twice a day) and fertilizer was routinely added to the water. This resulted in gorgeous plants. But you know what? You take those plants home and, just perhaps, you do not fertilize them daily. Maybe not even every week. If they are shrubs or perennials, maybe you fail to fertilize them at all. Next year, when you expect to see the same robust, luxuriant plant come up, you are going to be disappointed. The finely-tuned athlete has reverted to a moderately healthy, run-of-the-mill individual.

For years I thought that the potting mix my plants came in was going to add something to my soil. You know what? When that plant dies after a couple of years (and they often do) you can dig it up, and the same plug, the same mass that was in the original pot is totally unchanged. It has not broken down. It has not been incorporated into the surrounding soil. Nothing. It is as sterile as when you planted the unfortunate shrub in the first place.

The “soil” provides nothing, and if you do not fertilize regularly the plant will die. It is just a little like giving your children daily vitamin pills, but no food. Then you wonder why they are not very healthy.

Nevertheless, the same idea is applied to field crops. The followers of Norman Borlaug consider him a saint. It is true that his contribution to the Green Revolution saved millions of lives by

increasing yield through his semi-dwarf, high-yield, disease-resistant wheat varieties. But I remain skeptical.

A major critic of the Green Revolution, U.S. investigative journalist Mark Dowie, wrote:

*The primary objective of the program was geopolitical: to provide food for the populace in undeveloped countries and so bring social stability and weaken the fomenting of communist insurgency.*

That does not seem too far-fetched. And then there is the profit motive. US conglomerates tend to look at the rest of the world in market terms. While not strictly agricultural, I want to mention the Electrify Africa Act, which passed in May 2014. I was asked, by Bono's organization One, to sign a petition in support of the bill. The stated goal "to provide sufficient electricity access to people living in rural and urban areas in order to alleviate poverty and drive economic growth" sounded noble and altruistic. Curious about how renewable energy fitted in, I read the whole thing.

Line 9 actually explains the motivation behind the act: *Africa's consumer base of 1,000,000,000 people is rapidly growing and will create increasing demand for United States goods, services, and technologies, but the current African electricity deficit limits this growth in demand by restricting economic growth on the continent;*

It's not about economic growth for Africans; it's to develop another market for American goods and services. The word solar does not appear even once, renewable makes one appearance, while transmission and distribution feature in every section. Local resources are mentioned. This is another example of globalization. Although the end result may well lift millions out of deep poverty, it will also funnel a lot more money into the pockets of the already rich, while extracting and burning yet more fossil fuels. The word exploitation comes to mind.

One line from one song from Miss Saigon also comes to mind, referring to the half-caste children of GIs :

*They're called Bui-Doi, The dust of life  
Conceived in hell, And born in strife  
They are the living reminders  
Of all the good we failed to do...*

Every time I hear this I want to cry. I do cry. It pretty much sums up most wars, and it pretty much sums up Western intervention in the rest of the world. Sometimes the intentions are good; sometimes, good things come out of projects with dubious motives. But the good we fail to do comes about because of unintended consequences. Either no one thought about them, or worse, they knew what would happen and didn't care. I think that the latter is true for many agricultural endeavors.

Back to the Green Revolution. The high-yielding seed was obviously a boon to farmers, but they were encouraged to give up traditional farming methods in favor of technology- and energy-intensive (and expensive) monoculture methods of farming. As in the United States, this has led to a serious loss of biodiversity, and soil degradation through the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides. The increased irrigation needed to grow crops in marginal lands or unfriendly climates has strained water supplies. Aquifers are being depleted far faster than they can be replenished. One reason is that degraded soil does not readily absorb rainfall and much of it is lost to runoff.

Monoculture farming is completely unnatural and very susceptible to weather and other environmental factors. A flood, a drought or a new infection can wipe out an entire crop. Instead of a community relying on a variety of locally produced food sources, they have become dependent on centrally produced crops, which must be transported to the areas where they are

needed. In good years, that works well. But if there is one crop failure, a lot of people go hungry because there is no plan B. And no Planet B.

The Union of Concerned Scientists states bluntly that:

*“Industrial farming, once hailed as a revolution, is now an outmoded and unsustainable approach to producing our food.”*

Not surprisingly, degraded soil produces less nutritious plants. There are estimates that the food grown today is only 70% as nutritious as that grown in our grandparents’ lives. And then it is processed to give it shelf life, which essentially means removing any life from the food.

I have just had a moment of inspiration/insight, literally, as I wrote that last sentence. Could it be that the reason fresh fruit and vegetables are so good for you is not because they are loaded with phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals, but because they are loaded with bacteria? It works for the soil, why not also for our digestive systems? I must look into this idea further, but I suspect it is going to be one of those ideas that just will not go away. Rather like the connection between tobacco and knee pain. This is a complete tangent, but it is another idea that won’t go away. Maybe someone who reads this will be as fascinated as I am, and explore further. A few years back, I spent a month in Nicaragua teaching at a small community school. After about ten days my right knee swelled and began to hurt fiercely. I self-diagnosed water on the knee and bought analgesic creams and pills to little avail; it still hurt. I limped around for about two weeks and then we, the half-dozen volunteer teachers, went on a tour of a cigar factory. The tour lasted about two hours and I walked back to my lodgings afterwards. At some point I realized that my knee did not hurt anymore. Nothing. Not even a twinge. And the pain has never come back. Whoever finds out what it was about the cigars that made it better could make a fortune.

Back to processed food. Or even further back, to the corn and soybean fields of the Mid West. You know, industrial agriculture, the only way that we will be able to feed the growing global population. Of the millions of tons of corn produced almost half is fed to animals both here and abroad, and about 40% is converted to ethanol. That leaves maybe 11% for human consumption. And the vast majority of that is in the form of high fructose corn syrup. No one actually eats the stuff.

We do, however, eat the products of the other face of industrial agriculture – factory farmed animals. CAFOs are an abomination. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations include battery chickens, huge hog farms, many dairy operations and the feedlots where most beef cattle are “finished” before slaughter, even if they were previously pastured. Apart from the appalling conditions in which most of these animals are raised, there is the question of pollution of ground, water and air: so many animals in close proximity produce more excrement than can easily be coped with.

One group of environmentalists is adamant that the only way to save the planet is for us all to become vegans. Their argument is that cattle produce about one third of methane emissions (EPA figure) and degrade pasture lands by grazing and therefore are the cause of all our problems. Although, I can’t find hard figures, at least one third of that comes from manure management, the politically correct way to describe lagoons of excrement. Another view, championed by Alan Savory and described by Judith Schwartz in her book “Cows Save The world” maintains that actually cows are a very good thing.

The different ways cattle are managed makes both arguments valid. The vegans have a point, but they are not looking at the big picture. They are ignoring the fact that in many environments, eating meat is the only option. In her wonderful book, “Animal,

Vegetable, Miracle” Barbara Kingsolver talks about life in the high Andes. In a deforested, extremely arid area call Piura, goats are surviving on the few remaining mesquite trees, and dried seed pods. They provide meat, milk and manure, and more goats. Families who were given goats agree to give the first female kid to another family, spreading the largesse. Small, irrigated plots provide supplemental beans and vegetables, but the goats keep the people from starving. The project is sponsored by Heifer International, an organization worthy of substantial support.

The vegan crowd is only looking at cattle raising as most commonly practiced – turn the cows loose on rangeland to graze at will, and/or confine them and feed them grain. The Savory view, taking a clue from ruminants in the wild, suggests that a better way is to concentrate large numbers of animals in a small area for a short while. Just long enough, in fact, for them to mow the pasture, but not long enough to eat it down to soil level. As you know from your own lawn, mowing encourages growth, and the cattle leave behind a layer of extremely rich fertilizer. They move on and rotate through the area, mowing and fertilizing, until they get to their first pen rich in newly grown grass, and the process starts again. Savory calls the process holistic managed grazing. His critics, and there are surprisingly many, say it doesn’t work. This is probably because is it hard work. You have to consider the conditions every day. Sometimes, if the grass is lush, the cattle can stay for a few days; other times they may need to move on after just a few hours.

But it is not just moving the cattle. Savory insists that the ground must be kept covered at all times to reduce evaporation and to return organic matter to the soil. Absolutely no burning. Obviously, in many parts, winter is a problem and that has to be factored in. Some pasture needs to be left for cutting to provide winter feed, and in some areas it is necessary to provide supplemental feed.

Critics also say that it takes longer to get the cattle to a marketable weight. Savory counters that you can run more head per acre than with conventional ranching, more than making up for slightly lower finished weights.

What is undisputed that tall grasslands sequester carbon. The carbon enriches the soil and increases its water-holding capacity so that next year, the pastures will be richer. Seems like a no-brainer to me.

Diet is like religion. If someone wants to be vegetarian or vegan (the fanatics of the diet world) that's fine but they should stop trying to force it on other people.

"Science" has led to some remarkable innovations and improvements in our quality of life, but I question very seriously whether messing about with nature is in our best interests. There are so many influences in a natural ecosystem that they cannot all be controlled in a lab or even a field study. You saw "Jurassic Park" - nature finds a way.

I am more inclined to accept observed behavior of both plants and animals rather than scientific studies. It is generally accepted that animals and very small children will choose the foods that provide the nutrients they most need. There has been a lot of anecdotal reporting that animals, given a choice between GM feed and non-GM food, always chose the latter. Unblinded by science, they seem to know something we don't.

"Wake Up Before It Is Too Late: Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now for Food Security in a Changing Climate" is a recent report from UNCTAD, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development which uses over 300 pages to expand on the already lengthy title.

Miguel Altieri, Professor of Agroecology at UC Berkley, and contributor to the report said, *“What people are realizing is, first of all, industrial agriculture is not feeding the world, most of what it produces is biomass, which is for cattle, biotech crops, and biofuels.”* I don’t know how many times I have said that to supporters of biotechnology, particularly GMOs. To my mind, the jury is still out on whether they are safe because there have been many studies supporting both sides of the argument. I agree with sustainable farming’s poster boy, Joel Salatin that *“The science is only as good as the integrity of the patrons”* which eliminates many of the pro-GMO reports.

*“Wake Up Before It Is Too Late”* is not directly critical of GMOs, but it is of the Green Revolution. In the 1960s, Norman Borlaug, an agronomist, helped transition farming in Latin America and Asia to modern hybrid wheat and rice varieties grown with the assistance of irrigation and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. For this he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, one of the UNCTAD report’s Key Messages reads, *“The world needs a paradigm shift in agricultural development: from a ‘green revolution’ to an ‘ecological intensification’ approach”.*

Unfortunately, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is working to continue Borlaug’s approach, although with half an eye toward sustainability. They see biotechnology – not just hybrid varieties – as the key tool in what some are calling a second Green Revolution. Heaven help us! It will not help the rural poor anywhere in the world. They will not have food security while they depend on staples that are grown in some distant location and may or may not get to their intended destination. And it will do nothing to help the climate.

Of the many conferences I have been to over the past couple of years, only one left me feeling that there really is hope that we can avoid the catastrophic changes to our planet that are predicted if we continue with business as usual: Biodiversity

for a Livable Climate, Restoring Ecosystems to Reverse Global Warming held at Tufts University. One of the speakers, Ronnie Cummins of the Organic Consumers Association writes as well as he speaks. He recently penned an article entitled “Regeneration: Global Transformation in Catastrophic Times”, which begins by quoting the Pope’s encyclical:

*Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention.... It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster.*

He goes on to say: *The inconvenient truth of course is that our degenerate “profit-at-any-cost” global economy is killing us. The living Earth – our soils, forests and oceans – and the “rhythms of nature” are unraveling. Greed and selfishness have displaced sharing and cooperation. Land grabs, Empire-building, resource wars, and out-of-control consumerism have become the norm.”*

Then he outlines how regenerative agriculture can change all that. Regenerative agriculture is not only a better way going forward, it is the only way.

What exactly is regenerative agriculture? A recent article in The Guardian explains:

*Regenerative agriculture comprises an array of techniques that rebuild soil and, in the process, sequester carbon. Typically, it uses cover crops and perennials so that bare soil is never exposed, and grazes animals in ways that mimic animals in nature. It also offers ecological benefits far beyond carbon storage: it stops soil erosion, remineralises soil, protects the purity of groundwater and reduces damaging pesticide and fertiliser runoff.*

(The Guardian, I might add is becoming a go-to source for all things environmental. Among other things they have launched a “Leave it in the Ground” campaign to take the UK away from coal and other fossil fuels.)

*Cummins goes on: We must begin to connect the dots between fossil fuels, global warming and related issues, including world hunger, poverty, unemployment, toxic food and farming, extractivism, land grabbing, biodiversity, ocean destruction, deforestation, resource wars, and deteriorating public health. As we regenerate the soil and forests, and make organic and grass-fed food and fiber the norm, rather than just the alternative, we will simultaneously develop our collective capacity to address all of the globe's interrelated problems.*

While I don't suppose many of my readers are going to rush out and start farming, there is a lot individuals can do, starting with divestment. Before you start making things better, you have to stop making them worse. So take your money out of Shell and Exxon/Mobil, and Nestlé and Archer Daniels Midland and the other corporations who exploit our natural resources for profit, and invest in something local. Farmers' Markets are great but they usually only happen once a week and the farmer expends a lot of time and energy to be there. CSAs are great. That is Community Supported Agriculture. Members of the community buy shares in a CSA giving them the start up money to plant the season's crops. Each week they harvest what is ready and share it between the members.

How we get our food has to change. If we concentrate on real food and not calorie-rich, nutrient-poor food-stuffs, the change should be easy.



## ENERGY

How I wish I had more! I envy people who bounce out of bed in the morning and bustle through each day. That's not me. It's also not the energy I'm talking about here.

I am talking about heat and electricity. Although large swathes of the world do not need to heat their houses, everyone needs some form of heat for cooking. Almost invariably, this involves burning something. Wood, charcoal, dung are OK because their carbon is new. Not acceptable is the burning of fossil fuels which means releasing the carbon that has been trapped in the ground for millions of years. Also not acceptable are extreme forms of extraction – fracking, strip mining and mountain top removal, deep sea drilling, the tar sands. Cutting down old-growth forests is unacceptable, not that there is much left to cut.

We absolutely have to look to alternative forms of energy. Fortunately there are plenty.

The first thing those with ties to the fossil fuel industry will tell you is that we can't possibly supply the world's energy needs without coal, oil and gas, especially as those needs are only going to increase as the world's population increases. I have three answers to that.

1. Make sure that the population does not continue to increase by 200,000 a day. Education, access to birth control and empowering impoverished women will get the job done.
2. Reduce the amount of energy needed. This can be done by increasing fuel efficiency and demand: turn down the heating and put on a sweater, turn off the air conditioning

and use a fan. Change your light bulbs, and so on. And what applies to individuals should apply to business and industry as well.

3. Make sure that all new energy sources are renewable. I talked about the Electrify Africa campaign, which is admirable in theory, but terrible if all it is going to do is use fossil fuels to generate the needed energy.

It can be done. There is a blueprint for a fossil free future for every state of the union by 2030. See The Solutions Project. But sooner is better.

While it is important for all of to do what we can to reduce our carbon footprint, that is just a small part of the big picture. We are at a point where there is a way, but no will. Few politicians are going to show that will, while their major donors want to continue the status quo of subsidies, easily obtained permits and huge profits. It is just not possible that companies like Shell and Exxon Mobil, BP and Total, Petrobras Brasileiro and Lukoil, Chevron and China Petroleum, Reliance Industries are all run by childless men. But that is the only explanation I can come up with for running your business with a total disregard for the environment and the future well-being of **our** children and grandchildren.

The top 15 energy companies are getting between 8.9 and 15.7% ROIC. The nice thing to do would be invest most of that in the energy of the future. Currently that means solar, wind, hydro, geothermal, nuclear, hydrogen cells and biofuels, backed up by an increasing array of efficient batteries. But innovation knows no limits and the renewable energy source of the future may already be lurking in some research laboratory.

It is simply not nice to ignore the overwhelming evidence that the world is warming and the climate changing, because accepting the evidence would require changes in one's business model, and a possible decrease in profits. The companies mentioned above

could halve their profits and still have very happy shareholders. But, you know, Volpone.

How do we create the will to make the necessary changes? Learning about and exposing the damage that fossil fuel extraction is doing to people and the planet is a first step.

Take coal, for instance. Long considered the cheapest source of energy, coal is now under scrutiny for the adverse effects not only on miners, but also on anyone living where coal is extracted or burned.

In parts of the country, Appalachia in particular, the rock is obtained by a process that has been described as a kind of landscape vampirism: mountaintop removal.

First, workers clear mountains of their vegetation, cutting down and burning trees near the summit. Then, topsoil and bedrock from the hills is blasted away, a procedure that sometimes lops 600 feet off a slope's overall elevation. Finally, the seams of coal, exposed to the air for the first time in millions of years, are harvested by enormous cranes called drag lines.

Reuters reported very recently that St. Louis-based Peabody Energy is "under scrutiny" from the federal government over concerns that the company is violating federal bonding regulations that are intended to guarantee that, if a mining company goes bankrupt, it has sufficient insurance to pay to clean up its own mines. Yeah, right.

In 2011, a group of researchers tried to calculate the cost – to the public – of the United States' dependence on coal and came up with "a third to over one-half of a trillion dollars annually". In January 2015, Stanford researchers argued that the social cost of carbon (SCC) – which the EPA currently judges at \$37 per ton – should be closer to \$220.

Fracking is so nasty, I hardly know where to begin. Natural gas may, I repeat, may be better for the atmosphere than coal; the jury is still out. There is such a glut that gas seems very cheap, but when the SCC is factored in, nuclear, solar, and especially wind are all cheaper. Because gas is currently so cheap in the US, companies are pushing to export it to Europe and other areas where they will get a much better price. So much for promoting energy independence!

Study after study shows that at least 80 of known oil and gas reserves – and all unknown – must stay in the ground, if future generations are to have a chance of leading lives similar to those they lead now. A group of 21 teenagers have just sued the Obama Administration for failing to act. As 15-year-old hip-hop singer and youth advocate Xiuhtezcatl Tonatiuh Martinez explains:

*“The Federal Government has known for decades that CO2 pollution from burning fossil fuels was causing global warming and dangerous climate change. It also knew that continuing to burn fossil fuels would destabilize our climate system, significantly harming my generation and generations to come. Despite knowing these dangers, Defendants did nothing to prevent this harm. In fact, my Government increased the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere to levels it knew were unsafe.”*

And his Government, almost as a reaction to this lawsuit, yesterday issued the final permit for Shell to drill in the Chukchi Sea just off the coast of Alaska. I don't get it. Obama has no more elections to face; he can tell Shell to keep its money without fear of reprisals. Why does he not listen to the climate scientists who say that drilling in the Arctic is very likely to become a tipping point, an irreversible moment which triggers a feedback loop? In a positive feedback loop the effects of a small disturbance on a system include an increase in the magnitude of the perturbation. That is, the bad gets worse.

All of this is in spite of the fact that Department of the Interior says there's a 75 percent chance of a major oil spill in the Arctic. It may be willing to take that chance in order to guarantee Shell more profits; I'm not. However, I'm not sure what else I can do. I have signed every petition doing the round, I contributed to Greenpeace so that they could hang from the bridge in Portland (the support ship they were blocking first turned around, and then the protesters were ordered off the bridge and it sailed). I even wrote to the six members of Shell's North American management team. Didn't get an answer. Maybe that is because it was before my conversion to being nice even if it kills me, and I may have been a tad rude. I did sign the letters "Disrespectfully yours" in English or Dutch depending on the man's nationality.

It is very frustrating. We, as individuals, can do a lot to break the dependence on fossil fuels and then Shell comes along and counteracts all the good we have done. Or TransCanada, which has been trying so desperately to get the Keystone XL pipeline approved, in spite of it being considered another tipping point. Some have gone as far as to say that if the pipeline is approved (allowing endless streams of tar sands crude to pass through the US - and out to other nations) it is game over for the climate. This may be an exaggeration, but look at before and after photographs of Alberta. Look at before and after photographs of mountain top removal. Both processes are a disgusting violation of the natural environment. In the case of Alberta, it is also a violation of First Nations Treaties. But who cares?

Well, I care. And if I am unable to make one other person see that there is a better way to provide the energy for our future, then I might as well stick my head in the oven. Oops, that won't work. My house is entirely fossil fuel free. It is heated by hot water collected on the roof and backed up by wind-generated electricity. I'm on track to meet most of my personal 2020 goals.

I am still working on my car, an indestructible 13-year-old Toyota. As I believe in using things until they stop working or otherwise wear out, I may be stuck with this car for a while yet. It gets about 35 highway miles (on cruise control), which is not bad. I try to use it as little as possible, but I frequently fail to leave enough time to walk, and have not yet got myself an adult tricycle for grocery shopping and the like.

Apparently, it is possible to convert your regular car to one run on hydrogen. All I have to do is find a source of hydrogen and I'm in.

That just leaves air travel. I rationalize that the planes will be flying anyway, but the first airline to fly on biofuel will get all my business, even if it means taking four or five flights to get to my destination.

Reduce your carbon footprint. Divest. Reinvest in renewables, here and abroad. Vote out climate deniers. Break the grip of the fossil fuel multinationals.

We can do it.



**WASTE**

*In tough times, some of us see protecting the climate as a luxury, but that's an outdated 20th-century worldview from a time when we thought industrialization was the end goal, waste was growth, and wealth meant a thick haze of air pollution.*

Alex Steffen

I looked this man up and on his website he introduces himself thus: “I’m Alex Steffen. I try to live well, see far and be a good ancestor. I write and speak about everything from the distant planetary future to building better cities today.” I particularly like the bit about being a good ancestor. Being nice is not limited to your neighbors and your dog; we really need to be nice to future generations.

However, the phrase that is relevant to this chapter is “waste was growth”. I might turn that around and say that growth equals waste. I might even go as far as to say that growth can be defined by reaching the point where waste is a sign of success: you can afford not to care about being wasteful. It is certainly not my definition of success, but I’m a bit odd that way.

I have always hated the idea of waste, because, well, it’s such a waste! And so unnecessary. The mantra – reduce, reuse, recycle – is quite a good one, as long as it is followed in that order.

By far the most important action anyone can take is to reduce consumption. We have to unlearn the quantity over quality concept. A hint to mothers who drag their children along when they go shopping: do not say “I want” only say “I need” and always have a list. If you stick to that you will not get into a battle with the kids wanting all the stuff that has been so appealingly placed at their eye level.

Every time I travel by plane I half listen to the safety announcement, which always includes the warning that the

nearest emergency exit may be behind you. This may be true on the ground as well. Most systems currently in place seemed like a good idea at the time, but along the way something went wrong. Frequently, that happens because of efforts to monetize (I can hardly believe that I used such a horrid word, but it fits!) the idea.

My suggestion, therefore, is to look back through the history of, let's say, packaging until we get to the fork before which packaging served its purpose without creating mountains of garbage. In many cases, it may not have been obvious that there was an alternative route, but the option to carry on with what works is always there; change is not obligatory.

I have recently had two different experiences with wasteful packaging, although a card in an envelope is very minimal packaging. I ordered a fountain pen, which duly arrived in a medium sized priority box through the Post Office. Inside there was some dunnage keeping another box from rattling around, and inside that was the slim box containing the pen. A card was included to explain that this may seem a little excessive, but that she, the seller wanted to make sure that the pen arrived absolutely perfect condition.

As a marketing ploy, this can't be beat: the buyer feels very special and had many opportunities to notice the name of the company. It didn't work so well for me as I shudder at the thought of so much waste, and I am not going to return the nib and ask for a finer one because I will just get another box of garbage. In the second instance I made a donation to IPPF (yes, Planned Parenthood international) and I got a thank you card in the mail. My first reaction was frustration that they would waste the paper and the postage, when an email acknowledgement was good enough. Then I read the handwritten card:

*Dear Mrs Whitehouse,*

*Two words: Endless gratitude. Thank you very much for your recent gift in support of our fight for Mainumby. No child should ever have to suffer such injustice. We are truly grateful for your thoughtful and generous support, a little bit of compassion goes a long way. Without supporters like you, our victories are few. Thank you greatly.*

In case you missed the story, Mainumby was impregnated by her step-father. The law in Paraguay does not allow abortion and Mainumby's child was delivered last month, via Cesarean section because doctors determined that a vaginal birth would be too dangerous. She is 11. IPPF tried to intervene. The time and money spent to send me the card were not a waste: I will continue to support their efforts.

Most of the mail I receive, however, is a colossal waste. I have tried to reduce the volume by asking to be taken off mailings lists, but the catalogs and donation requests keep coming. Many of them are reused as mulch, or paper patterns for the English-style patchwork quilts I am making for my grandchildren, (using up the mountains of fabric scraps that I have been accumulating since the days when I made most of my own clothes and many for my children); some are recycled.

Inventory Sucks! This is a so-far undeveloped idea for a blog post. Carrying inventory is very expensive; not having enough inventory can be the death of a business. So what if one went back to that fork and took the road less traveled.

Let's look at clothing. The fashion industry is worth an estimated US\$1.7trillion every year. But, it takes 20,000 liters of water to produce enough cotton to make a pair of jeans and one T-shirt. An analysis of the landfills in Hong Kong showed that around 12,000 garments are discarded every single hour. They obviously don't have the local equivalent of St Pauly Textile!

Firstly, it is outrageous that these garments are just discarded. It is also outrageous that people buy garments they don't really want, and certainly don't need. What if the whole fashion industry could be turned around? In Hong Kong it has always been possible to order a garment one afternoon and have it delivered to your hotel the next morning. What if that became the norm?

What if Tommy Hilfiger or similar had more seamstresses (or whatever the male equivalent is) than sales staff? What if inventory consisted of a window display of the season's newest designs and a book of fabric swatches? The customer goes in and says, "I like those pants and that jacket, and I want them in blue and tan respectively." Out comes the tape measure to determine your size, including rather long legs or rather short arms. Would they be more expensive than off the rack? Maybe, maybe not, if you take into consideration the transportation from the foreign parts where the clothes were made and the amount of inventory most retail stores carry. And very little waste as the unused fabric can be incorporated into the next season's designs, and scraps could be turned into trendy paper.

No discussion (even a one-sided one like this) about waste can avoid landfills. I will grant that the idea of burying waste is infinitely superior to immense piles of rotting garbage littering the landscape.

That said, the solution to garbage is not what to do with it, but how to avoid it in the first place. One of the environmental heroes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is Tom Szaky, founder of Terracycle, a recycling company that makes typically nonrecyclable waste recyclable in twenty-four countries. #outsmartwaste explores why the waste crisis exists and explains how we can solve it by eliminating the very idea of garbage.

Yard and food wastes should be composted; metals, glass and paper should be recycled. Even "other" waste, such as mixed material products and hard to recycle plastics, pizza boxes or other contaminated stuff, can be disposed of outside the landfill. Pyrolysis offers one alternative.

Pyrolysis is the chemical decomposition of condensed organic substances by heating. The word is coined from the Greek-derived elements pyro "fire" and lysis "decomposition". Pyrolysis is usually the first chemical reaction that occurs in the burning of many solid organic fuels, like wood, cloth, and paper, and also of some kinds of plastic. Anhydrous pyrolysis can also be used to produce liquid fuel similar to diesel from plastic waste.

Here in the southern tier of New York, the amount of household garbage being produced is going down. Why then, is Casella, a Vermont-based waste management company, seeking to increase the capacity of four landfills that it operates in the area? Short answer: to boost profits by accepting more and more construction debris and the waste produced by fracking operations in Pennsylvania. I – and quite a few others – have tried telling them that we do not want Pennsylvania's nasty waste. Let PA use its own landfills to store the poisonous, radioactive drill cuttings that come out of fracking wells, but they don't listen. Is that nice, I ask you?

Construction and demolition debris is a huge problem, but one that could be greatly reduced by reusing materials. There is not a lot that is usable if you bring in the wrecking ball, but much of value if a building is deconstructed rather than demolished. The gypsum in dry wall could be recovered and reused. Bricks can be reused. Concrete can be ground up and used as the foundation of paths and roads. Wiring can be recycled. But, no, it is just easier to throw it all away.

Terracycle promotes reuse of many unlikely materials through what it calls upcycling. So, for example, the drink pouches found

so frequently in packed lunches are turned into backpacks and trendy bags. Bottles and jars can be repurposed as vases or storage containers. Clothing can be altered and embellished for a second incarnation. Seattle even has an art studio associated with its recycling center so that useful material can be siphoned off and given a new purpose in life.

A distant third, there is the option of recycling. Just as long as what you put out for collection actually goes to a recycling facility. For many years, the employees of an organization I am familiar with carefully separated paper, glass, and plastics into recycling bins, until they discovered that it was all going into the trash anyway. I consider that shameful behavior on the part of the management responsible, and urge them to institute an authentic recycling program, perhaps with incentives to the department that manages to produce the least amount of waste.

Probably my attitude to waste stems from mealtimes when we children were strongly encouraged to finish whatever was on our plates because, you know, starving children. Instead of encouraging kids to overeat, parents could consider putting less on their plates and donating the difference to feed the hungry.

This idea can be extended to all areas of consumption: if you are not going to eat/wear/use it, don't put it on your metaphorical plate.



**JUSTICE**

*"In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies  
but the silence of our friends"*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

As Aaron Sorkin/Will McAvoy pointed out, the United States is the world leader when it comes to incarcerating its citizens. This is not something to be proud of.

At least once a week I am asked to sign a petition seeking justice for someone who has been unjustly imprisoned. Most recently it was a woman, now in her 70s, who shot her husband who had been abusing her for years, multiple emergency room abuse. She did not shoot to kill, only to wound and keep him away from her. But she is the one who went to jail. And she is not the only one.

There was a recent attempt to convict a woman of infanticide because she had miscarried.

How many men have been executed only to be exonerated later? 152 since 1973. How many men are in jail with life sentences for possessing a small amount of marijuana? I don't know. But drug laws have to change. One of my Freelancer jobs was to write six articles about free marijuana seeds. If anyone ever decides to search my Internet history, I am likely to be in lots of trouble, as extensive research about pot is not the only thing they are likely to find! But I did learn quite a lot about the history about weed. One of the articles concluded:

*By 1840, medicines with a cannabis base were available in U.S. pharmacies, just as hashish was available in Persian pharmacies. A little later in 1876, the Sultan of Turkey gave a gift of marijuana to the United States and a short four years later there were Turkish smoking parlors all over the northeastern U.S.*

*Then Harry J. Anslinger, (the same person who had lobbied so successfully for prohibition; somehow when it was repealed they forgot to include marijuana) became commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics in 1930 and declared war on drugs. In his 30 odd years as Commissioner he shaped America's views about marijuana. He suppressed studies that found marijuana innocuous and dictated policy based on his prohibitionist views.*

*That could change. The government could run an anti-Anslinger promotion, give away free marijuana seeds, tax the product and make biofuels from the residue.*

Well, they could. There is very strong evidence that marijuana is less harmful than either tobacco or alcohol. So why is it still criminalized? Why is it such a big deal to get medical marijuana? Why are marijuana derivatives not routinely prescribed? After all, morphine, codeine and oxycodone are all available by prescription even though they all have psychotropic effects. From what I have read, cannabis derivatives do not produce a high, and the side effects are no worse than any other drug.

A friend told me that when her father-in-law was in the terminal stages of cancer, the family asked a nurse for more morphine. She responded that she couldn't possibly give it to him because he might become addicted! I can't help thinking that if you have cancer or AIDS, becoming addicted to marijuana is the least of your problems.

But, back to justice. Locking someone up and throwing away the key for drug possession is cruel and unusual.

I also have a real problem with the way sex offenders are treated. If it comes to that I have a problem with the way ex-cons are treated. Prisons are called correctional facilities, which I naïvely

thought meant that your unacceptable behavior was modified while you were imprisoned, so that when you had done your time, paid your debt to society, you were free to start again. That's, of course, not quite how it works. More and more employers are performing background checks, which basically mean that if you have a record you can't get a job. And you can't vote. Why not? Is your opinion invalid because at some point in your life you made a mistake?

More and more insurance companies are requiring background checks on volunteers with not-for-profit organizations, not for criminal activity as such, but for sexual misconduct. (See Liability). Being convicted of a sex crime (including consensual sex between minors) is pretty much a death sentence. You can be kept in jail indefinitely, but even if you are let out, you are put on the sex offender's registry, which severely limits any interaction with children, even if you are not a pedophile. This is not justice.

Militarized police shooting unarmed citizens and not being prosecuted is also not justice. Crashing the world's economy and not being prosecuted is not justice. Lying to take the country to war and not being prosecuted is not justice. Covering up torture and not being prosecuted is not justice. Facing 35 years in solitary confinement for whistle-blowing is not justice. But impeachment for lying about an extramarital affair is OK.

There is something very wrong with the criminal justice system in the US, and it starts at the very bottom where assigned lawyers sort of represent their clients, but not very well. This is sometimes due to indifference but more often due to being underpaid and overworked. Often, it is just easier to persuade the client to settle for some sort of plea bargain to avoid a trial, without anyone knowing whether the person is guilty or not. This is particularly so with the less fortunate among us who have passed through the school system with very little in the way of an education rubbing

off on them. Barely able to read, poorly dressed, speaking only very colloquial English, they are condemned before they start.

The whole idea of someone being innocent until proven guilty seems to have entirely disappeared. Local newspapers gleefully print any and all arrests. Do they ever follow up and inform their readers that Joe Blogs is not actually a criminal and a danger to the public as the charges were dropped, or he went to trial and was found not guilty? Not that I have seen. Major cases, yes, but for a domestic dispute or alleged misdemeanors, never.

More relevant to the theme of being nice to each other is family court covering divorce and custody, situations that seem to bring out the very worst in even normally quite nice people.

In most cases judges do their best to be fair, but they can only judge what they know about. There is very little opportunity for the defendants to present their side of the story. Even with a lawyer on their side, there is this ridiculous “just answer the question, yes or no mentality”. There are no yes or no answers; there is always a but. What if your lawyer doesn’t ask the right question? What if the plaintiff just lies, or cries? Why are cases won by the shrewdest, slyest, most unscrupulous lawyer rather than by the one who has the better case?

Due diligence, if that is the term, can also be taken to extremes. In December 1988, I took my daughter to a riding lesson in Watkins Glen. I lost control of the car on an icy bridge, spun 180 degrees and caused minor damage to a guardrail. Like an idiot I reported it to the police who promptly ticketed me for driving at an unsafe speed. How did they know my speed was excessive, I asked politely? Because I had had an accident, they replied. We won’t go into the logic behind that. I pleaded not guilty and turned up in court on the appointed day. The judge asked me if I could read the charges. Yes, I could. Did I understand them? Yes I did. Well, then please appear in this court two weeks from now. Ok, it

is only 28 miles from Corning to Watkins, so I could easily drive up again to state my case.

However, fate intervened. When I got home, David waved an invitation under my nose: we were invited to travel to Washington for the opening of a loan exhibition "Treasure from the Corning Museum of Glass" to be held at the National Gallery (now called, I gather, the Smithsonian Museum of American Art); did I want to go? Of course I did, but, you guessed it, it was on the very same day as my scheduled "trial". No problem. Next morning I called the court to see if it could be rescheduled. "Oh, no, sorry," they said, "the DA has already subpoenaed witnesses." Witnesses? Witnesses? The only other person present was my nine-year-old daughter, and she had not been summoned!

The court was inflexible, so I did the only possible thing: I paid the \$50 fine and flew on the company plane to Washington where I had the great pleasure of meeting Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He was probably the only Senator whose name I recognized and that was only because he had served as Ambassador to India at the same time as my uncle was the Ambassador from New Zealand.

Social injustice is another matter altogether, but it basically comes back to the unequal distribution of wealth. Those born to privilege have a huge advantage over those born into poverty. Children of the well-to-do trip over opportunities even if there is no direct nepotism involved – better education, a richer cultural environment, an introduction here, a good word there. The chances of a child born into poverty climbing out of poverty are slim. Not impossible, as candidates for public office so often tell us, but slim.

We live with a very distorted view of relative worth. In Arthur Miller's words:

*Don't be seduced into thinking that that which does not make a profit is without value.*

Who is worth more to society: a garbage collector or an attorney? A pre-school teacher or a code enforcement officer? The CEO of a multinational corporation, or the President? I would go with a), a) and b), but their pay does not reflect that. If we look at usefulness to society, then the garbage collector should be the most highly paid. There has to be a better way.



## EDUCATION

I have a B.Sc in Mathematics and Psychology from the University of the Witwatersrand, and an Ms in Education from Elmira College, but I had a hard time finding statistics on education that I could understand. Could it be that the National Center for Education Statistics is deliberately muddying the waters so that the man in the street has a hard time figuring out just how bad education in the US is?

The Newsroom tells me that the US is 7<sup>th</sup> in literacy, 27<sup>th</sup> in math and 22<sup>nd</sup> in science. Obviously this changes from year to year, but close enough.

Currently the country is in an uproar about the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Proponents claim that it will dramatically improve the quality of education. Detractors say it is financially and politically motivated and will take away the freedom of schools and teachers to educate as they think best.

In fact the Common Core is not a curriculum, but rather a set of standards that students are expected to meet. It will hold the students to a higher standard of thinking and allow more flexible ways of teaching. In theory, this will help prepare more students for higher education and better jobs by encouraging them to deduce information from available data rather than just memorizing the facts. In practice, teachers and parents are resisting strongly. Their motives seem to be that teaching practices will have to adapt (and may need greater skills on the

part of the teacher) and children will not necessarily seem as bright as when they were assessed on multiple answer questions.

Common Core may not be the answer, but there certainly is a problem. The educators and politicians all scream for more money, but the US already spends more on education than any other country in the world: \$809 billion (7.3% of GDP) to be exact or an average of \$7,743 per grade school child.

Why do American children not do better in school? One clue is the word average. There are many students who do very well in school, but their results are dragged down by the many that do poorly. In very broad terms, the students who tend to do poorly are those who arrive at the school door in the morning unprepared for the day ahead. This may be because they didn't sleep enough the night before (perhaps because of an after school job); they are hungry (not enough food in the house); they are too tense to concentrate (family discord/abuse) or they just don't know enough to keep up with the lessons.

The last problem is very pervasive. Far too many children started school without basic skills like reading and knowing their numbers, and without many social skills. There is an easy solution to this particular problem and that is universal early childhood education. In the US 50% of children receive no early education, and those children tend overwhelmingly to be from low-income households, where the parents are not well-educated and the child receives little in the way of stimulation and learning opportunities. Several studies have shown that a program like Head Start has the long-term benefit of increasing graduation rate (currently only 77% in the US) and lowering the number of arrests.

More importantly, it gives poor kids an equal chance at success. If they start at a disadvantage in kindergarten, they will be at a disadvantage all through school. They may never catch up, and it

is likely that they will actually fall further and further behind until they give up and drop out.

Early childhood education is an economically sound, easy to implement, and proven solution to at least some of the problems that schools face in their effort to graduate all students with sufficient knowledge and thinking skills to be able to enter the workforce or go on to college. Because it is such an important stage in a child's life, I think that pre-school teachers should be paid at least as much as a college professor. Not that the latter are particularly well-paid!

Another problem is the quality of the teaching. On the one hand, in every school there are indifferent teachers who either drifted into teaching for the wrong reasons, or who have been at it for so long that they have become stale, at best, or burned out, at worst. There is often no easy way to remove such teachers, and not many mentoring programs that can help them improve their skills or renew their interest in the job.

On the other hand, even the best teachers can struggle with the amount of material they are meant to cover in a year, and the number of tests they have to prep for and administer. And the reason for so many tests is the misguided desire to ensure that every child gets the same education.

While this might have been a laudable goal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the diversity of the population and the immense body of knowledge that exists make it impossible to teach every student everything. With the advent of the Internet, it can be argued that it is no longer necessary to teach facts at all. It should be sufficient to teach children how to learn and make sure that they achieve literacy, numeracy and computer literacy. (And how to determine what online information has a snowball's hope in hell of being accurate!) A bit of critical thinking wouldn't be bad either.

It is not necessary for all children to read the same books to become literate. It is not necessary for children to take trigonometry and calculus to become numerate, but it is necessary to teach them how to use the Internet, how to evaluate the information they come across and to convey that information to others as necessary, in other words, how to write intelligently.

I am indebted to John Oliver for pointing out that while there is a national curriculum for things like algebra and social studies, sex “education” is left up to individual teachers. As he also points out, sex education is something that could be useful to you all your life, whereas most people can survive quite well without knowing what the square on the hypotenuse is.

An extremely simple and cost-effective approach to achieving the goal of a thinking population would be to remove textbooks from the classroom. The teacher can keep one, as a guide to the curriculum. But children should read what they are interested in, write about what they are interested in, and learn basic math skills from practical situations. A social studies class on the ancient world, for example, could have a group of children drawing a map, others reading up about the Romans, others working on a Greek play, and others reconstructing the pyramids, with the teacher passing between the groups guiding the learning as needed. At the end of the unit each individual or group makes a presentation to the whole class, so that they all learn a little about each theme, while learning in depth about one. This is genuine learning, which does not rely on memory to be retained.

The amount of testing that US kids are subjected to is shocking, but not surprising. Once again it all comes down to money. At the k-12 level, there is huge money to be made off textbooks and tests. New Jersey is the testing hub, but Texas controls the textbooks, which, arguably, is not a very good idea. Do we really

want textbooks that include intelligent design as an alternative to evolution?

A textbook-free classroom would certainly fit with the Common Core goal of fewer lectures and more conversations. If those conversations could be about climate change and the environment, so much the better.

At the tertiary level, American schools are considered among the finest in the world – if you can afford them.

*Though the higher-education sector is mostly “not for profit,” the American university system operates as an absurdly lucrative corporate hierarchy, with the teaching workforce at the bottom.* Michelle Chen in “The Nation”.

On the one hand, young adults are told that they will never get a decent job without a college degree, a self-fulfilling prophecy as employers have been told the same thing. So a college degree has become the Holy Grail, even if it means graduating with impossible to repay debt.

On the other hand, many degrees do not actually deliver any marketable skills, and certainly do not guarantee a job. Even a professional degree such as engineering does not always translate into a job in the field.

In many ways, universities are an anachronism. Perhaps they should revert to elite institutions of esoteric scholarship in the fields of history, philosophy, sociology, archaeology, religion, cosmology and so on. Little of this scholarship will have practical applications, but it is part of being a human to want to know who we are, our place in the world, and how we got here. There should also be specialized research universities dedicated to finding practical answers to what Garrison Keillor/Guy Noir calls “life’s persistent problems”. Researchers should be paid to study,

not pay in order to receive a degree, or a patent. In order to maintain the integrity of the scholarship, these institutions should be supported by a government fund to which foundations can contribute without any influence on the direction of the studies.

Professional and technical education could take place at dedicated colleges and trade schools leading to degrees in Law, Medicine, Engineering, Business, Education, the Arts, Agriculture, Information Technology, Journalism, Building Trades and so on. Engineering schools would not offer English literature or the history of the Civil War, IT schools would not offer biology classes. No easy As. If you graduate from one of these schools, you are well-trained to enter your chosen field.

For those – and there are many – who are undecided about a career and just want to further their general education, there should be abundant opportunities for self-directed study. When I lived in London I went to many evening classes offered by the Inner London Education Authority – free! I chose Italian, French, German and yoga, but the options covered absolutely anything at the 101 level. More in-depth study was (is) available through the Open University, much as there are now numerous free online college courses available from US universities.

I envision a situation where an uncertain student enrolls at the College of his or her choice and meets with an advisor to draw up a study plan, and criteria for evaluation. The students then go off and study by any means available, consulting with the advisor as necessary. When they feel ready, they present a paper, or take an oral exam or whatever had been decided upon. If they meet the criteria, they are given a certificate which counts for credit should they later go for a degree, and shows potential employers that here is someone with the dedication and perseverance to educate themselves.

It is an uphill battle to change adult hearts and minds. It is therefore vitally important that the next generation should be well-informed and educated enough to assess and evaluate the information available. This is another example of how system-change can combat climate change.



## LIABILITY, INSURANCE, HEALTH

*Canada, where a pack of smokes costs ten bucks  
and a heart transplant is free*

In Favor of a Government Option (written before Obamacare was even a concept).

Health Care reform starts (or should start) with the axiom that NO-ONE, not doctors, not hospitals and certainly not insurance companies, should profit from other people's illness. When there is a profit to be made, there will be exploitation. Remove or reduce the profit factor, and the medical profession may have a chance to provide real care.

It is true that the United States probably has the most advanced medical technology in the world. But it also has appalling high infant mortality, an unacceptably high level of degenerative diseases, life expectancy below that of 34 countries including San Marino, Andorra, Guernsey, the Cayman Islands, Gibraltar, Jordan and Cyprus and just ahead of Albania. State of the art medicine does not help those who cannot access it.

On the other hand, the overkill mentality of the United States sometimes leads to tests and procedures far beyond what is needed, justifiable, or covered, so that even those with health insurance end up thousands of dollars out of pocket.

One small example: My elder daughter was at a bar with some friends. She swallowed awkwardly and passed out. Her boyfriend insisted that she go to the emergency room to be checked out. She was told that there was no problem. Her

physician's assistant later told her that. I could have told her that, as I have fainted more than once under similar circumstances. To quote Merck:

*Fainting may occur if the vagus nerve, which supplies the neck, chest, and intestine, is stimulated. When stimulated, the vagus nerve slows the heart. Such stimulation also causes nausea and cool, clammy skin. This type of fainting is called vasovagal (vasomotor) syncope.*

The emergency room only had to ask what happened. Instead they performed \$3000 worth of unnecessary tests, which took my then-uninsured daughter nearly three years to pay off.

Who benefited from that incident? Certainly not the patient. But the hospital made out like a bandit. They charged my daughter at the uninsured rates. What irony! You can't afford to buy into a health plan so you have to pay more! Of course, if she had gone to a different hospital, she might have paid half as much – or twice as much. Who knows?

I repeat, NO-ONE SHOULD PROFIT FROM THE ILLS OF OTHERS. I take that to be as much a given as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The United States is not ready for a single payer health system (God, no, that's socialism and we wouldn't want that, even though many of the most peaceful, enjoyable countries in the world are to a large extent socialist states).



*This is the kind of socialist wasteland*

*that Bernie Sanders wants to turn America into.*

However, without a government-run, government-assisted health insurance option, there is no chance of real reform.

IF – and this is an unimaginable if – the insurance companies agreed to change their modus operandi by reducing premiums, reducing executive compensation, covering anyone who applied, guaranteeing coverage whatever or wherever your job may be, paying without haggling over who the doctor was, including pre-existing conditions and abandoning all the other ruses to avoid paying up which are currently their wont, then the government could stay out of health care. [Wait a minute! Didn't I just describe Obamacare? Except, of course, for executive pay. And premiums.]

And to those members of Congress who vehemently oppose government run alternatives and claim that a government option is unfair to private insurers, I say, fine, put your money where your mouth is: renounce your congressional health care package; go and find yourself a better plan on the open market. Good luck.

To those, like congresswoman Sue Meyrick who claim that under a government plan she could not have afforded the six doctors, three mammograms, and one ultrasound before they finally they found her cancer, I would like to point out that she “may” have had to wait longer in Canada, we don't know, but in the United States, the 45 million uninsured people would never have been tested, or treated. Ms Meyrick is very happy with her (congressional) health care plan, and I'm very happy for her. But, she is one of the haves, and she is not, under any circumstances, going to share her “havenness” with the have-nots. She shares the attitude: What's good enough for me is good enough for me, but – lordy, lordy, - not for them. And I'm certainly not going to underwrite those good-for-nothings who only work two jobs at

minimum wage, and still claim they can't afford health insurance. If they can't afford it they should get a third job!

Attitudes like that are just plain nasty. What I don't understand is how the have-nots can be persuaded to vote for anyone who puts profits before people. Perhaps it has something to do with the idea that "*Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.*" I think they are just waiting for all that wealth to trickle down.

I grew up in a very privileged family and could, at one time, have been considered a die-hard Republican. Then I met Americans who through no fault of their own had landed at the bottom of the heap. I met an 11 year-old girl who had already lost three of her front teeth. She is bright, delightful and deserves a chance in life. But missing all her teeth, let's face it; she is not going to get a job of any significance. You people who would deny coverage to the most needy should imagine yourselves in the same position without coverage. Then you'd know. Then you'd do the right thing. Then you'd find a better way.

Health care reform MUST include coverage for every person in the United States, and if that means (and it does) a government option or a single payer system then so be it.

Since I wrote the above in 2009, the United States has come quite a long way. We do have Obamacare and we do have Bernie Sanders. That the latter is even running for President means that the country has begun to accept the idea that socialism is not all bad, and his increasing popularity in its broadest sense means that a single payer health system may actually happen in the foreseeable future. As it should. Health services should be available for the asking.

During the nine years I lived in Italy, there were four occasions when I accessed the available health services. Two were public health, one was private, and one was a mixture.

Because Italian health services were at the time so vilified by the British, we carried private health insurance. The first time we needed it was when the hydraulic system holding up the hatchback of our car failed and it fell on my three-year-old son's head opening up a three inch gash. I immediately took him to the pediatrician we used, who said sorry, he was not qualified to put in stitches. Several phone calls later, he found a technician at a nearby lab, who was. We went round there and Simon had 6 or 8 stitches in his head.

On another occasion, an elderly friend from South Africa had lunch with us on her way to the airport to go home. Unfortunately, she tripped and broke her hip. It was a Sunday so no private clinics were open (!) and we ended up taking her to San Giacomo, a public hospital off Via del Corso, where they made her as comfortable as possible on a gurney in the passage, because we had instructions from her family that no Italian doctor was to touch her. Her son, daughter and personal physician arrived the next morning and took her home, so it doesn't really count as an example of Italian health care.

One year later, however, also on a Sunday, our six-year-old daughter thought it would be fun to climb on top of the little swing in the garden. Of course, she fell off and landed with her arm at an angle. It broke just above the elbow. My first reaction was that if this had been 100 years ago, they would just have cut it off: the ends of bone were separated by at least an inch.

To cut a long story short, Julia and I spent the next two weeks in San Giacomo. I slept on a pool chair and acted as nurse for the ward, occasionally being relieved so that I could go home, bath and hug my babies. Julia meanwhile was in traction with her arm

above her head, the two parts of the bone being slowly pulled back into alignment to avoid damaging the nerve. At that point they set her arm and she was in a body cast for the next six weeks. Her arm healed completely.

While the nursing care was abysmal, she was attended by two exceptional surgeons. One, Dr Mittiga, was the Chair of the Department of Orthopedic Surgery at Rome University. The other, whose name I forget (Ziaco, perhaps) was far more impressive: he was personal physician to the Italian football team!

Total cost - \$0.

Obamacare - in spite of some 50 attempts by Republicans to overthrow it (have they got nothing better to do?) - is here to stay. It is a huge step forward in providing access to health care for all Americans. But it is, remember, health INSURANCE reform.

It may be a huge step forward, but the insurance companies are still in charge and a catastrophic health event can still bankrupt even the insured. A Time Magazine special a few years back highlighted the capricious nature of hospital billing, which can be summed up as "We'll charge whatever we think we can get away with." The 25 highest paid CEOs of the nation's top-grossing NOT FOR PROFIT hospitals are paid upwards of half a million dollars, with 19 of them earning over a million and the top slot being \$6.07 million. As I said before, no one should profit from the misery of others. Certainly not to the extent of six million dollars a year.

I consider health care a human right, but many do not. The US Constitution makes no mention of health care. Nor does the UN Declaration of Human Rights. I think that needs to change.

There has to be a better way.

Of course, health care is not the only story. Healthy people don't need much health care. Unfortunately, Americans are among the unhealthiest people on the planet.

IMHO, there are three reasons for that: A largely sedentary lifestyle, an appalling diet, and an obsession with bacteria. I am guilty of the first. My diet is quite good but rather weighted towards the grape, but I am definitely in the pro-bacteria camp.

Those little critters rule the world. When climate change wipes out the human race and 75% of the other species on earth, guess what? The bacteria will still be here.

Bacteria control our digestion, the breakdown of organic matter, and they help plants absorb nutrients. Without bacteria we are history.

Bacteria are also responsible for disease. Disease-causing bacteria can be thought of as the weeds of the bacterial world: they are strong and adaptable and go wild if left unchecked.

The key word there is unchecked. With the garden, if there are enough other plants growing and the soil is healthy, the weeds will not take hold. So too, with bacteria, if you have a healthy crop of bacteria in your gut, the e-coli or the staph or the strep or the salmonella will be crowded out.

A sterile environment may be desirable in a hospital, but not in your home. And not in the soil. You want a really good population of good bacteria to overwhelm the bad ones that are bound to be introduced from time to time. After all, the world is not a sterile place.

My interpretation of the role that bacteria play in our lives stems from studying the soil. (I am, you may remember, infected by compost). The more bacteria present, the healthier the soil. I can't quote you scientific studies which show that a rich bacterial environment is a good one for a healthy life. I haven't looked for them, and they may not even exist. But it makes intuitive sense,

and biologist friends support the idea. The idea that cleanliness is next to Godliness may need to be reconsidered!

Anyway, this crazy idea of mine, that bacteria promote immunity, got me banned from a website.

DailyKos is a "progressive" site where more or less anyone can post a diary, on any subject they like. Readers like or upvote the diary and the top ones are published for anyone to view. And of course, you can comment. I used to comment quite a lot, but then there was this diary about Tom Tillis, United States Senator from North Carolina whose views are among the most unlikeable in both houses of Congress. He is the sort of person that has Democrats foaming at the mouth whenever he speaks. They went absolutely wild when he proposed that States should be allowed to opt out of the mandatory hand washing regulation that is foisted on every restaurant in the nation.

I happen to agree with him on this point. The post that got me banned read:

I never thought that I would agree with the likes of Thom Tillis, but I do on this issue. Please note that he did not say restaurant workers should **not** wash their hands, he said it should not be mandated by law.

To start with it is an unenforceable law. Who (other than the restaurant owner) knows if the employees wash their hands? Secondly, a dirty restaurant is unlikely to stay in business long. The first rule for a food provider is "Do not make your customers sick". Oversight by the restaurant owner is far more likely to ensure cleanliness than some regulatory poster in the bathroom. This is not something that should be mandated by government; it is something that should be a common sense business practice. And if you think the employees don't wash their hands enough, don't eat there.

It would be really interesting to see how many cases of food poisoning in restaurants have been caused by dirty hands as opposed to contaminated produce. I haven't yet been able to find such a study.

The regulations that are imposed on restaurants and other food vendors are onerous and very often unnecessary. Two examples come to mind.

A couple of years ago a new store opened in Corning selling virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegars. Really good stuff. I got through my first bottle of oil quite quickly and, being a re-use, recycle sort of person, I put it through the dishwasher and took it back for a refill. Sorry, can't do that. Not unless they use 12 feet of plastic tubing to transfer the oil from the big dispensers to my bottle. And then throw the tubing away.

The idea leaves me speechless. Well, not exactly because I always have something to say about stupidity. There seem to be two issues that the Department of Health has with refilling bottles: one, the reused container may not be as sterile as the original. So what! I'm the one taking that risk, but two, my bottle may in some way contaminate the spigot of the dispenser. OK. How exactly, I am not sure, as it is quite possible to fill a bottle without it and the spigot ever touching. So I no longer get my oil there.

Probably, I am more of a loser than the store is because I am denying myself a great product. But I will not condone or support blind obedience to a stupid regulation. They could easily take back bottles, get them sterilized, and re-use them. But, they say, they don't have room for a dishwasher. Shame, as we used to say in South Africa. They are located between two restaurants, literally. Talk to one of them and run the collected bottles through their industrial dishwasher. But no, that is too much trouble, they prefer to just buy more bottles, and you, the customer, can always put yours in the recycling bin. Not me.

Second, cheese makers in New York are no longer able to take a wheel of cheese to a farmers' market and cut off as much as the customer wants. No, it all has to be pre-packaged. If I want my cheese wrapped in plastic, I'll go to Wegmans. However, I prefer to buy my cheese direct from the vendor and take it home in my own container. Can't do it!

New York State health officials would faint at a French market. Nothing is pre-packaged, nothing is refrigerated, no one wears gloves, customers pick up, feel and smell produce before they consider buying it, dogs wander around at will. And, amazingly, they are all quite healthy.

Unfortunately, these burdensome regulations are not entirely about keeping us healthy; they are about making sure that there are no grounds for a lawsuit.

Which is a perfect segue into liability insurance.

Of the many locations on Market Street where I traded books, one had a step. In order to reach the store door, set back about 6', one had to make the vertical transition from the brick sidewalk to the concrete slab between the display windows.

One day a woman tripped on this step and measured her length, hitting her head against the wooden base of the window.

To her credit, she did not sue, but she did expect my insurance company to pay her emergency room expenses.

My question is, "In what way does my paying the rent on a store front make me responsible for her inability to raise her fat leg high enough to elevate her body the four inches necessary to make it safely to my front door?"

I hadn't disguised the step; I hadn't turned out the lights or hidden the sun. Darn, I had failed to put that very attractive neon orange reflective tape to warn the unwary (those who can't tell the difference between brick and concrete) that there was a change in level. Bad, bad me. Just imagine leaving a four foot wide step just sitting there in the open waiting to be tripped over!

For the past 20 years or so, Corning has had some kind of arts and crafts fair downtown. Market Street is closed and vendors set up their booths for the weekend. In addition to travel expenses, the booth fee, overnight stay and meals, the poor out of town vendors have to pay between \$40 and \$100 to carry \$1,000,000 worth of liability insurance.

One million dollars. That's insane! Whenever I have said "that's insane" I've received the same reply, "I know, but you have to do it."

No you don't! How dangerous can a craft fair be? I have a hard time imagining any injury that would cost that much, let alone one caused by the vendor innocently sitting there, hoping against hope that they will sell enough to cover their costs. What can they possibly be responsible for? Breathing out at the wrong time, perhaps, causing a potential customer's hat to tip over their eyes so that they failed to see the canvas side of the tent, which they walked into causing their sunglasses to make a dent in their nose? Oh the pain, Oh the suffering! Worth at least three mil, don't you think?

Does no one take responsibility for his or her own actions and mistakes?

The story took another twist later on. And it became very personal. A few years back I trained as a Master Gardener with the Cornell Co-operative Extension. This meant that I was an ambassador for Cornell, promoting their scientific breakthroughs.

In effect it meant that I talked to people about gardens and did soil testing at the Farmer's Market. Then, one day, I got a letter saying that if I wished to continue as a Master Gardener volunteer, I would have to submit to a background check. At the insistence of the insurance company, they would be checking to see if I had ever been convicted of a sex crime.

Let's set aside the fact that many sexual deviants and molesters have never been convicted of a crime. Let's look at the chance that a sexual deviant would actually be able to molest a child or a senior (those were the high-risk groups) while testing a sample of soil in a very public place. Along with many others, I refused, and the co-operative extension lost about half its volunteers. It also strained their budgets as each regional office picked up the tab for the checks – not the insurance company that insisted this was necessary.

OK, so I can no longer call myself a Master Gardener Volunteer, or go to the Farmer's Market independently as they require a million dollars general liability insurance. See above.

Then I was at a docents' meeting at The Corning Museum of Glass. I don't necessarily hold this against her because she had been told what to say, but the very new education director casually announced that we docents would all have to agree to a background check. It's easy she said, all you do is go to xxx website and enter your information. I was already out the door. Bloody hell.

I was not just outraged that the Museum expected **me**\* to undergo a background check, I was outraged on behalf of those docents who have been with the program since it began. He is not the only one, but I was particularly outraged on behalf of a man in his eighties who is a fellow garden club member and fellow Master Gardener. I don't know how long he has been a docent, but it is long enough that if there was a problem with his interaction with

museum visitors, it would have come up by now. I am insulted that the Museum thinks it is necessary to investigate my background and I am outraged that they should feel the need to look into the backgrounds of docents who have served for decades.

[\*For those who are not familiar with my background, my husband, David, was employed by CMOG from 1984 until his death in 2013. He served as Chief Curator, Deputy Director, Executive Director and Senior Scholar. As a book restorer, I worked for the Rakow library for many years, and I have been a docent since around 2010. I am also an Ennion Society member, meaning that I give them quite a lot of money each year. None of that, it seems, is enough to tell the insurance company, we know this one, she's OK.]

I wrote this letter to the docent co-ordinator. It's not a great letter because I was almost incoherent with rage:

*Open letter to CMOG staff, directors and volunteers.*

*I quit. I will not authorize a background check and, without that, I can no longer continue to volunteer for the Museum. I have already been through this with the co-operative Extension.*

*I will not be dictated to by an insurance company, and I have a problem working/volunteering of an organization that is so feeble that it is unable to stand up to the strong-arm tactics of an insurance company. This is the direct equivalent of not covering pre-existing conditions. Travellers (and others) are going to charge CMOG an arm and a leg to offer "coverage" to low- and no-risk volunteers. That is not insurance, that is exploitation. How many times has CMOG been sued in the past 62 years? How are docents supposed to arrange their tours so that they can abuse the patrons? A quickie in the study gallery while the rest of the tour is watching Steve's video? But from what*

*Kris said, Travelers wants to lower its risk to include misdeeds by docents off Museum property. Please explain to me what liability the Museum has if I choose to grope little boys in the park - or whatever.*

*As you can tell, I am very angry. I am giving up a job that I absolutely love, and which, incidentally, I am quite good at. Just as I gave up being a Master Gardener which I also loved. But I will not be a pawn in some insurance company's scam. I will not be part of perpetuating the myth that companies and organizations absolutely have to carry liability insurance including that for abuse and molestation. I strongly urge every single docent to refuse to undergo a background check.*

They didn't. I was asked to go back and, to my continuing shame, I agreed. I agreed - not because I was won over by the arguments that they absolutely have to have this kind of coverage, and that really it was to protect me - but because I did not want to give up being a docent. I love the job and treasure the connection to David.

If you have nothing to hide, there is, in theory, no reason to refuse allowing a background check. Except that it is an insult. Cornell and CMOG (and the Rockwell Museum, and 171 Cedar Arts Center) are saying to volunteers that what the insurance company demands is more important than you are. The Steuben County Co-operative Extension asked men and women who had volunteered for upwards of twenty years to verify that they are not convicted child molesters. CMOG did the same.

The key word here is 'convicted'. These background checks don't address that creepy feeling you get when talking to a certain man. You know, the one who is supposed to have done naughty things, but was never caught..... The priest who was suddenly moved to another parish. None of that comes up in a standard background check. I happen to know that CMOG became aware of just such a

person on their staff and he was let go. That is as it should be. No insurance company involved.

Recently, I was told that if I wanted to continue teaching Italian at 171 I would need to go through a 30-45 minute new hire interview and a criminal background check. I have a longer and deeper history with 171 than anyone else in this town. Over the past 30 years I have taken classes, my children have taken classes, I have volunteered, I have organized events, I have taught, I have exhibited, I have contributed, I have been employed by them and I have been on the Board. But I'm still considered a new hire, and need a background check. I said, bugger you, I'm not doing it. Well, I didn't actually say bugger you, and we are still friends, I just won't be teaching again.

Make no mistake, insurance companies are bullies. They have spread the idea that if a business or non-profit organization does not have insurance, it is bound to be sued sooner or later, and it will not survive. They won't offer general liability insurance without the sexual misconduct rider, and they won't cover that unless they have minimized any potential risks. A win-win situation for them. But the time has come to say, enough. It still makes sense to insure your car (the state insists upon it) and your house (the bank insists), but liability insurance is another matter. Underwriting a sure thing is not insurance; it is exploitation.

Relevant here is a piece I wrote on the blog concerning risk. Risk is what we insure against and what insurance companies are very averse to. What do they call it, risk reduction, risk minimization? What better way to ensure that payouts are kept to a minimum than to make potentially risky behavior illegal?

Let me start by saying that the (many) criticisms I have of the United States are made, not just to complain and whinge, but in the hope of making a difference - of finding a better way.

I hate the idea that no one in the US is allowed to take a risk. Every time something happens that could possibly injure someone in the future, a law is passed to make it illegal to take part in that "risky" behavior. This is obviously very closely connected to insurance, liability and litigation. And the laws are one size fits all, with no leeway for exceptional circumstances, or even conditions that don't quite fit the criteria. There is no room for individual discretion. The result is that no one is allowed to think for him- or herself. It may well be that a large number of Americans are incapable of thinking for themselves and should, therefore, have laws that protect them from themselves. But there are also quite a few of us who are quite capable of weighing up a situation, estimating the risks and deciding whether it is a risk one is prepared to take.

How about baby cribs and cots? My entire generation and that of my children survived the unspeakable dangers of cots with slats and drop sides. I know several grandmothers who would like to pass cribs on to the present generation, only to be told that those heirlooms are now illegal.

What prompted this post is that I have come across information about crowd funding. This is different from things like Indiegogo and Kickstarter where you basically make a donation to get a good cause off the ground. For the past 80 years, the government has thought that only the rich should be allowed to invest in start-up companies. Apparently, the risk is too great for the rest of us. Things are changing, and crowd-funding will be legal as soon as the SEC finalizes the regulations, but as of now, an intelligent person with a few hundred dollars to spare cannot invest in a new business. Sure, we will probably lose that money, but it could be the next Google. If anyone can go and throw away their money at a casino, (and claim the loss against tax), why can they not make a modest investment in a company that seems to have promise



## WHAT MAKES US HATEFUL?

I have to confess that not only am I a Luddite, I am also, it seems, a Libtard, a decidedly perjorative term used with abandon on the Internet by what I guess we could call Contards. (Little joke: if pro is the opposite of con, what is the opposite of progress?)

Once again I had to look up what it meant and came across a much extended definition, which turned into a right-wing rant that can arguably be seen as the flip side of this book. I have made a few comments where I couldn't help myself, but for the most part, I have let it speak for itself. Here it is in a heavily edited version (for length not content). I have put in bold the parts that could be said to apply to me.

### Libtard

*As repetitive as it sounds, it stands for "liberal retard."*

*A libtard wants to live in a fantasy world (in which life is the way that they WISH IT WAS) as opposed to dealing with life the way it actually is. The most idealistic libtard envisions a time when science/technology and **Socialism** (in the sense of looking out for others) will eliminate all poverty, hunger, war, disease, injustice, unemployment and prejudice.*

*Most libtards subscribe to the notion that "people are basically good", and build their foundation for activism and "improving the human condition" on that faulty premise. Because they deny the facts about human nature, their "reasoning" is diametrically opposite to common*

sense. The reality that people have different initiative levels, are basically selfish, and often work for their own interests before helping others, puts a libtard's panties in a wad. So, when citizens will not voluntarily comply with various libtard prescriptions for "the common good", then laws must be passed, or force used, to MAKE them comply. (It is the gradual path to totalitarianism).

Likewise, his/her naïve cries of: "**can't we all just get along?**" and "there is nothing worth dying for" are red flags for anyone with a clue.

Metaphorically speaking, a libtard is a sheep who thinks that their grasp of diplomatic nuance or metaphysical sensitivity will prevent their flock from being devoured by the world's Islamic/Communist wolves. When America, the sheep dog, responds to wolf attacks, the libtard judges these defensive actions as offensive and wolfish. Since libtards are unable to recognize our enemies for what they are, they cannot be trusted to safeguard our future.

In a large nutshell, a libtard's goal in life includes one or more of the following:

- the establishment of a Socialist "utopia"
- "benevolent" totalitarian control of the world's population through any means necessary
- ever increasing government micromanagement of private enterprise
- the adoption of laws, treaties and tax regulations that hinder America's competitiveness
- the usurpation of the legislative process, at all levels, through judicial fiat (Libtards?)
- the filing of specious law suits in order to thwart the will of the people
- the promotion of the tyranny of the minority
- the filing of specious law suits to shakedown corporations for cash (under the guise of "social responsibility")
- the disproportionate taxation of citizens "who have more money than they need"
- the redistribution of wealth from producers to non-producers (under the guise of "fairness")

*--the banning and confiscation of all privately owned guns (even though it has lead to genocide)*  
*--the abolition of all private property rights*  
*--the destruction of all national sovereignty (America first, of course)*  
***--the destruction of Capitalism***  
*--the establishment of one religion (with no personal accountability) (really?), OR the **abolition of all religion***  
*--the appeasement of Islamic radicals and their American front groups like CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations)*  
*--the regulation, or banning, of all opposition media (under the guise of "fairness")*  
*--the appeasement of Communist dictators and their American front groups*  
*--the further insertion of Socialist ideology and indoctrination into public school curricula (but teaching intelligent design and abstinence only is not indoctrination)*  
*--the purposeful "dumbing down" of the masses through inane public school curricula and pedagogy (He has a point here, but I'm not sure we libtards are the reason)*  
*--mass thought control through "speech codes" and political correctness*  
*--the further promulgation of the homosexual/pedophile agenda*  
*--the teaching of HATE (superficially disguised as "Women's Studies", "African Studies", etc.)*  
***--the legalization of marijuana ("far OUT, man")***  
*--the establishment of worldwide socialized medicine (under the guise of "fairness")*  
***--the conservation of the environment over the conservation of the American economy***  
*--the demonization of attempts to make English America's national language*  
***--world peace*** (which genocidal dictators define as: "the absence of conflict" --dead men cannot resist your brutal oppression)  
*--the conservation of the environment over the conservation of humanity (See Rex Tillerson's remark about why should we save the environment if humanity suffers)*  
*--the promotion of abortion as birth control, eugenics, and **teaching the***

*theory of evolution as fact (even though the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics precludes it from the get-go)  
--the abolition of individual freedom  
--anarchy*

*Not surprisingly, there is a thread of anti-Americanism that runs through these ideas. A libtard cannot stomach the idea that America, despite its faults, is the greatest country in the world. (See Preface) As such, he/she sees it as their duty to tarnish the country's current and past image using all available means including: cherry picking facts and using innuendo, half-truths, lies and fabrications.*

*NOTE TO ALL MALCONTENTS: If America is truly evil, please pick yourself a better country.*

*Because most libtards are pantheists (New Agers), agnostics, atheists, liberal Jews, liberal Catholics, or have otherwise turned their backs on Jehovah, they lack true spiritual fulfillment. In order to try and fill that void, and "to make a difference", they work for the causes listed above. A pretty complete listing can be found at [discoverthenetworks.org](http://discoverthenetworks.org). (This is the right-wing's assessment of the left!)*

I am constantly amazed that 10 people can look at a set of data and come up with 10 different interpretations. This man uses many of the same arguments I use but directed against a different group. For example, *(Their) actions undermine America's educational system, economy, criminal justice system, military personnel, sovereignty, security, and freedoms* could just as easily be talking about the right as the left, as he is. Or, *the teaching of HATE*. Sure, there are some hate-mongers on the left, but they can't hold a candle to the likes of Rush Limbaugh.

*"using all available means including: cherry picking facts and using innuendo, half-truths, lies and fabrications."* Maybe this is universal, but in this context, I can't help thinking it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

His entire manifesto is about “me”. “We” is a foreign concept. The idea of doing something because it is a nice thing to do is non-existent.

It has taken me longer than really necessary to assemble these writings into a coherent whole, mainly because every time I read the news, something else comes up that I feel I want to address. This morning I glanced at IJReview, a mostly rightwing publication which has just enough left-leaning articles to give some semblance of neutrality. The comments after one article (The White House has hired its first openly transgender staff member, Raffi Freedman-Gurspan.), though, showed that the readership is, in general, the real reason that I needed to write this book in the first place.

My comment was:

*I commented on the totally unfunny half and half joke and then read down further. I really wish I hadn't.*

*One comment included what a horrible place to raise a family the US has become. I agree, but not because a transgender person has been hired by the White House as Outreach and Recruitment Director for Presidential Personnel. In my opinion as a long term resident, the United States is an increasingly horrible place to live because of the willful ignorance, racism, intolerance and spite that shows itself all through this thread, and many others.*

*When gratuitous insults pass for wit, and bigotry for an informed opinion, we have far greater problems than who is in the White House. The raw hatred that runs through the comments is deeply disturbing and I will just remind you of the Cherokee saying: But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die.*

The poison bit seemed like the only response to comments that suggested Mrs. Obama is a transy or a tranny and that, therefore, the President has hired Raffi (an ugly freak, and probably an illegal) so that he can have an affair because his

wife (the first monkey in the White House) is unable to satisfy him. *"Finally found his new squeeze to replace the fugly thing he lives with."* *"What gender was this thing when it was hatched?"* *"If he (Obama) had a son it would be a turd (from anal sex)"*.

Remarks like these make me feel physically sick. I don't know how to handle such raw hatred. I can't imagine what I would do if I met one of them face to face. But that is what needs to happen. Could we get them all into group counseling? Could there be a 12-step detox program for addicts of intolerance? How about involuntary sterilization? One comment actually promoted the idea of selective abortion to rid the world of freaks and faggots. What's good for the goose, I say, is good for the gander.

I have thought of packing up and leaving. With my British passport, I could live anywhere in Europe, with a preference for countries where I can communicate, that is, the UK, Ireland, Scandanavia (they all speak English), the Netherlands (I'd get by with Afrikaans), France, Luxembourg, Belgium, Lichtenstein and Switzerland with French, Italy and Spain. Germany and Austria at a pinch. I have choices. But I have lived here more than thirty years. My children are all married to Americans and have a selection of American children. I want to leave, yes, to travel - I still have 26 countries to visit before I can join the Century Club - but I want to come back to my house in this little town that I love, where I know hundreds of people and where I am known. Besides, if I am to save the world, I truly think the US is the place to start.



So.....

*Love all, trust a few, do harm to none.*  
Shakespeare. All's Well that Ends well.

The Omega Institute has a wonderful sustainability conference each fall titled "Where we go from here". That seems like a good way to wrap up my diatribe.

I want to emphasize that I am not telling you what you should do; I am merely suggesting that there is very likely a better way than your current approach, and offering some areas that I think are worth thinking about.

Let's start with labels. As soon as you call someone a Republican or a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative, you conjure up a slew of traits that are frequently associated with that group. There is also the assumption that every person who belongs to that group thinks, acts and feels the same way. By extension, it is easy to hate anyone who belongs to the "other" group. Funny thing, I don't think I have ever heard someone say I love all my fellow Republicans, or Greens, or Liberals. We seem to dispense love cautiously, but are ready to hate indiscriminately.

This is the basis of prejudice and bigotry. As I said earlier, prejudice is taught. It can also be unlearned, but that is not easy.

Somehow I became part of a Facebook group that calls itself the Flaming Liberals and states: "*This group is for inquisitive people who identify as liberal or progressive and don't mind the occasional bad pun or left-field digression.*"

There are less than 200 in the group, and about a dozen who post frequently, often in the form of photos that say a lot, very succinctly. The day after the SCOTUS gave gay marriage the green light one appeared of a young woman hugging a man with a "Kick me!" sign on his back. The caption is "Hug a Conservative: they've had a bad week."

Lively discussion followed, including comments like "nah..."; "free kick me signs"; "normally I'm a hugger, but I think I'll pass on this"

But I really like the idea of showing sympathy. Here is an opportunity to talk to someone whose ideas are wildly different from yours. Here is an opportunity to say something along the lines of "I know this has been a really bad week for you, and you feel that you have lost some battle. Please help me to understand what you have lost, and why it is so important to you." If approached with sympathy and a genuine need to understand, I think that a reasonable conversation could ensue. Without saying you are wrong and I am right, you nudge the other person towards examining their motives and justifying their antipathy. In some circumstances, it can even work the other way. After lengthy discussions with a farmer out west somewhere, I have revised my opinion about labeling GMOs. For someone like him who grows some GM crops and some non GM crops, labeling would require him to keep the two completely separate, and so would increase his costs. Besides even labels like organic or "natural" can be very misleading. Really the only way to be sure what is in your food is to know the producer.

Introducing humor into discussions can backfire. For example I find this hysterically funny, but possibly conservatives will not:

*It all makes sense now.*

*Gay marriage and marijuana being legalized on the same day.*

*Leviticus 20:13 -*

*"if a man lays with another man he should be stoned."  
We've just been interpreting it wrong all those years.*

I find Jim Jefferies' take on gun control hysterically funny, but I know gun owners who do not. So it is probably better to stick to non-controversial stuff, like the Bible. (Just kidding!)

Anyway, what I am trying to say is that the only way I can see to make the world a better place is to engage in meaningful conversation with the people whose ideas you can't stand. As Moshe Dayan put it: *"If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies."*

And starting with a hug seems like a good idea.