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Affirming The Need For Change

The world we live in creates avoidable sufferings of all kinds. Time and again we see the need for social change, as injustices and the mistreatment of people reveal themselves. There are countless aspects of our world that ought to be changed for the better. At the same time our capacity to cause hardship for others, in the name of reform and betterment, is demonstrated in unexpectedly perverse results. We have a long history of good intentions that are not matched by good deeds. Not all of our inspirations and longings in regards to change will actually prove to be the right direction. Nevertheless, the proposition that change is needed is still a sound one, given that the sufferings that people must now endure can be relieved through our actions and values.

Achieving such changes, providing they are not misguided or flawed in their own right, is a quite different matter than simply recognising the need for change. The decision to create change forces to the surface the need to have a viable theory of change that we can use. Part of this theory concerns our assumptions about people and change. In order to ultimately make progress on our issues and concerns, we need to be quite clear as to what we are to rely on in order to bring about change. For instance, does endless complaining about, and mourning the state of our world really have much impact, or can it inadvertently serve to leave people well ensconced in their defeatism and resignation? Such a simple and practical question reveals just one aspect of the much bigger question of the origins and dynamics of creating change.

It is certainly apparent that our world is changeable and that many examples of improvement exist to justify some measure of cautious optimism that the prospect of change is not simply a pipe dream. This short paper will examine change from the point of view of the personal foundations of change. In particular, it will explore the important roles of personal will, conviction and commitment in the process of both individual and collective processes of change. These elements of human functioning may, on one level be obvious and taken for granted. Nonetheless, their importance should not be diminished simply because they are so much a part of daily life. An appreciation of their role can illuminate many of the opportunities for negotiating change that people seek.

Conceiving Of The Way Change Comes About

We live in a time in history when we are asked to believe that what is material, external, empirical, cognitive, rational and measurable constitutes the parameters of our universe. Often it is science that is used as the ultimate justification for these portrayals of reality, but these ideological preferences might better be understood as “scientism” i.e. the posturing of being “scientific-like” more than a necessity of science itself. In this worldview, it becomes natural to look at social change as a problem “out there” in the world that will ultimately be resolved by some manner of manipulation of the natural world. Social change then inevitably becomes a matter of altering the social order “from the outside in”. The classic paradigm of this in the modern era has been social engineering and, in particular, technocratic, top down, expert driven social change, often but not always under state sponsorship.

If one places one’s faith in remedies of this kind, it becomes routine to create social changes simply by looking for ways to shape the conduct of people from the outside. Not uncommonly, it results in schemes that prescribe an endless array of external interventions “on” or “at” people and systems, usually by manipulating social organizations and systems. In such approaches, the assumption is usually that new behaviour will follow from new structures, new forms of organisation, or differing patterns of financial manipulation. In some instances, the people targeted are asked, or even compelled, to accommodate the values, visions and ideologies that support these new structures and visions.

This sort of phenomena is most readily seen in the now widespread practice of organisations announcing their “new” values, mission statements and the like, usually accompanied by a new organizational structure, slogans and official “culture”. We are frequently asked to believe and assent to the assertion that external manipulations of this kind constitute authentic change. Often such “changes” are both announced to us and packaged as if we had somehow chosen these ourselves, since these impositions are often done in our name. Not surprisingly, many people have lived through so many of these top down “changes” and restructurings, that these exercises in organizational tinkering eventually become a numbing blur of platitudes bound up with a much too familiar “business as usual”.

What is missing in this strategy of externalised behaviourism is any meaningful role for the vast majority of people, other than to be the compliant and accommodating player in a set of prescriptions for oneself originating from remote strangers who act as if they knew best. These actions may not even be consistent with the rhetoric used to justify them, and they may well serve interests and agendas that not only are concealed, they may counter legitimate and proper agendas and needs. Apart from the morality of such an arrangement, one has to wonder if such imposed “change from without” is really change at all. Could it be that what is actually achieved is more a matter of compliance than a real difference in the way human beings actually work? Is change that is “out there” and which involves no change in individual people really authentic change? Or has change

become confused with massaging the more obvious layer of bureaucratic patterns of our social institutions whilst leaving the people involved unengaged and uncommitted? Anyone who has lived to see serial reform within agencies will tend to discount the rhetoric of the next wave of “change that is good for you”.

Inward And Outward Change

Certainly, if we take too literally the premise that human beings have actually changed when their more outward conduct conforms to expected behaviour, we are certainly at risk of confusing the actual character of people with the face they present to the world. In a similar way, we deceive ourselves if we think that the particular organisation or system has actually changed when its slogans shift to capture what is current and fashionable, or when it embraces ostensibly “new” values by the putting in place of “new” faces, “new” processes and “new” structures. Indeed, the outward form has had a visible metamorphosis, but how deep does it really go, and how genuine is it?

Such questions as these push us to go further, by expanding the range of what is discussable from simply the visible, material and external, to the character of what is hidden from view, but nonetheless deeply operative in human beings and their social institutions. Often this essence is rather poetically called the “soul” of people and organisations. These questions of the authenticity of change are also scientific questions, but they may need to be taken up outside of the ideological preferences of much of the materialist, technocratic, social engineering assumptive model. To answer the question of the authenticity of change, it is necessary to examine human beings in their fullness, not just in terms of their instrumental roles and outward conduct. In this sense, what *really makes people tick* is the actual scientific question, and this cannot be answered solely “from without”. This recognition forces us to *also* see the world and social change from the “inside out”.

When people have authentically changed inwardly, it is striking that the genuineness of this change gradually suffuses and pervades their conduct in a way that simply wouldn’t “ring true” if they were acting. A genuine “change of heart” could eventually be teased out from mere pretence, or the instance of tentative experimentation with new views with little commitment to them as yet. In a similar way, we could (and do) evaluate our social institutions along some continuum of authenticity, however vague and inarticulate we may be about the basis for such judgements. Some people are quite discerning in being able to see to the “soul” of what lies beneath the surface layers, and often can become our truth tellers and prophets. In other words, authenticity of change is a real question and sorting out its validity is often possible.

The Value Of Recognising That It Is People Who Are The Irreducible Creators Of Change

It may be comforting to some to imagine that it is some abstract and impersonal system or authority that is most seminal in creating change. In fact, many people operate as if this premise were entirely the case. This view would place change as being

something created “out there” and by others. However, when we look at change a little more closely we can see that the commitments and handiwork of individuals precedes the eventual ability of social institutions to change. The resultant institutional change that comes about is not due principally to the actions of the organization or system, but rather it arises from the character of the people involved and their sense of the directions the institution should evolve towards. These people act as catalysts within these organizations and systems, and thus are the core agent of change, irrespective of the ebb and flow of environmental influences.

The view that change happens “in here”, does not nearly give a person quite the same “wiggle room” as does the “outside in” scenario. When individuals matter to the formation of human history, as they clearly do, then no life is lived without some consequence for others. Change always occur within the context of a specific culture or history for sure, but it is still dependent on who is present and what they believe, think and place value on. In other words, what they are like as people. People shape their environments even as they are shaped by them. Thus, a force is present that emits from within people outward and, when properly channelled, can become a force for change.

It is interesting to consider what this prospect of “personal agency” might mean. Certainly, it suggests that people are not simply the product of their environment, or mindless mirrors of the order of the economic, political and social world. They bring to their lives the capacity to act and be something other than what surrounds them. Undoubtedly, most people will make an accommodation to the world they find themselves in, but there still remains that potential, often repressed, to be their own person no matter what the worldly wisdom dictates. From such impulses arise the tentative images of a different world, first dreamed about in the reveries of people whose imaginations, values and priorities answer to their own directions. Human beings can change their world because they have within them the will and potential to be free. Were it not so, we would all simply do what we see others do.

It is not true, however, that people always use this freedom, or exploit its possibilities fully. To be one’s own autonomous agent, means being willing to allow one’s direction and purposes to be authored from within, and to possibly resist the unceasing pressures and interests from without. Even this free agency is selective and rare, as most people do not quarrel with most of what is normative in communities and societies. Most yield to convention unrelentingly, except perhaps in a few special instances where they choose to be at odds with the ways of people around them. It is these moments that make a lie of the determinism of environment, as they reveal that people can be more than programmable robots, invariably compliant in the hands of those who would seek to mold them.

People Can Decide To Pursue That Which Is Good Or Better

It is unlikely that change would ever come about, were it not for the fact that people constantly look past the world of today and seek to make it conform to a different ideal. Often these ideals are awakened by the sense that there is something fundamentally

wrong in the way of the world. By the same measure, this may lead people to wonder whether there is a better way that some day could replace the evils of today. This sense of unrest and hunger for a larger truth and direction, often turns such people into pilgrims, haunted by a sense that at least some of life doesn't have to be the way it is. From such a longing has arisen the stimulus for personal and societal transformations both for good and ill. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that change has occurred because of what has shifted in the inner life of people.

Social change often occurs simply because people yield to the movements that are happening around them. Often as not, this is done without all that much notice of the import of such yielding, as the significance of small events or moments does not always show itself as they are occurring. So it is with the stirrings towards change. They may arise amongst people, and propel them along, with only the dimmest sense of where things are heading. Such unconsciousness is all too common, yet it brings with it the danger that people do not choose their steps with the kind of mindfulness that is associated with wisdom, prudence and judiciousness.

Even despite this tendency, it is also apparent that many people go much further, and gradually evolve and set before themselves, a set of ideals to guide them. When these ideals become internalised into the very fabric of the character of individuals, they often become an inner compass that constantly urges the person along to probe deeper levels of the truth about what is right and good. If these ethics and ideals are authentic, and held to with fidelity and integrity, it may well come to be that a kind of goodness can take hold in a person and grow stronger. If the ideal is a worthy one, then a devotion to its cultivation within their "being" can yield many virtues in the way the person "is".

The same can be said about collectivities of sincere people who mutually embrace and strive for a worthy goal. They too can collectively help entrench a shared "manner of being" or ethos that shifts the culture of their times. Most of our beneficial social movements have tapped into the same inner reservoir of emergent idealism, and nurtured its expression into often radically different directions than were common at the time. These initiatives of social change may have their more visible roots in various prominent persons, but it would be incorrect to fail to notice the shared nature of a search for the right and good, as this too may be a potential that is first grasped only dimly and distantly. In contrast for at least some people, the luxury of a gradual building towards a desirable future may simply be overrun with what can often be a somewhat mysterious onset of powerfully transforming inspirations that arrive unbidden and unexpected, but are welcomed nonetheless.

The Role Of Personal Will And Commitment In Social Change

The pursuit of social changes is not just a matter of being drawn to a direction not shared by one's community. It also involves the taking of life defining decisions to contest the patterns of life around you through the way one will live or not live. Decisions of this kind can be momentous, as they *personalise* a matter that was formerly "out there" and unconnected to oneself, into how one "is" and will "be". Ideals cease at that point to

be interesting abstractions and gradually take on the nature of existential commitments. A “commitment” in this regard is not an accident at all, but rather the ultimate use of one’s freedom in defining what one will conform to, and that which one will resist.

A personal commitment is unavoidable if one is to pursue change, as the process of change is rarely credible if the exponent refuses to embody that which he or she exhorts others to embrace. Human freedom is a wondrous faculty, as it permits to each person the capacity to select a unique path for themselves amongst the many that are possible. It allows the person to say “yes” to one call and “no” to another and, in the process, alter their lives in possibly profound ways. However, it needs to be noticed that there is no movement possible within the person without the taking of decision. Obviously one can stand paralysed with anxiety at a crossroads or simply avoid the crossroads altogether. There will be no pursuing of a novel path unless one can make the decision that takes oneself along a new path.

In making a decision, the person not only moves from one existential reality *to* another, they also relinquish or abandon their former path. They *go from* a former identity in the process of going *to* a new one, and thereby yield something of themselves and their location in the universe so that this can occur. This remaking or reinvention process cannot fully occur without such a person making and staying with the new direction and identity. By persisting with the direction they have chosen, they more deeply transform themselves as they gradually surrender their former sense of themselves. For this reason, change can be evaluated quite readily from the vantage point of personal commitment. The journey down a new path will not go far if the pilgrim keeps returning to the crossroads to wonder if they have made the right choice.

Nonetheless, it is human nature to vacillate, doubt and agonize, and it is the rare person who has not experienced such moments. Often, such periods of uncertainty and indecision can play a highly useful role in clarifying the rationales for choosing one path over another, and thus lead to a mindfulness that would have been elusive if the decision had been taken without much thought. In this way, decision and commitment may not quite be captured simply by the *act* of decision or commitment, as this would not give proper weight to the much more encompassing *process* of decision and commitment that precedes and succeeds an actual decision. Truly, many people don’t just promptly make decisions, as much as they struggle to and with them. The ultimate decision may be easy to summarize, but it is rare that the process of making it is quite as cut and dried.

So it is with collections or communities of people who may be involved in making decisions about their shared lives. They too may need to come to decision, and resolve the matter of the degree of commitment that they hold to the paths they have taken. Sometimes the presentation of a crossroads may actually serve to entrench people even deeper into a decision of the past, as they strengthen their resolve to resist the enticements of a new direction. Not uncommonly, people are greatly influenced by the choices of their neighbours and peers, and may find that imitating them serves to make their decisions of direction simply a matter of agreeably following along. For some people, more oriented to an inner guide, the behaviour of others may be irrelevant and

unimportant, as they take their measure from a different source than what the majority currently prefers.

In the end, however, decision and commitment do reveal their presence, as people settle within themselves the question of what seems right to them. While personal change may begin a process of more collective shared social change, it does not assure it in the aggregate, as the interplay of human freedom can result in communities being divided along many lines originating from the inner lives of very diverse people. Often this human variability means it is difficult to reconcile the competing senses they have of what is important. Commitment is certainly needed for change and transformation to occur, yet it can also serve to set people against each other and to fracture the polity of their common lives.

The Need to Address Conviction

The making of change is clearly possible, as people are capable of decision and commitment, and can transform much of their lives if there is a sufficient willingness to do so present in them. However, the making of change is not just about the intrinsic capacity to transform, it also involves a process in people of becoming convinced that such a transformation is warranted and wise. It is often frustrating when others do not see things in the same way as we would like them to. Yet, if one looks more closely at such encounters, it is often possible to pass beyond such moments of impasse and resistance, if a way can be found to convince the person or group that one's path could usefully be theirs. If the argument or appeal fails, it can often be due to the fact that the case made was simply not persuasive enough. As such, people remain unconvinced and uncommitted.

So, while personal change may possibly be something that can be undertaken even when one is entirely opposed by the majority, social change may not so readily occur. This is because most people use their freedom to insist upon the dignity of making their own decisions. To have decisions affecting them be taken by others is to be dominated by others. On the other hand, to freely agree with the persuasions of others because they may make compelling sense, is an act of human cooperation. It does, however, require that the person involved become convinced. Their approval of a proposal for change is contingent on a case being made for a proposition that meets their standard or threshold of persuasiveness. It is for this reason that the term "negotiating" change may be useful for capturing the character of the interactions we call persuasion.

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The act of becoming convinced happens each and every day, such that we may scarcely give attention to it. Yet it is a human process of great significance. In the act of being persuaded we find that we can move from being uncertain and irresolute to clearer and decided. In coming to conclusions, we find that we must be convinced that one argument is better than another. These convictions, once embraced, often stay in place for long periods of time, and become the defining anchors of much of our sense of what is best and good. It is difficult to imagine change occurring or being initiated by people who

hold no convictions, given the many struggles that may be involved in gaining the change. Conviction sets the stage for enduring personal commitments by making it possible for these to be held with resolve in the face of much testing.

In many ways the nature of the negotiations concerning change revolves around the process of getting agreement on what might be points of practical convergence between individuals and groups arising from their convictions, interests and necessities at a given point. Conviction sits in the innermost realm of the person as an expression of how they have resolved the key questions of life. It is more fundamental than even reasoning, since convictions provide the starting point or premises for much of our reasoning, and generate the core assumptions from which we view the world.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that despite their fundamentality convictions are not immutable, and are always subject to revision if the person is persuaded otherwise. It is this capacity to revise one's opinions and convictions, and to have these shifted through the entreatments of others, that sits at the heart of the social change process. People are not "fixed" in their outlooks for all time, and can become convinced to alter their perspectives and conclusions about life. It is their convictions that are in play in the negotiating of social change, even when these are influenced unconsciously. Their pliability or immovability proceeds from the inside out depending upon what can or cannot be dislodged in the inner architecture of their minds, hearts and souls.

It is for this reason that the language of change is partially the language of the mind and reasoning, but it is also that of the heart and soul. It is no accident that we have phrases such as "a change of heart", "a new spirit" or a "fresh outlook". The perspectives we use to stare out at the world may have a great stability, but they are far from being impervious to influence from the world. It is not our purpose here to explore the specific means of influence, but rather to understand more clearly the importance of influence in shifting perspective and conviction. People may not always appear that they can be "reached", and admittedly many are remarkably stalwart in the obstinacy of their positions. Nonetheless, people are not stones, and can be moved if something were to arise that caused them to wonder whether the world might be different from the way they had come to imagine it to be.

The Prospects For Change

This exploration was begun with the observation that change may be a necessity if the sufferings and injustices of our world are to be faced and resolved. Many who languish in the brokenness of our world may often despair that such healing change is remote or unlikely. In this they are often tragically all too correct. Even where there are attempts at change, including well developed social movements, the structural and personal interests arrayed against change may repeatedly overturn all attempts to set things right. Change is not assured even when "right" is on the side of the activists, as "might" may well repel "right". Perhaps sadder, what is right may not be of particular interest to many people.

Even with such realisations that the world may be irredeemable and incorrigible, it is much too radical a conclusion to suggest that it is entirely so. We can know this because, even with one person, in the small orbits that are our obscure lives, we can witness with great regularity the many times that people have disentangled and pulled themselves back from the abyss in terms of doing wrong, and instead have undertaken their own pilgrimage to the “better”. Though the “better” they may seek and think they have found, may not be that of another, it is important to appreciate that they have indeed changed. As it is with one, so it might well be with another. Once there are even a few, there could one day be many. The change remains real, at least for these people, even if the ultimate victory they seek remains elusive.

It is therefore important to not give up on change in the face of continuing opposition based on the belief that it is hopeless. It may well be that there is no reason for the kind of optimism assured by favourable probabilities, but this does not mean that one is having no effect. Often, we do shift the world one person at a time, and none of this will occur if we start with the premise that these small shifts are pointless because they do not quickly or inexorably lead to triumph. Perhaps if we saw our goal more as changing the world by degree and increments, rather than as winning, we could take more solace in the fruitfulness of what we do achieve, rather than lament the changes that have yet to succumb to our efforts. One never really knows when the tides will change in the hearts and minds of people, and it may well be that a crucial corner may be turned even when we least expect it. It may also be true that the personal commitments, of even one person, may be just enough to make the difference.

It is also the case that the battle is lost when we let ourselves become convinced that our efforts and vision matter not. Movements for social change are easily defeated when they lack the resolve that lets them be tough minded in the face of adversity and failure. It is most certainly true that one can never gain the conviction and commitment of others if one has already given in to a sense of depression and defeat. If the convictions of the deeply unconvinced are to yield, it will necessarily be to those people whose faith and confidence remains more certain. In this we struggle not only with the convictions of others, but perhaps more with our own. If we crumble under the pressure of adversity, perhaps others will follow our example. Even in the small ways of our small lives it still matters what and whom we decide that we and the world are and can someday become.