

# PARADISE LOST, PARADISE REGAINED

*The True Meaning  
of Democracy*



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## Empowerment and the Process of Change

*Celestial light,  
Shine inward, and the mind, through all her powers,  
Irradiate; there plant eyes, all mist from thence  
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell  
Of things invisible to mortal sight.*

**A**LTHOUGH WE HAVE been made to feel powerless, in fact we are not. We discover our power once we begin to penetrate the fog of mystification that passes for truth. To get a fresh look at things as they are, we must first get past things as they appear to be.

We are living in a man-made world, yet we act as if we were subject to an alien force beyond our ken or control. We consciously hope for the best while subconsciously waiting for the worst. We fail to realize that our way of understanding and thinking about the world—our private lives, the organizations we work for, the public realm of civic responsibility—determines the degree to which we are helpless victims of circumstance or masters of our own destiny.

In our films and fiction and TV, we seem fascinated with transcending time and space, exploring new worlds in our imagination, conceiving of super-real forces that invade the world we know in ways that are mystifying and terrifying. We have a compelling interest in otherworldliness and the implicit belief that somewhere there is a thread tying us to fantastic forces. Eventually the unthinkable will occur.

### *Seeing beyond Appearances*

The fanciful speculation we allow ourselves via our cultural experiences stands in sharp contrast to the perspective we apply to our government and political life. In that realm, we assume that things will go on forever,

just as they are, an assumption that reflects not so much conviction as it does an intense wish that things stay the same. Sheldon S. Wolin describes the contradiction thusly: “The same society that enthuses over economic, technological, and scientific advances, and devours novelty in its popular culture and consumer goods, also includes an extraordinary number of citizens who, when it comes to politics and religion, passionately reject the idea that experiment or novelty is welcome.”<sup>1</sup>

However, let us assume that for many there *is* a genuine wish to bring about change for the better, change that renders our government responsive to the common will. The kind of change required can be called “transformative change.” To participate in such change calls for an attitude that takes nothing for granted.\* Yet it is most common, in our day-to-day living, to operate on the assumption that what we see at first glance is in fact real. According to Arno Gruen, “We all desperately want the appearance of things to correspond to the truth.”<sup>2</sup> This seems to have been the case throughout the history of civilization. Plato’s allegory of the cave suggests that the philosophers of his age were dealing with the same problem. What is shadow? What is reality? The method of systematic doubt formulated by Descartes, as well as the tradition of scientific thinking represented by the accomplishments of people like Galileo, Freud, and Marx, operates on the assumptions that what we see is not necessarily real and that the reality behind appearance must be discovered with the aid of historical investigation and critical thinking.

Lines from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore*—“Things are seldom what they seem, / Skim milk masquerades as cream”—echo the theme of counterfeit reality, a theme that transcends all disciplines. We are beginning to understand its application to human psychology even as we joke about it. One psychiatrist says “Good morning” to the other. The second wonders what the first meant by that.

We also understand that the physical reality we see—the table in front of us, for instance—conceals an atomic structure that we can only infer but that is real nonetheless. However, the process of learning to see through to hidden reality is a slow one. We are especially laggard in applying this kind of understanding to our personal lives and to political structures and processes, where the costs of mistaking shadow for substance are so high.

We have become accustomed to confounding myth with reality. We believe so strongly in the ideals we associate with our form of government that we have trained ourselves to ignore the discrepancy that exists between our beliefs about our government and the reality of what that government actually is. We fail to recognize that those in power have a vested interest in our not seeing the truth. “It can only be by blind-

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\* Vandana Shiva says, “In order to effect change we need to adopt a structural and transformative analysis that addresses the underlying forces that form society.” *Earth Democracy*, pp. 131–132.

ing the understanding of man,” warns Thomas Paine, “and making him believe that government is some wonderful mysterious thing, that excessive revenues are obtained.”<sup>3</sup> We have been taught that to question one’s government is to be “un-American.” Our early writers, however, were steeped in a different tradition. According to Paine, “The defects of every government and constitution, both as to principle and form must ... be as open to discussion as the defects of a law, and it is a duty which every man owes to society to point them out.”<sup>4</sup>

Americans, in particular, are victims of self-inflicted naiveté. We have nurtured the belief that everything is okay and that we can trust our leaders to work things out to our benefit. This persistent belief in a benign world, regardless of the accumulating evidence that contradicts it, has been given a name. It is called “metanoia,” which James Duffy defines as the “naïve ... faith in the innocence and benevolence of others who are actually a danger to oneself.”<sup>5</sup> Many of us suffer from metanoia. While a paranoid person will think he is in danger when he isn’t, a metanoid person will think he is safe when he isn’t. A metanoid is liable to call someone who sees hidden dangers “a paranoid conspiracy nut.” Metanoia insulates us from the disturbing reality around us and thus renders us powerless to do anything about it.

In this context, it is relevant to consider the term “American exceptionalism,” the belief that the United States occupies a special place among the nations of the world. By virtue of its national credo, historical evolution, and political and religious institutions, America is unique. It is not to be judged by the same standards that are applied to other peoples. In fact, it is not to be judged or critiqued in any way. It represents the incarnation of the highest ideal that any government can aspire to. In this light, the United States occupies a quasi-religious niche in the pantheon of gods who reign on earth. Any “true” American would no more criticize or scrutinize the United States than one would criticize God himself, or herself.

A satirical essay written by an Anti-Federalist (democrat) at the time the Constitution was being debated demonstrates that the concept of American exceptionalism goes back to the earliest days of the nation. In this piece, the author has assumed, in the first person, the voice of an oligarch who is agitating for the new government:

I believe in the infallibility, all-sufficient wisdom, and infinite goodness of the late convention; or in other words, I believe that some men are of so perfect a nature that it is absolutely impossible for them to commit errors or design villainy.... I believe that to speak, write, read, think, or hear any thing against the proposed government is damnable heresy, execrable rebellion, and high treason against the sovereign majesty of the convention.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the term “metanoia” has special relevance to understanding what makes an American an American. Americans believe unquestioningly

in the benign intentions of their government. Such a belief is a fundamental element of their ethos. Unfortunately, it prevents them from seeing accurately and acting responsibly. It is like an anesthetic to their political sensibilities.

John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State, addressing the House of Representatives on July 4, 1821, gave voice to the American ideal. He also issued a warning:

[America] has, in the lapse of nearly half a century, without a single exception, respected the independence of other nations while asserting and maintaining her own. She has abstained from interference in the concerns of others, even when conflict has been for principles to which she clings, as to the last vital drop that visits the heart. She has seen that probably for centuries to come, all the contests of that Aceldama<sup>†</sup> the European world, will be contests of inveterate power, and emerging right.

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.

She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.... She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit....

[America's] glory is not dominion, but liberty. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, Freedom, Independence, Peace. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.<sup>7</sup>

We can respect the ideal articulated by Adams. Yet we must also acknowledge that this ideal was abandoned some time ago and that Adams' worst fears about what would happen to America once she became involved in foreign wars have been realized: "She might become the dictatress of the world. She would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."

*All Quiet on the Western Front* is a novel by Erich Maria Remarque, a German veteran of World War I. The book, published in 1928, describes the German soldiers' extreme physical and mental duress during the war, and the detachment from civilian life felt by many of these soldiers upon returning home from the front. One of the characters wonders, "What would become of us if everything out there were quite clear to us?" That is the key question, the one we should all be ponder-

† "Aceldama" is a Biblical reference that means "field of blood."

ing. What would the world become if we all saw clearly? Seeing clearly, unflinchingly, that is the challenge.

If we wish to escape the harmful effects of metanoia, we must find the courage and self-discipline necessary to see clearly and critically. We must think first and then act. As Henry George said:

Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciation; by the formation of parties, or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action *will* follow.<sup>8</sup> (italics in the original)

We take action after we have studied the conditions that need to be changed and have come to understand what caused them to be the way they are. Once we understand the cause, we can consider an alternative that will produce a different outcome. Thus, thinking critically—seeing the truth at the deepest level—is empowering. It is liberating.

We must train ourselves in healthy skepticism when it comes to our government. We must train ourselves to not automatically believe in official pronouncements and reports. By no means should we assume the good intentions of those who govern. Nor should we assume that they are like us. We do not all share the same emotional makeup. There are those who have compassion for human suffering. And there are those who don't.

### *Cyclical vs. Transformative Change*

We are living through a period of rapid change at every level—social, economic, cultural, technological, political. We are left with feelings of uprootedness and insecurity, and so we superimpose a structure of permanence on a changing world, blocking out all that doesn't fit. In the process, we end up mistaking shadow for substance. Like the people in Plato's cave, we sit in a darkened room, watching shadows cast upon the wall, choosing to take those shadows for reality.

The sun rises and sets, the tides come in and go out, the seasons change. We go to sleep, wake up, spend five days a week working and two days recovering. For most us, this cyclical reversal of complementary states is what we mean when we say "change." This recurring, repetitive, cyclical change, however, when viewed within a larger context, is not change so much as sameness. It has none of the characteristics of transformative change—novelty, unpredictability, irreversibility—which are of the greatest significance in the world of human affairs. Rather, it is the background, the *basso continuo*, against which transformative change takes place.<sup>‡</sup>

<sup>‡</sup> Sheldon S. Wolin offers this contrast: "Change suggests a modification that retains a prior 'deeper' identity. Transformation implies supersession, or submergence, of an old identity and the acquisition of a new one." *Democracy Incorporated*, p. 96.

Transformative change is different from cyclical change. It is nonrepetitive and irreversible. It represents the development of something new and it occurs within a context of temporality, emerging from the flow of past events and movements, extending itself into an indeterminate future with consequences, not all of which can be foreseen. It has direction.

Transformative change in the social setting takes two different forms. When it is, or appears to be, beyond the control of the person or persons it affects, it is “natural change.” This is a process that takes place over an extended period. The transformation is gradual. It is experienced passively. Because we rarely consciously experience such change, we fail to anticipate it or understand the directing forces behind it. It seems unpredictable and uncontrollable. In the social setting, this is the change we fear most. It can come from anywhere, at any time, and it can do anything—like some of the mysterious forces depicted in science fiction. It is intransitive. It has no object and, in a sense, no subject, or at least it appears to be lacking in both.

Transformation that occurs as a consequence of forethought, foreknowledge, foresight, and initiative is, with regard to the person or persons who initiate it, “artificial change.” It takes the form of action and reaction. It is transitive. It has subject and object. It has purpose. It has direction and a degree of predictability. This is the change that permits us to take charge of our lives and the world we live in, change that enhances our sense of competency, self-worth, and inner security.

Most of the transformative change known to man, taken individually or collectively, is of the natural sort. It occurs without our understanding or our initiative. The helpless infant—lacking in language, ideas, beliefs, political preferences, the ability to hold a job and get married—over the course of time acquires all of these. The movement from city-state to nation-state, from spinning wheel to textile mill, from thirteen colonies to fifty states—these are all examples of natural transformation across broad sectors of civilization. In none of these cases were the ultimate outcomes and consequences the result of planning, foresight, or initiative, individual or collective, on the part of the party or parties involved.

We seem to be quite comfortable with such change. However, we tend to be uneasy with the prospect of artificial change, change that we bring about. We usually expect the worst from gaining foreknowledge and taking initiative, assuming, without good reason, that it is best to leave things as they are. If we meddle, matters might get worse. Such an assumption reflects an underlying pessimism and an unreasoning trust in “fate,” letting things take their “natural” course.

And yet the degree to which natural or artificial change prevails in our individual or collective lives is potentially self-determined to a much greater degree than any one of us realizes. Much of what passes for natural transformation is open to human intervention. By means of critical thinking followed by thoughtful action we can create something new that serves the common good.

*Temporality: The Future Is Real*

We miss many opportunities in life because a distorted sense of time obliterates historical perspective and truncates the future by forcing us to view it in terms of short-term cycles, mere transposition of present circumstances to a future date. We look for cyclical repetition, which we dub change, and then falsely conclude that things stay roughly the same.

Most of us like to think of ourselves as living in the present, coming from a past that is vague in its meaning though rich in emotional content and heading into a future that is structureless, remote, and ill-defined. Such a notion of time denies temporality and anchors us in an indefinite present that doesn't really exist. The present is an artifact, a contrivance, a convention we use to superimpose structure on our lives and stretch out the duration of time, perhaps insulating ourselves against thoughts of our own decline and demise. Paulo Freire observed, "As men emerge from time, discover temporality, and free themselves from 'today,' their relations with the world become impregnated with consequence."<sup>9</sup> We need to do away with the here and now. Seen from a larger perspective, it doesn't exist.

There is no "is." There is only "was" and "will be." Notice how I couldn't avoid the "is" in the last sentence. The "is" is the necessary platform from which we can look backward to what was and forward to what isn't yet. But it is a floating platform with no piers or piles to sustain it, a weightless anchor we throw overboard into the flow of time, an imaginary magic carpet, at one moment no larger than the head of a pin, at another large enough to blanket the universe.

When I say "the here and now," this very moment, what do I mean? However I define it, the here and now, like quicksilver, eludes my grasp. Is the present the moment I have the thought, "Is the present the moment I have the thought"? Is it the moment I hit the first letter of the sentence, "I"? We could go on refining the question into infinity, because the present is the infinitely small gap between the future and the past. But for convention's sake, it can be "While I am sitting at the computer," "Today," "This week," "This year," or "The next fifty years," depending on our perspective.

We live with the disturbing paradox that the part of time in which we exist disappears before our eyes. Like light-sensitive film the moment we open the box to take a look at it, the present moment loses the very properties we wanted to examine in it. That aspect of temporal reality that we can most readily examine and reflect upon—the past—is no longer with us and open to our influence. That part of reality—the future—that will have the greatest impact on our lives cannot be known with certainty. The present doesn't exist. That past cannot be acted upon. The future cannot be known. We are in a terrible predicament.

Yet, in many ways, we are what we have been. We are the accumulation of what we have lived through. We tend to appreciate this when



we think of ourselves, but when we loose our gaze upon the world, we take the world, our nation, as it is and forget where it came from. This is a mistake. For if it is true that I am what I was, it is also true that this country is what it was. Consequently, we should be treating the past with a great deal more respect than we do, and we should come to understand that to know ourselves as a people we must know our past, objectively and accurately, because that past defines who and what we are. By discarding our past and its meaning—as Americans in particular are wont to do—we are discarding ourselves and our sense of identity, our rootedness to ourselves and to each other. This is one important source of insecurity in our culture. It is not possible to deny an identity and simultaneously have one.

In a similar fashion, I am what I will be. The world is what it will be. It makes sense to pay attention to the future in a way that is creative and productive, with the understanding that the future is not a mere repetition of what is or what has been, but a coming into being of what isn't yet.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the reality we see is not “real” reality. What “is” is not what *really* is. What “is” is what is in the process of becoming. This is the sense in which the future is always with us. The future is not an unreal or arbitrary abstraction but rather a concrete attribute of things as they exist in what we call the “present.”

It is not that difficult to conceptualize the “will be” in the “is.” In fact, in a limited way, such thinking is a part of our daily living. When I say, “I am going to plant some dahlias in the backyard,” what I really mean is that I am going to bury a small woody growth in the ground that bears no resemblance at all to the lusty green leaves and coral petals I have in mind when I plant it. I am planting something that isn't yet. Likewise, one can incorporate into the “who I am now” some future goal toward which one takes initiative long before it is realized. In other words, potential is real.

Joe decides to lose weight. In order to do so, he has to become a thin person in his imagination before he becomes a thin person in reality. Otherwise, he will never lose weight. The future is in the present.

Our relation to the future is hampered by the fact that transformative change is a slow, gradual process. It happens, but we don't *see* it happening. We have to reconstruct it retroactively to see it. We see it after it happens. This is where history comes in. To initiate transformative change, on the other hand, we have to “see” it before it happens. This is where imagination comes in.

If I take a seat on a bench along the esplanade that borders the Hudson River near the 79th Street marina in New York City, I can watch the setting sun dip behind the New Jersey palisades across the way. Yet

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§ In the following paragraphs I am speaking the language of Friedrich Hegel. My understanding of Hegel's dialectics, is based on a reading of Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*.

something strange occurs. I see the sun as it hovers, already partially hidden by the cliff-top, and know that within fifteen minutes it will have completely disappeared. I give myself the assignment of “watching” its movement, the way I can watch the young boy on his bicycle as he rides across my line of vision. Without fail, the sun sets at the assigned time. Without question, it has moved from one position to another, in a relatively short period. And yet I can detect no movement. This is a lesson in humility concerning my ability to detect a change that takes place in front of me and that I have devoted myself to observing.

### *Discontinuity*

Irreversible, man-made change takes place at an even slower rate and hence is even more difficult to detect. And yet it does take place, just as surely as the sun sets. To see it, it is necessary to adopt the proper time perspective. It is necessary to make use of the analytic techniques of contrast and comparison—to engage in the discipline of historical study.

I can remember a time many years ago when, as a teenager, I could ride safely on the subways alone in almost any area of the city, day or night. I can compare that reconstructed memory to the present situation and draw some conclusions about the change that has taken place.

Thus, if our time span is long enough, we can actually see a discontinuity in development. What once was has become something quite different. This raises the issue of identity. When there is continuing transformation, over a substantial span of time, does the individual or societal element under study change into someone/something different from what he/it started as? And if someone/something different has emerged, do we need a different perspective and different concepts to make sense of this newly emergent entity?

For example, at the age of thirty, is Joe the same person he was at the age of three days? If we could look at his DNA in both instances, we would probably say yes. But on just about any other level of analysis, the person of thirty is not the same as the person of three days. Even in terms of simple appearance, if Joe had a photograph of himself at three days and asked a friend to detect the resemblance, in most cases that friend would have a tough time, so dramatically has Joe evolved from what he was then. Every cell in his body has changed many times over. Of course, at thirty, Joe can speak, walk, run in a marathon, read, write, and do arithmetic. Joe at three days could do none of those things. It is really a question of two different beings, though by convention we assign them the same identity.

Consider the United States of America. When we think of the country we are pledging allegiance to, we are probably thinking of the continental USA, a vast connecting system of highways and power lines, cityscapes, oil wells, factories, a population of more than 300 million,

an elaborate and highly structured governmental bureaucracy, a TV set in every living room.

On June 21, 1788, the United States was born, that is to say, the Constitution had been ratified by nine out of the thirteen states. The population was about 3 million, only a hundredth of what it is today. There was no President. Currency as we know it did not exist. The land mass was one-third of what it is today. There was no USA west of the Mississippi River. In 1800, Washington, D.C., became the nation's capital. The White House, which stood on a desolate bog, had no bathrooms, and water had to be carried by hand a distance of five city blocks. Are we, in the year 2012, pledging allegiance to one and the same country that came into existence in 1788? Or, once again, is it a question of convention based on social and legal necessity rather than ontological reality?

Thus, things are not what they seem. They *seem* to be fixed and unchanging, when the opposite is the case. The "present," the "is," *seems* tangible, real, and extended in time, when in fact it is so small and fleeting as to have no meaningful existence, while the future—which we relegate to some position of distant remoteness—has been alive, well, and living within the "present" all along. Thus, to find reality, we must first destroy appearances, what "obviously seems to be the case." We must begin with the negation of the given.

### *Critical Thinking*

If we are deliberately, consciously, going to undertake to change something about ourselves or the world we live in, the first step is to acknowledge that something is wrong. For some, this is the most difficult step of all. It means "being critical," making negative statements, "being judgmental." It means recognizing and accepting the fact that thought has an important "negative" role to play. Otherwise, it is not possible to advance in a self-determined way.

Negativity and critical thinking have gotten bad press in American culture. "If you can't find something good to say, don't say anything at all" is a common admonition. We have heard it since childhood. Such an attitude has become an intrinsic part of our etiquette and thought processes. We are expected to speak and think deferentially of someone else's ideas, whether we agree or not. It is considered poor manners to do otherwise. We are inundated with appeals to the power of positive thinking. What about the power of negative thinking? Learning, growth, and implementation of new ideas can only occur once we have seen what is wrong with things as they are.

It is unfortunate but true that negativity is frequently confused with "negativism." The person who looks to see what is wrong is seen as a "boat rocker," a "poor sport," a "poor loser," a "pessimist." There are indeed people who are negativistic, those who are always complain-

ing and critical in a way that is self-defeating and undermining, people whose response to negativity is passivity and retreat.

But negativity—as opposed to negativism—is a universal attribute of reality, not of people. In other words, things are wrong with us and with the world around us, whether we choose to see them or not. Thus, the true meaning of negativity involves using critical thinking to penetrate surface appearances and release inner potential. Paradoxically, the negative is more positive than the positive, because the negative holds out the possibility that there is a way to make things better.

What “is” must pass away before something new can come into being. Things cannot develop their potentialities except by perishing. This is the “destructive” aspect of the process of transformative change. Everything “is” only in the sense that the process of its becoming something else is not yet manifest. Being is continual becoming. Every state of existence has to be surpassed. The real field of knowledge is thus not the given facts about things as they are, but rather the critical evaluation of those facts as a prelude to their passing beyond their given, manifest form.

All of this can be very unsettling to contemplate. Change is everywhere. What we seek is something fixed to hold on to. And so we cling to any branch we can find as the river surges forward.

There is a law in physics that says, “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” In a sense, this applies to human beings as well. Where there is change or the possibility of change, we humans resist. We are especially resistant to change that reaches deep into the essence of our psychological and social being.

Resistance can have positive as well as negative consequences. Change that hasn’t been subject to resistance is not real change. Thus, resistance is a necessary reaction to what is new. It is both an emotional reaction against and an intellectual means of assimilating something new, integrating it into existing frameworks and setting up new ones where necessary. However, sometimes people resist adamantly, without self-examination or struggle, and refuse to budge. Such resistance is morbid and inhibits new growth. A person should be open to considering new ideas and then perhaps rejecting them after fair consideration.

Developing and implementing new ideas will be less discouraging and more successful to the degree to which the resistance factor is taken into account from the outset, recognizing that it is both human and necessary. Innovators must become skillful in helping others work through their resistance. What this means is having enough self-confidence, patience, and insight into human behavior to allow someone to differ; to help him explore and fully express the nature, meaning, and significance of this difference; and to help, through argument and persuasion, move him from one position to another.

Innovative thinking requires living with doubt, incompleteness, and uncertainty and feeling comfortable with others who do the same. Allow-

ing oneself to see past the illusion to what it conceals can be threatening, and might be especially so for someone for whom being in control is of critical importance. The psychological consequences of moving from one perceived reality to another were explored by Helen Merrell Lynd in a little-known book published more than fifty years ago.

### *Change and the Loss of Self*

Lynd's *On Shame and the Search for Identity* is a sustained discussion of what happens to a person when he sees something suddenly, for the first time, that contradicts some basic assumption he has about life. He is taken by surprise and made to seem foolish in his own eyes for being so mistaken for so long about such an important matter. He feels violated in some fundamental way. It is not so much what others might think about this deficit but what he himself thinks. "The deepest shame," says Lynd, "is not shame in the eyes of others but weakness in one's own eyes."<sup>10</sup>

Shame is not so much an emotion as it is a state of being, a state that arises without any warning when "patterns of events ... of which we are not conscious come unexpectedly into relation with those of which we are aware."<sup>11</sup> Even if one sees it coming, one cannot fend it off. Once it arrives, it is haunting and inescapable. One is left with a feeling of powerlessness. What we thought to be true about ourselves and our environment turns out to be invalid. And most importantly, our belief in our own ability to know what is true is brought into question. This is fundamentally the most threatening part of the whole process. It is not what one discovers about what one didn't know that is most troubling but what one discovers about one's own *capacity* to know. This question of our capacity to know strikes at the core of our sense of self, our identity, our psychological being.

As Lynd points out, unlike joy, sadness, or anger, shame is such an isolating experience because "there is no readily expressive language"<sup>12</sup> with which to communicate it. Going through such an experience in partnership with one or more other people who have had or are having similar experiences will help to facilitate the transition from one state to another. What is required and not easily achieved is a readjustment in one's perception of who one is, of the world one lives in. Lynd quotes Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, where the profoundly disorienting effect of shame is aptly portrayed. Anna, a proper married woman, has found that she has feelings for another man, fundamentally betraying who she thinks she is. While riding on a train from Moscow to Petersburg,

something seemed to choke her, and all objects and sounds in the wavering semi-darkness surprised her by their exaggerated proportions. She kept having doubts as to whether the train were going backwards or forwards, or were standing still altogether; was it Annuska there, sitting next her, or was it a stranger?

“What is that on the hook?—my fur shuba or an animal? And what am I doing here? Am I myself, or someone else?”<sup>13</sup>

As new reality replaces old reality, a person begins to lose his sense of connectedness to himself and to the world. He experiences a loss of identity. He is no longer at home in the world or in his own body. He loses known landmarks. His ability to trust has been undermined. He can no longer trust in himself, in his world, or in his ability to know.

This penetrating experience of shame when one begins to discover that one has been fundamentally wrong about something explains, as much as anything, the reluctance to explore an alternative reality. One had placed one’s confidence with enthusiasm in a reality that never existed. In desperation, one clings to familiar details as a source of security:

As trust in oneself and in the outer world develop together, so doubt of oneself and of the world are also intermeshed. We have relied on the assumption of one perspective ... and found a totally different one.... We have become strangers in a world where we thought we were at home.<sup>14</sup>

The overall quality of shame involves the whole life of a person, all that he is, including the parents who have created and nurtured that life.... Loss of trust, exposure, failure, the feeling of homelessness—these experiences of shame—become still more unbearable if they lead to the feeling that there is no home for anyone, anywhere.... Experience of shame may call into question, not only one’s own adequacy and the validity of the codes of one’s immediate society but the meaning of the universe itself.<sup>15</sup>

Lynd once again quotes from *Anna Karenina*. This time it is Anna’s husband whose universe has been shattered. Alexy Karenin is an aristocrat and civil servant who lives life by the spoonful. He is in control, unfeeling, unruffled. He is predictable. His life is predictable and so is everyone in it—until his wife, Anna, falls in love with another man. Karenin wants to believe that his wife has been true to him and tries to convince himself that she has. But

he could not help feeling that he was confronted with something illogical and absurd, and he did not know what to do. Karenin was face to face with life; he was confronted with the possibility that she might be in love with some other person besides himself, and that seemed quite absurd and incomprehensible to him because it was life itself. All his life he had lived and worked in official spheres, dealing with the reflection of life. And every time he had come up against life itself, he had kept aloof from it. Now he experienced a sensation such as a man might experience who, having calmly crossed a bridge over a chasm, suddenly discovers that the bridge has been demolished and that there is a yawning abyss in its place. The yawning abyss was life itself and the bridge that artificial life Karenin had been leading.<sup>16</sup>

In order to bring about change in the form of government, as individuals working alone and in small groups, we need to find the courage to experiment with our ideas. We might have to go through a mild version of the disorientation Lynd describes. Such an experience, though unsettling, is neither devastating nor debilitating. It is something like awakening from a disturbing dream.

Here is an exercise to try. It should take just a few moments. Keep track of your physical and emotional responses as you first consider the project and then actually struggle through to some kind of conclusion. I have chosen something that is difficult and unsettling to envision. That is the whole idea. It will give you an idea of what it means to let go of the fixity of things as given. Momentarily lift your eyes from this page and, in your imagination, try to construct a society with no police force and no prisons.

I can imagine that such an exercise might produce a tightening in the gut, maybe a queasy feeling, maybe a dryness in the mouth—in other words, fear. Then comes the sense that it is absolutely inconceivable and impossible to construct such a society, even in one's imagination. But bear in mind that in ancient Athens there was no police force. There were no prisons. It could be that you can come up with no solution that seems viable. Perhaps there is none in contemporary society. The attempt, however, to conceive of such a possibility should enable you to understand what it means to let go of perceived reality and to struggle to think about social change.