

Got possibilities?

This book is a guide to creative thinking in service of radical social transformation. It is a brief and practical how-to book with examples, offered in the conviction that ordinary people, working together, can begin to re-envision the world in unexpected and dramatically off-the-charts ways.

Please do not say — do not even think of saying — “I’m not creative” or “You can’t learn creativity.” If creativity can’t be learned, then why are creativity experts paid top dollar to teach corporate executives and product designers to be more creative? In fact, why are there creativity experts at all? Why can’t the rest of us learn too?

Please also do not think of saying that we can’t really change anything, that “changing the world” is only some kind of youthful fantasy. In fact the world is changing radically, right now, right under our feet. Oil is peaking. Genetically modified foods are all over the stores. More people are now overweight, worldwide, than are starving. Earth-like

planets are showing up in other solar systems. Tycoons are giving away \$30-billion fortunes. Religion is back from the margins, no longer the opiate of the people but more like some kind of intoxicant.

Alternative futures are already on the drawing boards. Corporate CEOs talk about things like “transformational products,” and it’s not all just hype. Technology magazines like *Popular Science* are beacons of optimism and inventiveness alongside the vitriol and pessimism of the political opinion magazines. The Iraq War alone is now estimated to cost at least two trillion dollars in the end. Quite apart from the advisability of that war, oughtn’t we take a moment to marvel at a society that can marshal such an immense investment in *anything*?

Once again, though: what about *us*? Where are you and I, our colleagues and neighborhoods and communities, anyone with some hope for progressive political and economic transformation? Who is insistently talking about what else might be done with even a sliver of that two trillion dollars? Where are the transformational *social* inventions? Who is going to think of them, if not us?

Yes: the first and essential challenge is to think of them. I propose that what we urgently need

right now is not the social pressure or the political power to enforce changes we already know we want. That is a recipe for more of the same: more power politics, more zero-sum battles back and forth across all-too-familiar turf. What we desperately need — first — are *ideas*: new big ideas, the next big things, ideas that can reshape or even leapfrog the familiar battles themselves. It's not a time for stock answers or old sectarian battle lines. Our most urgent need is to reawaken the radical imagination.

Case in point: enough of the human race is already on-line that any of us can be in direct contact with ordinary people in Iraq and South Africa and Nunavit and nearly anywhere else in the world. Why abandon the Web to pornography and on-line shopping? We could create a *truly* “new world order”, starting right now, out of virtual person-to-person dialogue around the globe. Let web-savvy kids run the forums, translate, instigate: it's their future. Who says that all possible political systems have already been invented?

What about a world with radically less work? What about moving beyond alternative cars, and even beyond alternative forms of transportation, to an alternative *world* in which transportation itself is much less necessary? What about massive new

student exchange programs instead of sending so many young people abroad armed and in uniform? What about rebuilding New Orleans as a floating city, or putting only “extreme” surfers in the path of hurricanes? *Now* we’re on to something ...

Please don’t say (a third request — I know I am asking a lot) that all of this is too audacious, too bold for an age of caution and retreat. For sheer audacity there’s not much to top what’s happening right now. The Bush Administration’s signature projects, just for example: assertively embracing sole superpowerdom; fostering a Western-style democracy in the heart of the Arab world; radically remaking the “business environment.” Among other lessons, we need to learn that there is no lack either of boldness or of immense resources in this moment. What we lack are better ideas, a different sense of direction, something quite beyond the all-too-familiar misadventures. It’s still the turn of the Millennium, for God’s sake, and the question is still what we are going to do with it.

Good energies are already at work. In my own city, a group is working on creating the infrastructure for sustainable agriculture on the county level. Public canning facilities for home gardeners, cow-share programs, Earth festivals. “Re-localize Now!”

A twenty-something former philosophy student is organizing a clearinghouse and open space for forms of learning that don't look like schools at all. A colleague is designing housing for elder visionaries, at once reclaiming a traditional social role and, of all things, re-imagining retirement communities.

Maybe we are beginning to open the door to a freer imagination. Sometimes I think I see it among citizens' groups, in schools and universities, even in politics. Even with the best of intentions, though, it is easy for imaginative work to get thoroughly stuck, and certainly not to get as thoroughly *unstuck* as it might and must. Goodwill and enthusiasm alone do not free us from the usual political and philosophical assumptions — often unconscious. Brainstorms tend to circle back into the usual complaining. The ideas that emerge are often only predictable variations on the familiar. Activists get impatient with all the thinking; they think they already know what is to be done. The doctrinaire mistrust brainstorming on principle: if you already have the answer, what's the point of multiplying options?

So we need help. Creatively and thoroughly re-imagining the world takes specific techniques, shared, known and embraced by all, deliberately

and explicitly put to use — even and perhaps especially among activists and the most committed. We need specific ways to make fluid what usually seems to be fixed, better ways to remold it into new and as yet unimagined shapes. You will find them here.

This book does not go into the nitty-gritty of organizing. It offers little strategic advice. It sketches a multitude of examples, but they are mostly forward-looking possibilities not yet actual. The title means what it says: this is a book in service of *vision*; imagination itself in service of changing the world; imagination off the scale, radically suggestive, provocative and fertile. Only a beginning, then — but imagination *is* where it all begins.

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