

How to Change the World

Disgust about the status quo is not the place to start

By Marjorie Kelly

I've been thinking lately about utopias, both societal and personal: those little dreams we harbor about where we'd like to be heading, the pictures we carry in our individual and collective heads of the greener pastures we'd like to find. Whatever it is we're striving for, it always seems just over the horizon—if only we could get there, life would be so wonderful. Yes, life will be grand when we can beach up on No Troubles Atoll, as my friend James used to say. I've always thought of such mental images as healthy guides to growth and change, but lately I've begun to wonder if maybe they're not. I've been thinking, in particular, of historian Isaiah Berlin's observation that the pursuit of utopia is not only impractical but downright dangerous.

A recent collection of essays by Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Knopf, 1991), is devoted in large part to analyzing why revolutions fail. In these essays, Berlin shows quite vividly that the belief in utopia, and the historical attempts to bring it about, have had only one real effect: to vastly increase human misery. His point is not the familiar one, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could reach utopia, too bad we can't." No, Berlin's observation is more disturbing than that. In historical and concrete terms, he shows that the *attempt* to reach a perfect state is itself damaging to human happiness and progress. He offers a warning we might heed anytime we find ourselves cheating the present in pursuit of some hoped-for future. Berlin writes:

"Utopias have their value—nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities—but as guides to conduct they can prove literally fatal...."

"The possibility of a final solution—even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler's day—turns out to be an illusion; and a very dangerous one. For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever—what could be too high a price to pay for that?"

The observation works not only on a cultural level but on a personal level as well, because a society striving for utopia is just like an individual striving for perfection. I think, for example, of businesspeople trying to get rich so they can some-

day be happy—neglecting their families and their health in the present, for that perfect future they may or may not ever reach. I think too of those who throw away bruised relationships in pursuit of some mythical ideal partnership—only to find that all relationships hold disappointments.

The point is not only that perfection is an unattainable goal. It's the wrong goal. Instead we should strive for aliveness: to really taste the wine, both the bitter and the sweet, fully present in the moment. And it's not that we should neglect the future. Far from it. I believe that aliveness requires a passionate quest for what we can become, but also an affectionate acceptance of what we are.

Next to this altogether human, altogether alive state, perfection is a pale cousin. To be perfect is to be without flaw, without error. But the only way to avoid error is to choke off the spontaneous flow of life, to check each movement before it is made, to shrink one's field of action to what can be entirely controlled.

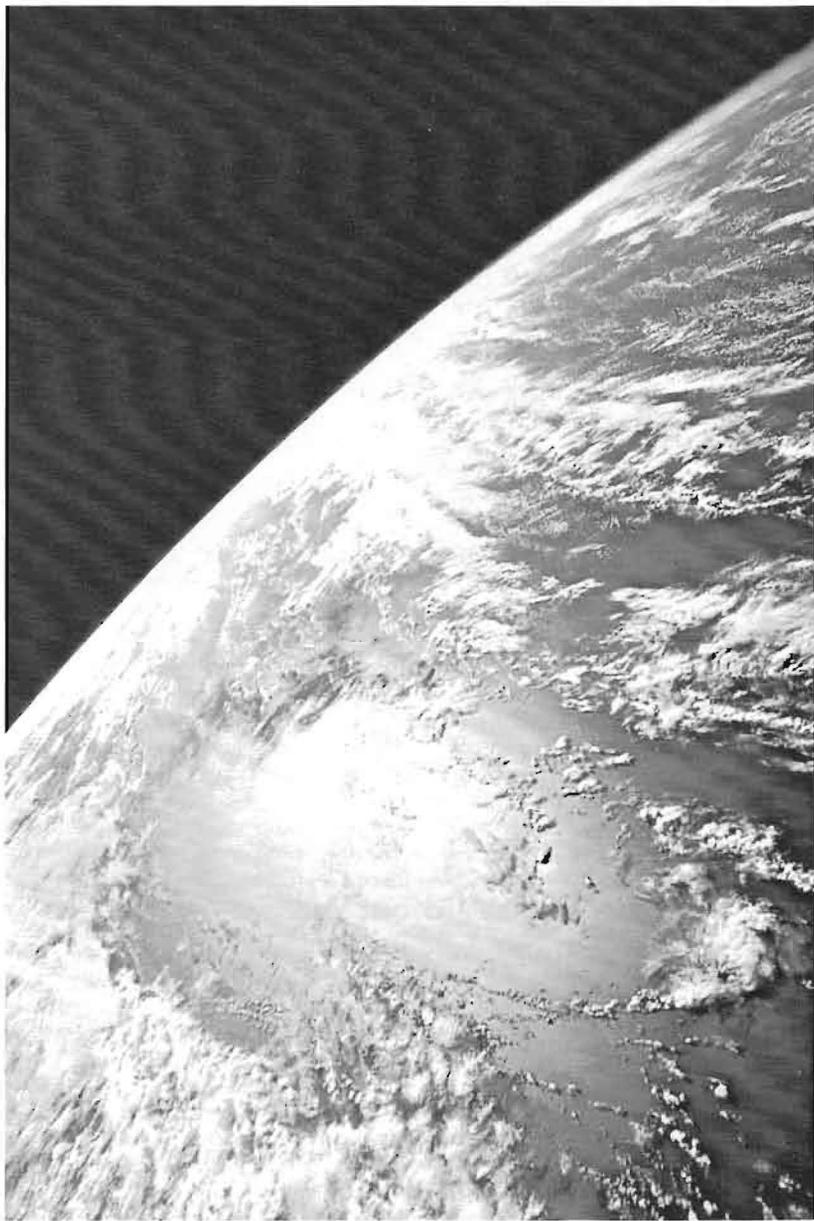
So, you might ask, what does all this have to do with "How To Change the World"? It seems to me we harbor illusions about the nature of change. And the first of these illusions is that the object is to eliminate all injustice and every mistake—whether in our society, our businesses, or ourselves. I would say instead that the goal is to *accommodate* mistakes: to expect them, and to deal with them in a healthy way.

The problem is, if we think we should be perfect, we try to believe that we are perfect, and we stop seeing our very real weaknesses. That in itself is a danger. A culture blind to its own shortcomings is likely to envision "evil empires" lurking across the sea. A manager unable to admit mistakes can become a blunt and unforgiving critic of employees. An individual seeking perfection can become harsh and judgmental toward those who are "lesser."

As Isaiah Berlin observed, even the attempt to be perfect is dangerous. By trying to erase what we hate about ourselves, we end up projecting it onto others: seeing our unacknowledged shadow-side out there in the world and loathing it.

The drive toward perfection stems, I believe, from self-loathing—from an inability to accept ourselves as anything less than the ultimate. But the drive toward aliveness comes from self-acceptance,

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from openness to and curiosity about all that we are, including our vices.

In this spirit, I would argue that it is ineffective to work for social change by starting with loathing and disgust about the way things are. Yet I am struck by how often my colleagues in change-making assume that an attitude of outrage is the only morally acceptable stance today. We might ask ourselves: Do we really want to change the world, or do we simply want to howl about how bad things are?

I am thinking, for example, of the recent article in *Mother Jones* (March/April 1991) entitled "Greenwash," which mocked and ridiculed companies for their environmental advertisements. How dare corporations claim to be environmentally progressive, it said, when everyone knows they still pollute. The tone was shaming and belittling—and not likely to promote change in any effective way. If anything, such attacks will encourage businesspeople to throw up their hands and say, no matter what we do it's never enough, so why bother.

How then should we work for change? This magazine really is my model of the answer:

First, celebrate rather than criticize. We should applaud the fact business has taken one step forward, rather than bemoan the fact it hasn't taken six steps.

Second, hold a vision of what is possible. Outrage may launch our efforts, but it cannot guide them. Only a vision of the possible can guide us.

Third, welcome everyone, and don't check IDs at the door. It's not productive to fret about some bad-guy corporation using ethics or environmentalism "as a cover." If a company considers it important to be seen as progressive, that's wonderful. The company's own pronouncements will serve as pressure to make sure actions follow. And their

advertisements will up the ante for other corporations, making responsibility the norm in business.

I do believe that progress is possible, and I believe it is happening in our time. I may not hold much faith in utopia, but I do have faith in the sturdy, stubborn movement of life toward greater unity and expanded knowledge. And I have a similar faith that life will always be flawed.

I remember, for example, how hard my friend Kim struggled when she was in her early thirties, back in school to finish a bachelor's and planning to work straight through on her master's—and I remember how that goal seemed to her light years away, and the dream of all dreams. She finally did fulfill it. And I visited her maybe a year later, after she had landed a good job, bought a house, and settled in with a new partner. Before I had a chance to ask her, What did it feel like, having all your dreams come true?—I found what seemed to be the answer, in a quote by Gertrude Stein taped to Kim's bathroom mirror: "When you get there," it said, "there's no there there." ✕

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