

Extracts from: Brian Murphy, forthcoming. *Transforming ourselves, transforming the world*, Daraja Press, Quebec.

Padkos comment: This is an important big book that addresses how to change the world in a powerfully holistic way. Our selections below connect just a few parts of the overall book with our current focus in this padkos season. There's much more to the book, and we urge you all to read it when it's available from Daraja Press later this year!

Extracts:

This book addresses the fundamental question of change. It defines human beings as possibilities, in process — the process of becoming, of development, of change. The future for human society could be a brutal, miserable existence, as many currently predict, but it could just as well be a creative, open and humane existence. The future is not determined; it is influenced by what we do now in our various communities, in our various countries, and in common cause internationally — by the possibilities we envision and the actions we take to make our visions reality.

This book is a proposition: a proposal for how individual people, and people in groups, can form a conspiracy — an open and public conspiracy — to begin to change the present and influence the future in a positive progressive direction; in fact, to influence the evolution of human society, and human beings themselves. When I use the word ‘conspiracy’ in this way, the first reaction is often confused, since people are used to conspiracy being a negative idea — implying secret, subversive, even treasonous behaviour. I am proposing that we re-appropriate this word, and the very act of conspiring together, and transform it into a positive and transcendent form of social and political action.

Secret? No. This is a conspiracy that is open, and defiant, and celebratory! Subversive? Yes. This would be a conspiracy that is publicly and explicitly subversive of everything in society — systems, institutions and structures — that erodes humanity and individual dignity, and exploits people as though they were machines”

[The book] presents action as the practice and maintenance of health — of being physically and spiritually whole and sane and alive — and explores why it is reasonable and worth it to act, even when individual acts may seem on the surface to have insignificant effect.

‘I will act, because it is sane, and healthy, and human to do so. We will act together, because it is sane, and healthy, and human, and more effective to do so.’ This affirmation is the beginning of open conspiracy.

I believe that the private and personal realm is where community starts, and where struggle begins. This is the realm of our lives as activists to which we devote the least time, but it affects us the most. It is imperative that we begin to share some of this experience, the *personal* of the political — this monologue that we never get an opportunity to share in an environment of trust and solidarity. And if we were serious about our work, we had to stop making ‘the poor’ the object of it, and engage with people as mutual subjects of our own lives and history. It is from this resolve that this book has emerged. Its underlying assumption is that human beings are creative agents capable of forming our own future and destiny. We can *choose to change*, and act on this choice to create the world we want.

Our constant crisis as activists is the danger of becoming ‘burnt-out’, of losing energy and the will to act: conscious in our intellect, but so immersed in our own reality that we cannot act; so alienated from our sisters and brothers that we cannot speak; so oppressed by what is that we can no longer hope for what could be. We internalize the human condition rather than externalize our own vision. We see our significance not in who we are and what we do, but from what is, and from what effect we produce on what is. And we are burnt-out, we are resigned, we have despaired. To confront this inertia we need to assert in practice ideas that contradict the irrational in today’s society, to initiate new modes of human expression and new perceptions of human potential. And we need to do so not because such initiatives will bring utopia, but because inaction is insane and suicidal. We choose not to ‘escape our freedom’ but, rather, to *practise* freedom; this very act is the essence of humanness.

The Dilemma of Action and the Psychology of Inertia

How can a society initiate and promote a change process that represents the very antithesis of the prevailing ethos of that society, and its complex of social structures, norms, institutions and culture? Where do we start? [In the face of how difficult it is, and how common failure can appear to be, a very common response is hopelessness. Instead Murphy proposes the following framing approach:]

‘I am dissatisfied with the world and my relation with it; how do I act to become satisfied?’ This is a more powerful and useful formulation. It is self-centred, focusing on self rather than on some objective — and overwhelming — fault with the world. This shift in the way the problem is perceived is significant because it contains an implicit premise: *all action is ‘selfish’, directed towards achieving or maintaining health*. By health I mean the state of an organism in which all its aspects are fully integrated and functioning at their individual and collective potential. The organism — an entity more than the collection of its aspects — is whole and functioning in an optimal manner (the word ‘health’ originally meant ‘well’ or ‘whole’), in that its capacity for interaction with its world is actualized and practised. In this context the problem can now be posed: ‘The world is unhealthy, and I am unhealthy with/in it. How do I act to achieve health, and to maintain it?’ The factors that prevent my becoming an agent of change lie in my psychology as well as in my society.

[Many activists will recognise the pattern that action against the irrationality of society gets labelled as being] ‘antisocial’, ‘strident’, ‘radical’, ‘anarchistic’, ‘unbalanced’, ‘deviant’ — indeed, ‘insane’. Our need for material security, for acceptance, for tranquillity, for ‘belonging’, temper and subvert our need for authenticity and rationality. The person who asserts her vision and rationality against the irrational norm almost inevitably finds herself alone, and alone in a painful, almost unendurable way: an alien without the support of the group and without structures and norms to provide guidance, security and nurturance.

Such alienation is pathological, just as the suppression of authentic self for identity within one’s group is pathological. We are left with a painful dilemma, a double-bind: denial of self in order to maintain security of identity, and protection against alienation from the social grouping; or denial of social grouping for the existential integrity of self, and protection against alienation from personal value and vision. Both choices are alienating, pathological, anti-human, and ‘death-dealing’. Neither choice can be tolerated in health.

Political revolution is often put forward as the antithesis of conformity, as the radical response. But in politics, as in physics, one revolution usually brings you back to your starting point; movement through 360 degrees leaves you standing still. Trading places with the slaver does not do away with slavery. Political revolution (or its promotion) based on ideological doctrine is, ironically, fundamentally dependent upon conformity. Individuality and authenticity are again repressed.

Extrinsic modes of behaviour and thought are adopted, this time based not on the prevailing sociopolitical structure but on a counter-doctrine, still extrinsic, dogmatic and absolute. This doctrine provides the necessary focus for motivation and reinforcement. Adherents are nurtured through commonality of cause and action with fellow doctrinaires. Action is programmed by the dictates of the ideology and its catechists, and activism is reduced to a militant response to the authority of doctrine. The primary value is dedication to the cause and to its code. This response, once adopted, is relatively easy to follow, because the code is clear — all contradiction, all ambiguity, all doubt, is removed. Freedom of thought and act has been escaped, although the illusion of freedom remains. There is ego-gratification, in that harmony is established between belief and action; identity is provided through doctrinaire solidarity; sense of significance is strengthened by the role of the protagonist against the evil of society.

During the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period, this response has its own perverse viability, and contains within it sustaining balance. Health is an individual phenomenon, and the ideologue solves the problem of health by recanting individuality — his own and that of others. In a very real sense the individual no longer exists; only the doctrine exists, and the individual is its tool — not as an entity, but as a function of doctrine (without exception, all existing formal ideologies, and religions, contain rigorous and explicit sanctions against individualism, personalism, ‘selfishness’ and non-conformity, in spite of incidental rhetoric to the contrary). Health, in the sense we have discussed it, is no longer a problem. This is tantamount to curing a headache by blowing out your brains.

In the post-revolutionary phase, there is no distinction between this response and that of conformity except, to some extent, for the small clique who are the leaders and who become the new regime. There is still, for the vast majority, repression, alienation, unhealth and conformity to an imposed ideology. It is critical to explore the validity of the radical ideological response to societal irrationality and unhealth, because, for those of us who cannot or will not conform to prevailing ‘truths’, there is an almost irresistible tendency to establish (or adopt), and forcefully promote, countervailing ‘truths’. We have been socialized to expect and to need order and identifiable, incontrovertible truth about reality and its workings.

[So] the source of social evil ... is the notion of Truth itself. ... [D]ogma and doctrine in themselves ... rob us of our freedom to think and act. [Therefore transcending inertia requires that we] accept the inherent ambiguity of human existence.

Ideological radicalism ... appears [as] the only tangible response to societal irrationality and institutionalized injustice is the forceful imposition of their antithesis, a new sociopolitical order. This meets our need for rebellion, a code and a cause. It provides an avenue for the expression of anger and pain, and antipathy to the prevailing social order. But ..., once codified and set in motion, [it] is a sociopolitical cul-de-sac, containing in itself all of the root social evils of the prevailing order.

Humanist Radicalism [is another] potential response. To begin with, this approach [borrowing from Erich Fromm] can be characterized by the motto: *de omnibus dubitandum*, everything must be doubted, particularly the ideological concepts which are virtually shared by everybody and have consequently assumed the role of indubitable commonsensical axioms. To ‘doubt’ in this sense does not imply a psychological state of inability to arrive at decisions or convictions ... but the readiness and capacity for critical questioning of all assumptions and institutions which have become idols under the name of common sense, logic, and what is supposed to be ‘natural’.

Later in this essay, Fromm continues: Radical doubt is dialectical in as much as it comprehends the process of unfolding of opposites and aims at a new synthesis which negates and affirms. Radical doubt is a process; a process of liberation from idolatrous thinking; a widening of awareness, of imaginative creative vision of our possibilities and options. The radical approach does not occur in a vacuum. It does not start from nothing, but it starts from the roots, and the root, as Marx once said, is man. But to say 'the root is man' is not meant in a positivistic, descriptive sense. When we speak of man we speak of him not as a thing but as a process; we speak of his potential for developing all his powers; those for greater intensity of being, greater harmony, greater love, greater awareness. We also speak of man with a potential to be corrupted, of his power to act being transformed into the passion for power over others, of his love of life degenerating into the passion to destroy life.

Radical humanists do have in common an approach which begins with the root of 'humanness' and aims at fuller humanness; they also have in common a commitment to critical investigation, authentic consciousness, and radical intervention in reality in a rebellion against prevailing inhumanity, injustice and irrationality.

How does the approach of humanist radicalism respond to the dilemmas of action and the psychology of inertia...?

The primary values in humanist radicalism are individual freedom, growth and health. Its one tenet is that freedom, growth and health for every human person are both possible and essential. Its ethic is that this individuality, characterized by these qualities, can flower only in a milieu of dialogue and mutuality.

Humanist radicalism recognizes the essential 'self'-centred quality of all action, and recognizes that the struggle for vision is the struggle for health. The humanist radical vision is a vision of and for self, but it includes all humanity. It considers as unacceptable the fact that some are free while others are slaves. It is based on the understanding that personal health is not remote from the health of others, and that it is only in sharing with others the perpetual struggle for freedom and growth and health that we remain free, continue to grow, and move towards fuller health.

Humanist radicalism is conspiracy. The word 'conspiracy' comes from Latin words that mean 'to breathe together', and combines the notion of mutuality of life with the image of hope. It is dedication to dialogue and mutuality, to shared vision, decision and action, because that is healthy and effective. To impose is to negate the human; to accept, dialogue, assert, accommodate, assimilate, share, is to actualize and affirm humanness. Humanist radicalism is open conspiracy: vision publicly professed, and asserted in action, a mutual celebration of human awareness, creativity, love and will, in a mutual endeavour to achieve the highest degree of integration of human faculties — emotional, physical, intellectual, and artistic — in creating new human feasibilities.

How do we move from dilemma, despair and inertia to active humanist radicalism? What is required of us is a personal affirmation. This affirmation does not deny nor exclude our dilemmas and our psychology; rather, it is an affirmation that is transitional, moving us from the state of despair and paralysis. And while it does not remove the sense of powerlessness, this affirmation makes powerlessness less oppressive and pervasive.

The personal affirmation required is an affirmation of self, and of vision: I am so convinced that leaving social evolution to chance will lead to chaos, perpetuation of human misery, and the destruction of all things I consider remotely 'human,' that I have no choice but to act personally on and with my society, regardless of my underlying fear that the essential transformations may never be achieved.

If, as human beings, we do not try, we may continue to live, but our humanness will wither and die. If we do try, we may fail, but at least it will be an individually and humanly meaningful failure; we will be striving for our own possibility; we will be ‘in process’, which is what humanness is. This affirmation makes the limits of personal power less relevant, by reducing our concern for ultimate effects and focusing on the need for self-affirmation and positive social action.

[W]e need to accept that our significance is not tied to what humankind eventually does, or becomes. Rather, our significance is bound up in what we, as unique individuals, do as ‘possibilities in process’ striving to actualize personal potential and the human possibility. Our significance is in the process of being and doing, of being whole and sharing our wholeness with others — a process that never ends. It is the practice of health.

We will always be prone to despair, and inactivity, and impotence if we gain our identity and ego-strength from ends rather than means... The constant crisis of the activist is the danger of becoming ‘burnt-out’, of losing energy and the will to act. ... We need to identify with a process, and gain our self-worth from who we are as agents, not from the products of our agency; from who we are as subjects, not from the objects we name. If we can maintain this perspective, we will be able to act, to ‘risk a movement without being sure if movement would be better or worse in a hundred years or a thousand’.

When, as individuals, we see a glimmer of hope in this approach... , our attention needs immediately to turn to nurturance, to support, to dialogue... We need to find allies. At the risk of being simplistic, we must start talking to others. Within one mile of each of us at this moment there is at least one person who shares our concerns and perceptions and dilemmas; there are probably many more. We need to find him, her, them.

Part II of this book explores human beings and human society as open-ended ‘possibilities in process’, and provides an analysis of the essential qualities and capacities that embody our potential to transcend the conditions of our lives, and change the world.

[The] emphasis on the free individual as the preeminent unit and basis of society is a controversial assertion that is challenged by those communalists of all stripes — cultural, religious, nationalist and ideological, and from both the Left and the Right — who insist that humanist individualism is a perversion of natural laws and human nature, and a danger to society and the nation. Some will even insist that this notion is culturally imperialist, or bourgeois, a subversive idea from the decadent West. This is nonsense. Humanism is neither a Western nor a modern idea; on the contrary, it is universal and as old as human thought, and has constantly been repressed as a threat to the prevailing order.

The potential of humans is typified by doubt, and question — not by certainty.

[T]hose individuals who have most dramatically resisted this repression and fomented substantive change have begun by doubting, by questioning, by challenging and eventually confronting the established conventional truths. This tradition of resistance against tyranny, whether it is based in race, or gender, or class, or religion — indeed, it is usually based on all of these equally — continues today.

The primary drive of human individuals is not survival of the species, is not survival of the group, is not even survival of the physical self. Rather, our primary drive is the survival and development of the personal self as reflected in self-concept and world-view, and this drive includes, of necessity, the survival and development of our world as we perceive it must be for us to interact in an integral manner consistent with our self-concept. The human individual is a visionary whose primary drive is to live his or her vision. Our reality is in the realm of vision; our action is in the realm of realizing or maintaining our vision. And all these are inescapably individual in essence. Our individual vision is all we know. It is our being, and our reason to be. ... The course of human history has been driven by individual and collective visions of a better world, and the ongoing struggle to turn vision into reality.

[W]e have a tendency to see the individual and society as a dichotomy in which a choice must be made: either the individual, or society — as though ‘society’ was an entity apart from the individuals who comprise it. Given history, and the tension between our ego and identity needs, this is not at all surprising. Ultimately, however, there can be no dichotomy. To function successfully, individuals and society must be a unity. A society in which one subordinates or negates the other is a malfunctioning organism.

[from the] Conclusion

Unless we act from the basis of individual health, we cannot create a new and truly human world. This is a hard lesson, and those faced with the barbaric inhumanity of repressive regimes and soulless corporations may feel that it is a reactionary one, removed from the hard necessities of the ‘material reality’ of economic and political relations. I understand this view, but I cannot accede to it.

The choice is ours, and only ours, and the decision we make is a decision for all humankind — it is a decision to work to ensure that others have the choice that is now our agony and our joy; to ensure that others have the choice to participate in life as well as death, in celebration as well as mourning; to ensure that others may share in the creation of the future of humanity, whether it be dusk or a new dawn. And above all that decision is, and can only be, a solitary, individual decision: to live, to choose, to act: ‘to walk with the others/ And in the end — with time and luck — to dance.’