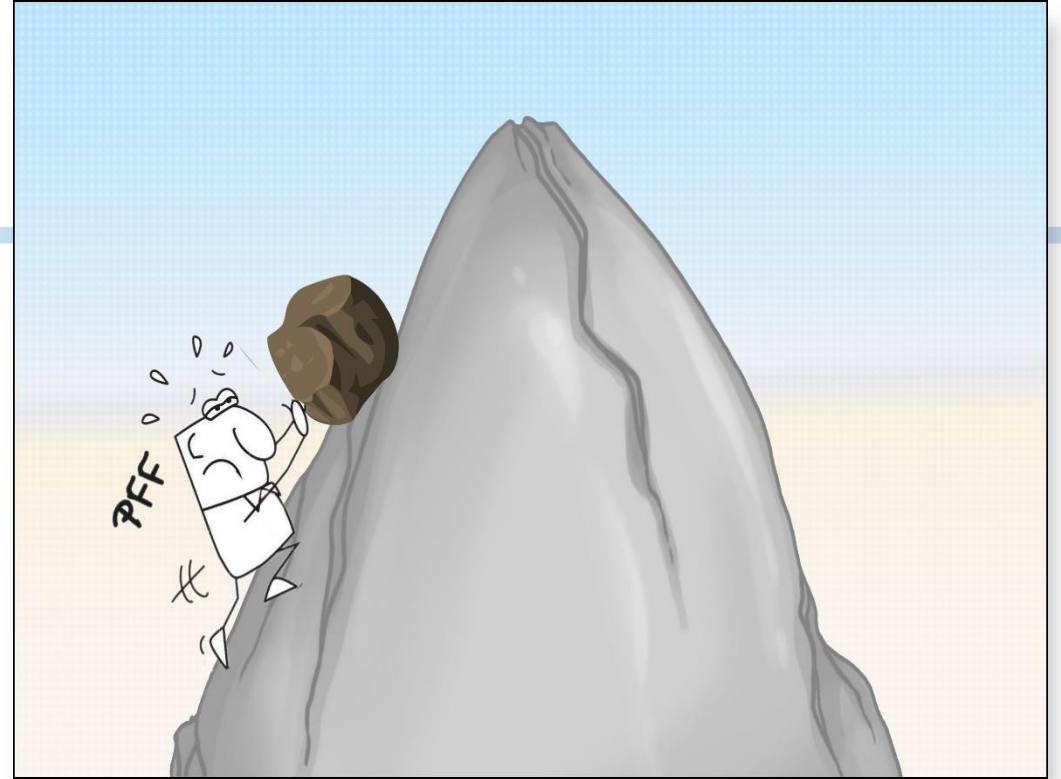


Beyond Sisyphus:

Redesigning
Social Change Systems
to Create a Healthy,
Humane World

Version 3.0
September 2022



CREATING THE FUTURE
Change the Questions, Change the World!

What you'll find in this deck:

At Creating the Future, we are in the inquiry stage of a project to re-imagine the structures that social change organizations rely upon to do their work – ranging from human resources and accounting to funding and governance, and everything in between.

This deck is where we are gathering the results of that inquiry. It is a place for theoretical exploration, for thinking out loud, for synthesizing all that thinking into a cohesive logic that will eventually guide our actions – a “green paper” where we can think things through together. As such, it is a work in progress, an ongoing draft.

We hope you will share your thoughts with us.

And we hope you will be part of this effort, to ensure the work done INSIDE social change groups reflects the healthy, equitable, humane future we want to see IN THE WORLD.

Please share your thoughts at <https://creatingthefuture.org/contact-us/>

Creating the Future extends deep gratitude to the following publications for sharing what we are learning from this inquiry:

Nonprofit Quarterly:

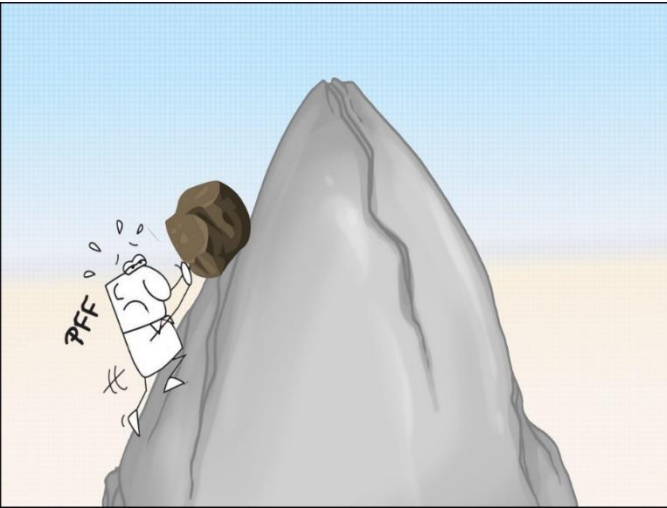
[How Nonprofits Can Truly Advance Change](#)



Community-Centric Fundraising:

[The Fact-Based Fallacy of Accountability to Donors](#)

The Story of Sisyphus



In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by the gods, forced to roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll down when it reached the top, over and over, for all eternity.

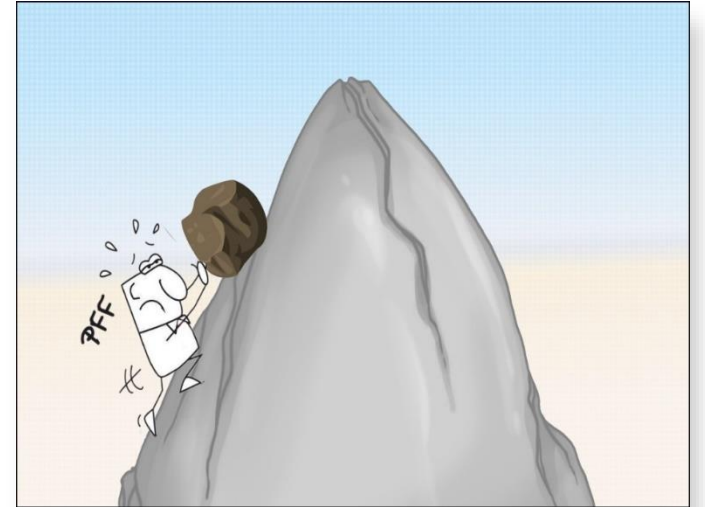


Do you ever feel like Sisyphus in your work to create a more humane world?

Do you ever feel stuck, frustrated -
like the struggle to

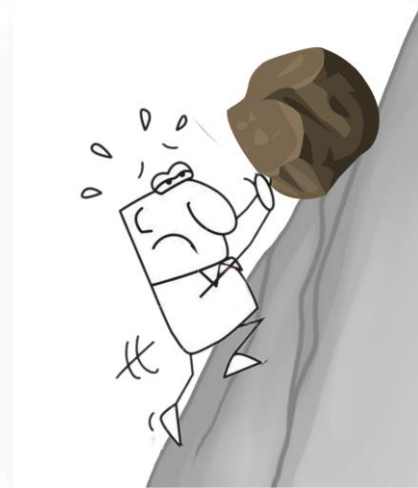
- ➡ raise money...
- ➡ stay competitive...
- ➡ do more with less...

...is just as hard, if not harder, than
the real work of your mission?



With the health and humanity of our planet increasingly at risk, changemakers shouldn't have to ALSO battle the systems intended to sustain their work.

- ***Funding***
- ***Planning and Evaluation***
- ***Leadership and Equity***
- ***Community Engagement***
- ***and all the rest***



Creating the Future is in the inquiry stage
on a project to design systems
that smooth the way for
social change efforts to
create the future they want to see.





Here's what we're finding...



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The Struggle

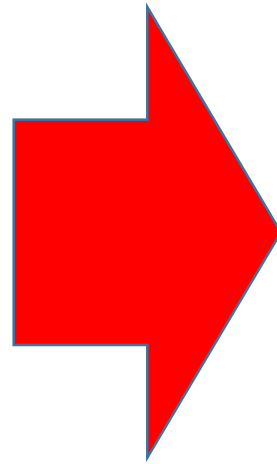
The frustration facing social change organizations is palpable. That frustration is felt by folks doing work on the ground in communities, whether in traditional nonprofits or social enterprises. It is felt by foundation leaders and philanthropists, by academics teaching social enterprise and nonprofit management, by consultants and capacity builders.

In our experience, when everyone within a system is frustrated, the problem is not individual people or organizations...

The problem is systemic.

The Analysis

**To create a world
that is equitable,
humane, healthy...**



The systems we use
to create that world
would themselves
reflect equity,
relationship, trust,
enoughness, and
possibility.



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Unfortunately, that isn't the norm for the systems that guide and support social change efforts.



For example...



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Resourcing / Funding Systems would demonstrate...

- Power centered in community members & the people doing the work
- Equity, relationship and trust
- Sharing resources. “We” together. Enoughness.
- Valuing “in-kind” as a gift of sharing and relationship
- Donors & funders would leverage their relationships and expertise to ensure adequate resources for what communities need (aka fundraising)



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Inequitable power dynamics center power in whoever has money
- “He who has the gold makes the rules”
- Scarcity
- Hunger Games-esque competition for the means to survive
- Fear of offending donors leads to avoiding seminal issues
- In-kind contributions valued only for decreasing the need for cash
- Each org must gain expertise in fundraising, in addition to their mission knowledge.



Organizational Structure would demonstrate...

- Power centered in the people most closely affected by any decision
- Networked relationships resembling natural ecosystems & communities
- Boards (where required) as support to the people doing the actual work
- Porous organizational “walls” for open flow of ideas, people and resources.
- Centering community sustainability & thriving



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Top-down command and control (military origins) that maintains power & privilege
- Boards at the top, pretending to lead
- Organization is “in here.” Community is “out there” (e.g. going “*out to the community.*” e.g. Rich Harwood’s encouragement to “*turn outward*”)
- Centering the organization itself as an entity that must be sustained & thrive



Evaluation & Learning would demonstrate...

- Learning what works and sharing that broadly across whole fields, to move together towards what is possible (future focus)
- Seeing programs as a means to learning what works vs. programs as ends unto themselves
- Emphasis on relationship and stories, as those are primary way humans learn.



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Little value placed on learning (e.g. lack of consistent funding for evaluation)
- Evaluation as compliance, to justify past performance
- Emphasis on learning as individual organizations (vs. whole fields), leads to hoarding information
- Metrics / numbers (quantitative) valued over stories (qualitative); “hard” evidence over “soft” (*i.e. human-centered*) evidence



Planning & Decision-making would demonstrate...

- Planning that centers the community affected. Everyone co-planning / co-deciding together. “Confluence” of interest.
- Plans and decisions reflecting the values changemakers want to see in the world
- Future-focused, aimed at dramatic, visionary, community-focused results
- Mindful of privilege, patriarchy, colonialism, racism in the planning process itself.
- Embracing the whole interconnected context, including all possible futures.



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Planning that centers the organization, routinely excluding community members and line staff (seen as having “conflict” of interest)
- Organizational and community values eclipsed by what can be easily funded
- Incremental plans, reacting to problems and intervening vs. creating the future we DO want
- Assuming that social change groups are naturally creates equity blind spots
- Funding cycle mindsets (e.g. What can we take on in the next 2 years?) lead to myopic plans



Leadership would demonstrate...

- Shared leadership and power, within organizations, and between people in organizations and people in community
- Leadership succession focused on vision, values, and continuity of the benefit received by the community
- Centering people from affected communities as leaders of their own change (race, ethnicity, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, other factors)
- Active pipelines for developing leaders within affected communities
- Equity in all its facets and dimensions



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Power held closely within certain positions of the organization, modeled after the business world (i.e. “C Suite” leadership)
- Succession replacing one individual with another vs. a time for rethinking leadership needs for ensuring continuity of mission
- “Natural” org life cycles assume that bureaucratic management skills will replace visionary, values-based, start-up leadership.
- Organizational leaders overwhelmingly from the dominant culture, often lamenting “We can’t find any qualified __” (i.e. *no pipeline*)
- Government & nonprofit leaders given more credence on issues than community leaders



Communication & Engagement would demonstrate...

- “Engagement” as collective strength towards community-generated goals. Centering what we can all accomplish together.
- Openly sharing resources and knowledge
- Connection, Relationship, Inclusion, Equity, Alliance and Trust
- Finding common ground as allies
- Communication as two-way



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Marketing mandate to differentiate from other orgs
- Assumptions re: competition limit trust and sharing
- Relationship-building seen as a function of fundraising, favoring those of financial means over “regular people”
- Relationships with organizations doing similar work are competitive, working at best as “friendly competitors”
- Communication as one-way “outreach”



Accounting & Accountability would demonstrate...

- Primary accountability is to the people served by the org's work. Stewardship programs aim primarily at that accountability.
- Accounting processes & tools center ends (reports re: community impact), and only then focus on means (reports re: money)
- Ongoing board, staff and community conversations dedicated to determining how to assess and report impact.
- Organizations valued by the reach and depth of their results & relationships (vs. their budget)



Current Systems demonstrate...

- Primary accountability and stewardship to donors and funders
- Accounting processes center money, period. (accounting for means vs. ends)
- Valuing metrics leads to *counting what is easy to count* – pounds of food, numbers of people served – vs. real change in people's lives
- “Fiduciary” is to the organization's survival, not the community thriving. Organizations are value by the size of their budget.
- Capitalist view of many board members, that programs should “pay for themselves,” eschewing programs that are “subsidized” by the organization's budget.



Program Design would demonstrate...

- Programs centering self-determination and self-empowerment of community members, building on community strengths
- Organizational staff serving as facilitators of co-designed, strength-based, community-based programs. Program design would be developed by community members, adding content expertise from the organization as needed.



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Current Systems demonstrate...

- Program emphasis on “doing for” people assumes communities are “weak and in need of fixing,” perpetuating dependency, ensuring orgs are needed in perpetuity.
- Programs center organizational staff, often excluding affected community members from that discussion entirely, perpetuating the influences of colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy.
- Business memes of “fail fast” and “prototyping” that make sense in developing software are now encouraged for designing programs that impact people’s lives.



HR & Compensation would demonstrate...

- HR would focus on creating conditions that bring out the best in people.
- Compensation would align with the value of the work to the organization and to the community vs. “market value.”



Current Systems demonstrate...

- HR views people as risks to be managed / potential liabilities, with a focus on discipline and remedies. HR centers and protects the organization, not the people working in that organization.
- Compensation based on “market value,” in an economic system that values money over people, systemically devaluing the “caring work” of social change groups.



When those with money make the rules about who gets to create what kinds of change, and planning for that change is reactive and incremental...

When learning is hoarded, accounting emphasizes dollars over impact, HR sees people as risks to be managed, compensation is rooted in “the market,” and communication emphasizes differentiation vs. finding common ground...

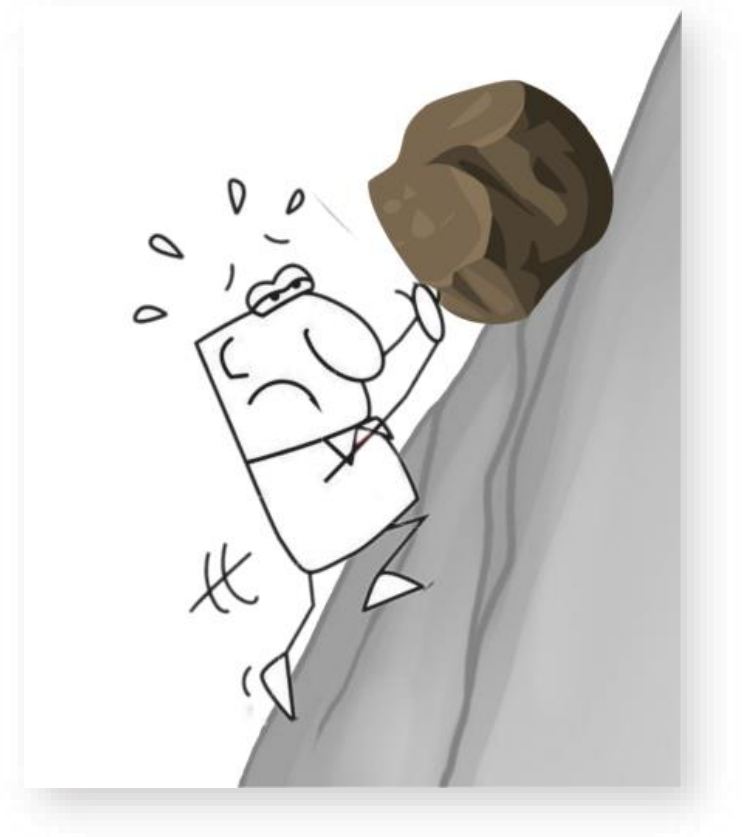
When organizations adopt top-down, command-and-control leadership and power structures, with a handful of primarily dominant-culture individuals making decisions and plans that affect everyone inside and outside the organization’s “walls” ...



When the tools and systems used by social change groups are adopted and adapted from the very institutions (business, military, etc.) that have caused many of the problems in the first place ...



...the social change ecosystem is
actually modeling and
perpetuating
the very conditions
it is seeking to change.



What Has Been Tried



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There have been many efforts
over several decades,
intended to address the frustrations
social change groups face...



Efforts tried to date have included...



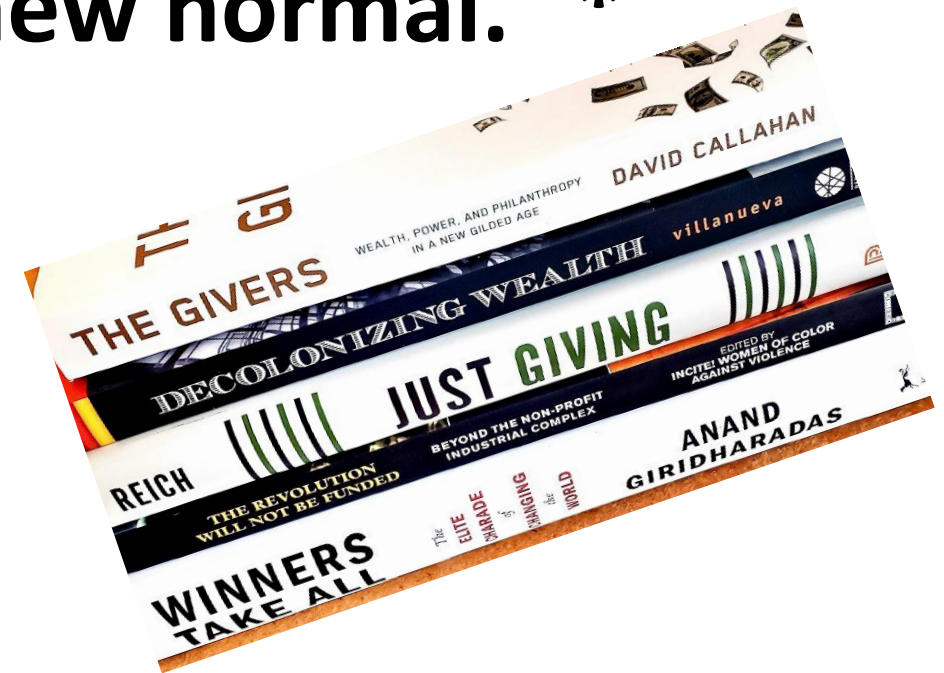
... and many more



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New initiatives to infuse more Diversity, Equity & Inclusion are being launched across the whole social change arena, along with efforts to reinvent philanthropy and governance, all foreseeing the coming of a “new normal.” *

* Deborah Elizabeth Finn has assembled a [running list of articles and books](#) about the current “revolution” in philanthropy. As of December 29, 2019, the list contained over 100 articles and books.



And evidence of widespread changemaker frustration is strong

- ❖ Dan Pallotta's TED talk, "***The way we think about charity is dead wrong,***" has over **5 million views** *
- ❖ Vu Le's "***Nonprofit AF***" blog, critiquing the daily realities of nonprofit life, has over **40,000 subscribers**. His Facebook group "Nonprofit Happy Hour" has over **50,000 members**. *

* As of August 2022



Why Reforms Have Not Worked



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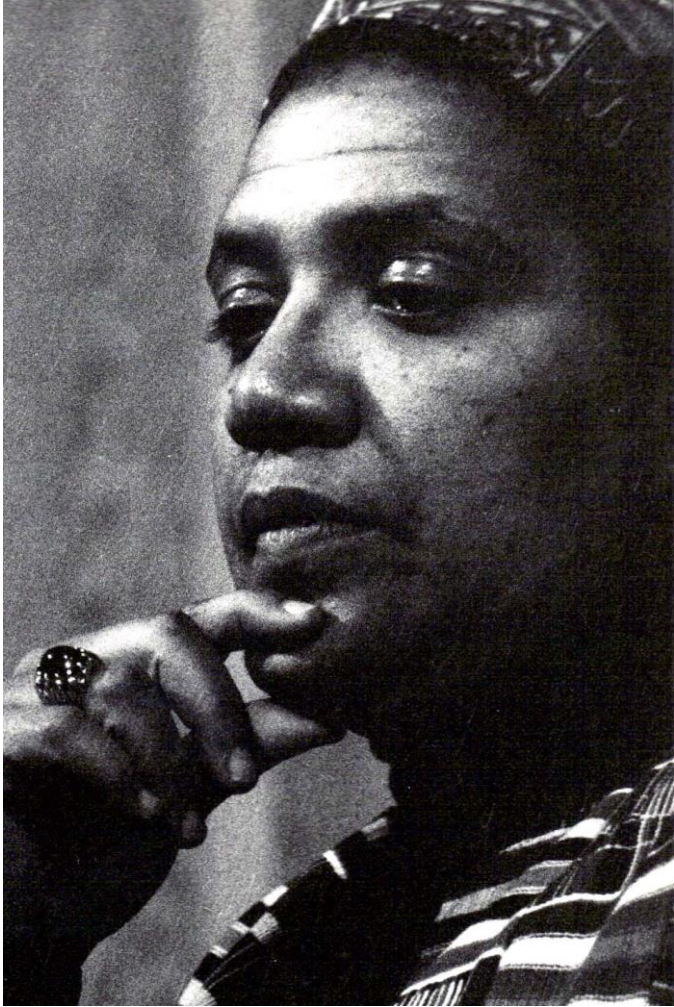
Why Reforms Have Not Worked:

Reason #1: Origins in Power & Privilege

The tools and approaches that support social change were not built to create long term, systemic, societal change. They were adapted instead from business, church charity / industrialist charity, the military. **Approaches rooted in power and privilege cannot dismantle power and privilege – cannot create equity.**

Given what is at stake, social good efforts deserve supports that are intentionally designed for the purpose of creating systemic societal change.





" The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

~ *Audre Lorde*



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When the questions, assumptions, and approaches that support an effort are at odds with the results that effort is intended to create, the results are guaranteed to disappoint.



Dr. Steven Kerr* described this conflict between means and ends as
“The Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B.”

Why Reforms Have Not Worked:

Reason #2: Organizations at the Center

The assumption that organizations are the unit of primary importance, rather than the people in our communities. This again stems from the origins of “charity,” when that care was the realm of individual churches and private philanthropists. Each of those efforts was owned by its founding philanthropist or religious order, just as modern-day programs are owned by a nonprofit, a social entrepreneur, a church, or a government department. That translates into *legal* fiduciary duties of care and loyalty—NOT to the community, but to the organization.



Why Reforms Have Not Worked:

Reason #3: Reform is, by definition, reactive

Reform efforts are, by definition, incremental, reactive attempts to reduce or eliminate symptoms. Interventions to fix what we do NOT like cannot create the world we DO want.

By narrowly defining the problem as (for example) “funding” or “governance,” we also fail to consider the interdependent effects of each of those functions upon each other, and upon the whole of the social change ecosystem.

One key to creating change, therefore, will be to see these functions as one interconnected system, rather than reacting to each function independently.



The conflict between means and ends has led to...

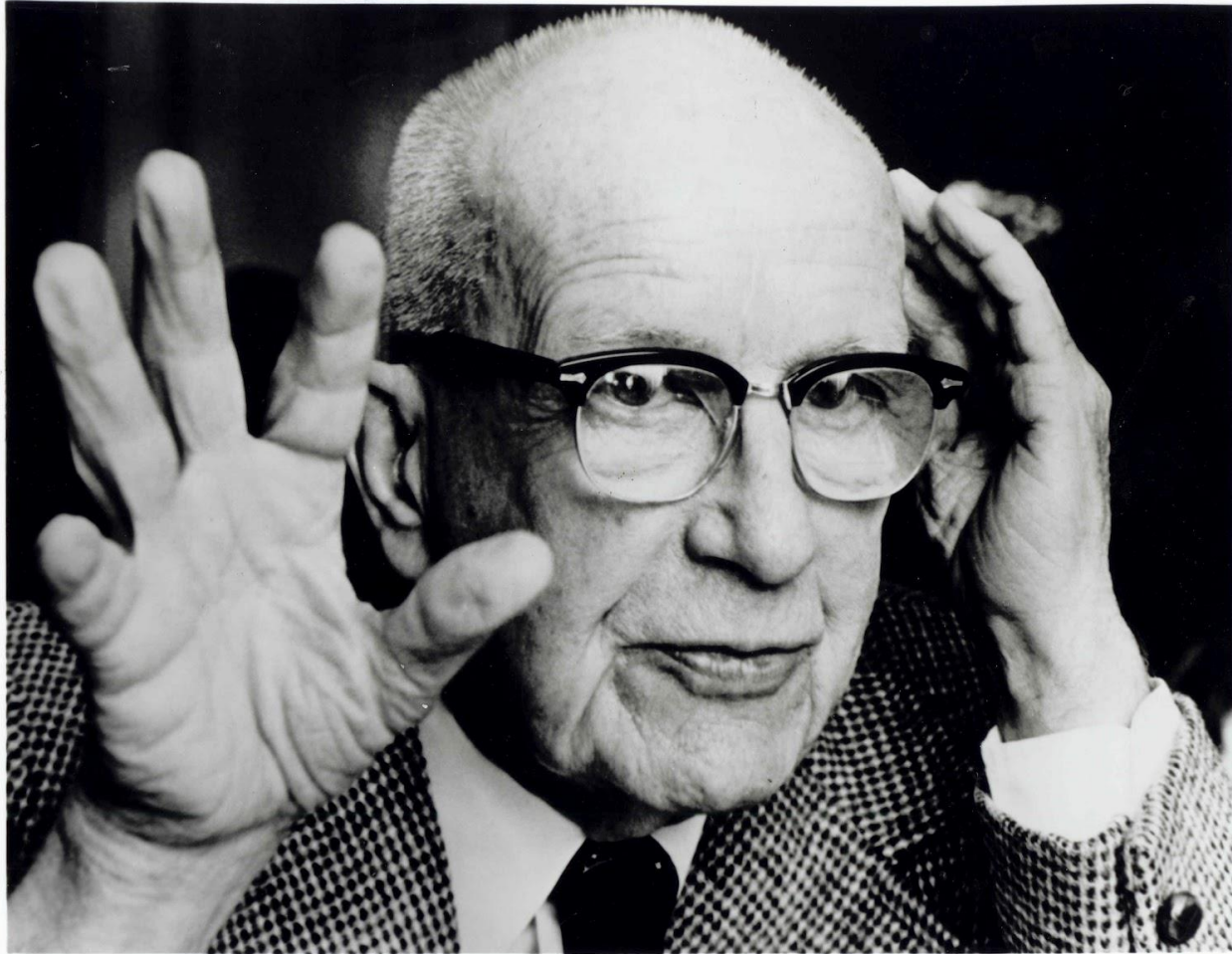
- ✓ Perpetuation and normalizing of systems rooted in colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy within social change organizations themselves
- ✓ Assumptions that change is hard, slow, incremental, leading to futility, frustration, burnout
- ✓ Wages that devalue the importance of the work being done (more frustration and burnout)
- ✓ Growth of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex – a market that thrives on the ineffectiveness caused when means are misaligned with ends
- ✓ The proliferation of social change orgs fighting each other for money, and the underutilization of ALL resources – people, time, money
- ✓ All of which puts a cap on the amount of real change that is possible



What WILL Work



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"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

- *Buckminster Fuller*



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What WILL work:

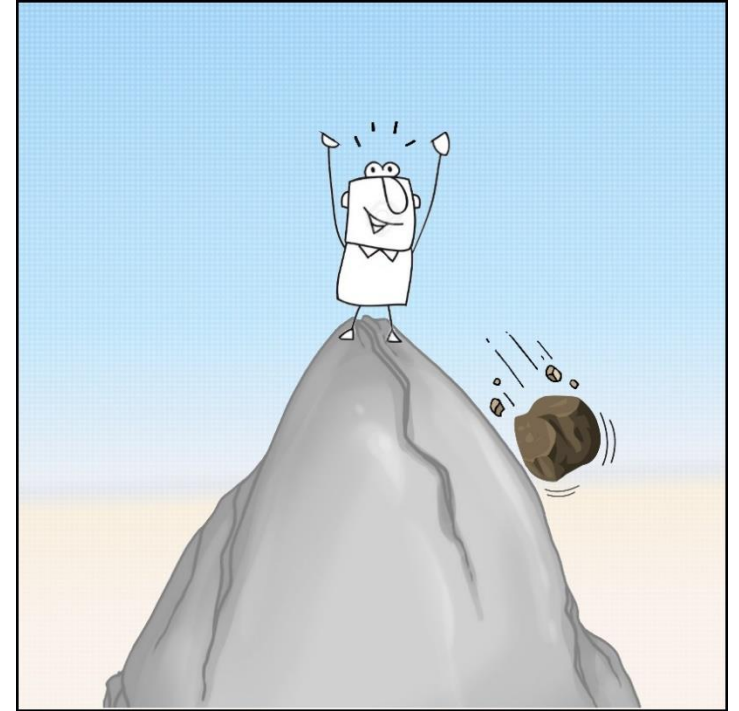


- 1) **Thinking:** Align the questions and assumptions that support social change work with the values of the equitable, healthy, humane world we want to see.
- 2) **Actions:** Re-imagine *each and every social change support system* to align with that thinking. Create the social change ecosystem we DO want vs. reacting to the individual aspects we do NOT want.



This will require asking questions like...

- Who will be affected by any effort to re-design social change systems? What would it take for them to determine what actions are taken (vs. taking actions on their behalf)?
- What would GOOD look like for each and every system that social good organizations rely upon – the individual structures AND the system as a whole?
- What supports would reflect the desired end results of social change, creating that future by BEING it, in every way possible?



Those questions are at the heart of
Catalytic Thinking –
a framework for bringing out the best
in any situation,
through the questions we ask.




With Catalytic Thinking guiding all our
work at **Creating the Future**,
we are excited to explore and experiment,
to reimagine
the interconnected systems
that currently support
the social change ecosystem.



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Who we are


Creating the Future's Vision:

 A healthy, humane, equitable world that works for everyone.*

Creating the Future's Mission:

Catalyze systems change by showing people how to re-imagine and re-create systems via the questions they ask (Catalytic Thinking).

Creating the Future's Work to Accomplish the Mission:

- 
- a) Experiment: Apply Catalytic Thinking to existing systems, to demonstrate that re-imagining the systems we all encounter is possible
 - b) Educate: Share what we learn about how systems change happens

* The phrase “*a world that works for everyone*” is most often attributed to Buckminster Fuller

To date, our work has included* ...

2012 – 2022

Intention:

What we committed to accomplish

Demonstrate that Catalytic Thinking works to help groups and individuals reach their potential, and teach others to use that framework for their own systems change work

How:

Experimenting

Creating the Future's teams experimented with our own organizational systems (open engagement, board work) and external organizational systems (demonstration projects)

How:

Sharing what we learn

To share what we learned in those experiments, Creating the Future has developed and taught classes, provided keynote speeches, written for industry and mainstream publications, and taken any opportunity to share what we are learning.



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* For details about our accomplishments, head to
<https://creatingthefuture.org/990-funding-and-annual-reports/>

What We Propose:

In this inquiry stage, we will continue to engage groups and individuals in conversation about these issues, to determine what approaches will create the most impact.

Staying true to our values, our community members will guide any decisions about what actions to take. That is one of the many reasons we want your thoughts in reading this draft.



Whatever actions we take, here is what is certain...

- **The ultimate goal** will be to ensure that ALL the systems and structures used to support social change exemplify the humane, healthy, equitable future we want to see.
- Per Creating the Future's **core values**, Catalytic Thinking will guide our work, and both our planning and the work itself will be done **openly**, as is all our strategy work.
- We will build upon our experience as a **place for experimenting**, creating and holding the space for those who wish to experiment with alternative support systems, and to provide **Catalytic Thinking** as a support for those experiments. Importantly, we will not seek to reinvent what others are doing, but to act as a support to those efforts.
- We will continue to **advocate** for change within the social change arena – in our writing, speaking, networking, and all our communications.

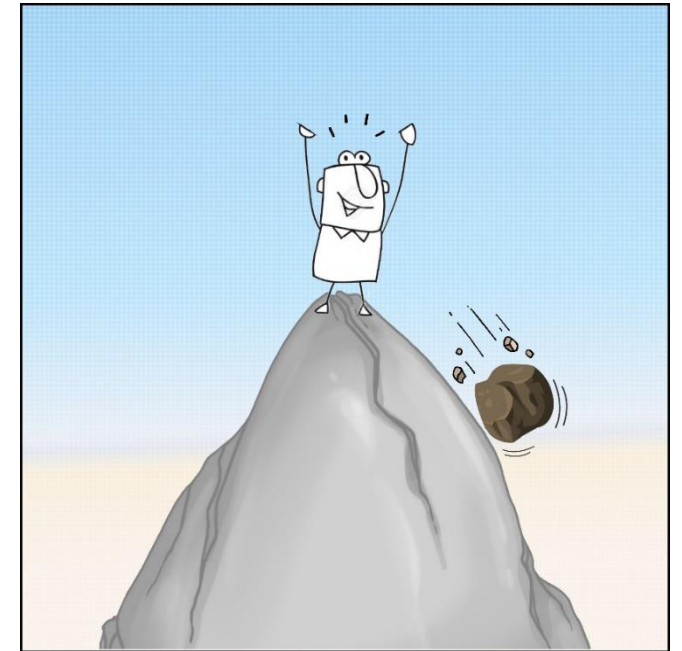


Here is just some of what we envision...

- ❖ **Resourcing** that walks the talk of cooperation, sharing, trust, and equity.
- ❖ **Organizational structure** that reflects an ecosystem vs. military command.
- ❖ **Evaluation** as shared learning, to enhance results across entire fields of endeavor.
- ❖ **Planning** that is systems-focused, vision-focused, community-focused.
- ❖ **Leadership** that is radically inclusive, equitable, shares power - towards the goal that both organizations and communities are highly participatory and engaged.
- ❖ **Communication & engagement** that includes vs. differentiates, seeking out voices that are often ignored, where openly inviting participation is simply how we be.
- ❖ **Accounting / accountability** aimed first at accountability to the community for end results, only secondarily on means (including but not limited to money).
- ❖ **Program design** rooted in deep community engagement, where people in community contribute their wisdom to guide the design of the programs.
- ❖ **HR & Compensation** that values people and aims to bring out the best in their potential, honoring the importance of the work they are doing.
- ❖ **ALL as one interdependent, interconnected system of support for social change**

Aligning social change support systems with the ends we want to see will allow people to experience...

- Less frustration and burnout, more joy and ease
- More connection, relationship, trust among changemakers doing similar work, between organizations and people funding their work; and especially between organizations and the communities they serve
- More resources of all kinds (not just cash), with more sharing of those resources - more cooperation
- **Most importantly, more progress towards the equitable, healthy, humane world we all sense is possible.**



*It is time for all of us
to build THAT
together*



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“Let’s begin our journey not with the question, ‘What do we have now, and how can we make it better?’ Instead, let’s ask, ‘What can we imagine for ourselves and the world?’ If we do that, then boundless possibilities of a more just world await us.”

*~ Mariame Kaba
Author, We Do This ‘Til We Free Us*



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Creating the Future extends deep gratitude to the following individuals, whose thinking has contributed to this inquiry so far.

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We are also deeply grateful to the folks at Community-Centric Fundraising and Nonprofit Quarterly, for sharing the insights we’ve assembled here.

Nonprofit Quarterly: [How Nonprofits Can Truly Advance Change](#)
Community-Centric Fundraising: [The Fact-Based Fallacy of Accountability to Donors](#)

Please share your thoughts!

Please share your thoughts and experiences with us around this topic.

And if you think of folks who might add to this inquiry, please introduce us!

<https://creatingthefuture.org/contact-us/>

Thank you!



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