

## Society's Breakthrough! Overview

*All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.*

Arthur Schopenhauer

*W*hat is fundamentally the most significant problem we face as a society? For a number of years I have been asking this question and have appreciated the deep conversations that quickly develop. People believe we have become materialistic, alienated from one another, disempowered, depersonalized, and caught up in making a living—diminished in some way. Concern is expressed about the unfair distribution of wealth, the loss of community and citizen involvement, the impending collapse of the environment, our increasing bureaucracy, and the general lack of good sense in our collective actions. All of the comments suggest a breakdown in our underlying system—the way we have structured and organized ourselves economically, politically, and socially.

### *Society's Breakthrough!*

This book explains why this breakdown is occurring and proposes a specific remedy—a capital “B” Breakthrough. It shows how we can subtly adjust the system to help us make a giant leap forward on all these issues simultaneously.

That’s what a Breakthrough is—a simple change that makes a huge difference. True Breakthroughs challenge the paradigm of our times, the set of assumptions that circumscribe our lives. Even if no outward risk can be found, a Breakthrough is felt to be threatening until the paradigm shifts. Once that happens, the idea seems like common sense, only it’s a new common sense.

### **Limits to Our Current System**

To illustrate how one little change might transform many difficult, seemingly impossible-to-solve issues, consider the old story of the three blind men who encounter an elephant. One finds a leg and says that an elephant is like a tree. Another approaches from behind, touches the tail and says that an elephant is very much like a rope. The third comes to the front of the elephant, and feeling its trunk, says an elephant is like a snake.

Pretend for a minute that the elephant is restless, causing problems for each of the men. The tree-like legs are stepping all over the vegetables in the garden; the rope-like tail is whipping the blind man in the face; and the snake-like trunk is destroying a nearby bush. Not understanding the whole system, each man then works hard to solve his particular problem. One tries to turn the tree-legs into posts, heaping dirt around them. Another attempts to cut off the rope-tail. The third squirts poison at the snake-trunk to protect himself. The elephant, of course, doesn’t benefit from these actions, nor do the other men.

Generally, this is how we approach societal problems—as though they are separate and as though we can use methods of control to fix them. But a Breakthrough allows us to see the whole elephant and

respond intelligently. With this seeing, we might place some food nearby to motivate the elephant to move to a more advantageous location for all concerned. On its own, then, the elephant itself will eliminate the separate, individually confounding issues.

However, such a simple appearing “whole system” answer might be resisted by the blind men. Even though each may care deeply about the problem he addresses and wants it solved, the narrowness of his perspective may cause him to believe the new solution is irrelevant and resist it. What value could there be, they might all exclaim, in placing a pile of hay nearby? After all, each is an expert in his field of study and all agree there is no value to this new idea.

*Society's Breakthrough!* suggests that we can address our societal problems through this kind of simple action by looking at the whole elephant. The particular Breakthrough suggested here arose from my work leading four-day seminars on *Dynamic Facilitation Skills*, teaching participants how to help groups address issues creatively and collaboratively. In the seminars, participants form small groups and take turns facilitating the others. Each facilitator helps his or her group choose difficult issues, like inadequate healthcare, racism, or improving education, and then helps people stay creative in addressing them. The facilitator doesn't participate in this conversation and isn't concerned about *what* the group ultimately decides. Instead, the facilitator manages *how* the group talks. He or she assures that everyone is heard and respected and that the process is creative.

*Over the years, as groups have wrestled with these different problems, their many insights have flagged one ultimate cause: our system.*

At first, I was embarrassed by this convergence. It seemed that no matter what issue the groups worked on, they eventually had the same perception—that our system is causing the problem. I thought maybe something was wrong with how I was teaching. But as more groups reached this conclusion the point sank in as being true.

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Our system should facilitate us to become all we can be. It should help us make collective decisions that are wise, that work for everyone—for all species and for the planet. Currently, our system relies on competition to do this. It encourages us to excel by outperforming others, and that through this game-like process, collective decisions will be made that are best for everyone.

In the realm of politics, for instance, we have majority rule, or even plurality rule. It is a battle of pre-formed ideas and candidates with set positions. This does not set up a forum for looking deeply into issues to understand them and to determine what is best for all. Rather, it encourages candidates to seek enough votes to get their way or, failing that, to aim for compromise solutions that are “good enough.” This approach guarantees arguments, shallow discussions, and a disenfranchised minority.

In economics, we also rely on competition. Our capitalist system assumes a level playing field where the best can rise to the top. It assumes that the market will generate investment, production, and distribution decisions that benefit everyone.

But times have changed. Our system no longer works as well as it once did. We are not the collection of independent farmers, fishermen, and craftspeople we once were, and for which our system was designed. And we no longer live and work in a world of infinite resources.

A competitive, game-like system assumes independent players and doesn't work if we are *interdependent*. That is, the more we resemble one organism, one elephant, the less we benefit from competition. When competition predominates within an organism, like between the heart and lungs for blood, then the organism dies.

The focus of this book is to describe a simple adjustment to our system, without really changing it, that would facilitate us out of this dependence on competition. It would help us individually and collectively to become more conscious, more trusting and better at thinking through issues.

## **Our System**

What is our system? Where did it come from? How did it gain control?

The answer to these questions came to me as an epiphany in one of the small groups of my seminars: The U.S. Constitution is our system. It is probably the greatest social innovation in history, having sparked a shift away from tyranny toward liberty and justice for most of the world's people. But it is also the primary cause for society's big problems.

At the time, I didn't know how this could be, or see anything particularly wrong with the Constitution. But the insight pushed me to look at it deeply. How could the U.S. Constitution, for instance, have anything to do with today's international terrorist threats or with the environmental crisis?

I discovered a problem, not with the design of the Constitution, but with how this design has supplanted the functioning of We the People. No design can be left in charge of itself and us forever. The problem is that because of the Constitution, you and I have abdicated our responsibility for the system we are in. We face big problems, but there is no "we" to address them.

The question for me then became: Is there a way, with one amendment to the Constitution, for We the People to reassert control over our system? Is there a way that we might come together and seek what is best for all, rather than automatically relying on self-interested competition? And can we do this with little or no risk?

Yes! We can. There is a simple answer to this "elephantal" question that I call the "Citizens Amendment to the U.S. Constitution." Enacting it would transform how we think and act, both individually and collectively. It is like placing hay near the elephant, a win/win strategy for solving most of the really big problems in society.

### **The Nature of a Breakthrough**

Once I “got” that the Amendment would work, I thought people would listen excitedly when I described it to them. I flew to Washington D.C. half expecting someone in power to say, “Great idea! I wonder why we didn’t think of that before. We’ll get to work on it right away.” That didn’t happen.

The normal response to a Breakthrough is not excitement over new possibilities, but rapid dismissal. It is seen to be irrelevant and concerns predominate the subsequent discussion. But these concerns are not with the idea itself, that it poses some risk, for instance. The concerns are that the immense benefits which are claimed might not be so large, or that the idea might be difficult to implement. And even when these minor concerns are readily addressed, it’s still as though a fatal flaw has been found.

It is natural for people to respond to a Breakthrough critically at first. Such an idea requires some kind of inner shift for people to “get” it. A friend experienced this shift in a dream. She had been reading this book and making notes that reflected her concerns and questions. That night she had a dream where she saw herself asleep for a long time. Then she rose and joined people in the streets, feeling joy at being alive. After the dream, her concerns and questions melted away, as she found herself excited about the idea, wondering why others she talked with didn’t see its merit as she did.

One example of a societal Breakthrough has helped me understand how this shift works. In Europe during the 1840’s, childbed fever was killing as many as one-third of all women who delivered babies in hospitals. At that time, doctors would go straight from examining cadavers in the morgue to the delivery room, wiping their hands on their smocks. Dr. Ignatz Semmelweis had been working on this problem for many years and discovered that the deaths could be eliminated if doctors simply washed their hands in a disinfectant solution before touching pregnant women. After testing

his hypothesis and proving it worked, he published the data and waited for the new practice to be embraced.

But important doctors had proclaimed authoritatively that childbed fever was the result of bad air, bad blood, sin, diets, moods, and other causes. Respect for authority was at issue here, and Dr. Semmelweis was a country bumpkin compared to these distinguished doctors. For them to wash their hands in chlorinated lime every time they touched a patient would have undermined their authority and threatened their relationship with patients. Even though Dr. Semmelweis could demonstrate that his idea worked to save lives and he presented the confirming data, it threatened the authority-based paradigm of those times. Emotional resistance prevailed.

These doctors resisted Dr. Semmelweis's Breakthrough, even though it meant losing patient lives, and possibly even the lives of close relatives, because acting on the idea meant challenging the basis of existing society. It meant seeing an elephant that wasn't supposed to be there. For the medical establishment to begin acting on Dr. Semmelweis's discovery, Dr. Louis Pasteur needed to first demonstrate that germs carried disease, and Joseph Lister needed to show how antiseptics could kill them. Only after disease could be visualized in this way did the imperative of washing hands become obvious, the new common sense. Once the elephant was seen, many other cures far beyond childbed fever could also be discovered, like reducing the 90 percent death rate from amputations, protecting against infections in general, and aiding with maladies such as food poisoning and syphilis.

### **The Citizens Amendment**

The U.S. Constitution was a societal Breakthrough in its time. It established a new and revolutionary basis for society—the idea that a set of agreements can be in charge rather than the whims of one

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person. It put this concept into practice in a way that was a great leap forward for humankind.

Now, I suggest that another leap forward is to recognize the elephant that has arisen from our dependence on these agreements. The real basis for society must always be a *living conversation*. The Citizens Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, while leaving the agreements alone, helps us to acknowledge the importance of this conversation and to shape positively. It is summarized below:

*Each year twenty-four registered voters will be randomly selected in a lottery to form a Citizens Wisdom Council. This Wisdom Council will be a symbol of the people of the United States. It will meet for one week to choose issues, talk about them, and determine consensus statements. To ensure creative conversation and unanimous conclusions, the meetings are aided by a facilitator. At the end of the week, the Wisdom Council will present the statements to the nation in a new ceremony, from "We the People" to the people. The Citizens Wisdom Council will then disband permanently and the next year a new Wisdom Council will be randomly selected.*

That's it. There's little risk. There is no coercion. Congress, corporations, the Supreme Court, laws, the media, government programs, elections, lobbyists, and all of what our system has come to be, remain unchanged. This is simply an annual series of small groups that meet, present statements, and then disband.

It is *not* primarily an effort to influence Congress for new laws. Congress may make better laws as a result, but that is not the point. The Amendment essentially establishes an annual constitutional convention with *all* of us as delegates. It creates a way by which We the People can establish an ongoing, national dialogue, talk about how things are going, and articulate our conclusions. To the extent that We the People speak with one voice, change can happen voluntarily



without laws. As you continue reading, you will see why this Amendment will come to be so powerful despite the fact that Wisdom Council statements are not binding in any way.

Today we talk as though we already live in a democracy. But this is because recent generations have redefined and watered down the term. Actually, the word “democracy” comes from the Greek “demos” which means “the common people,” and “kratia” which means “power.” It is where the common people have not just a vote—but real power. This is certainly not what is happening in America today. Nor did the Founders intend to create a democracy. They thought of democracy as a kind of mob rule that was sure to fail and sought to avoid it. They wanted a republic. This word comes from the Latin “res publicus,” or “*thing* of the people,” that is, a management system to which the people consent.

We do not live in a democracy, but democracy is the cure for what ails us. We need a way for the average person to become truly involved in facing, thinking about, and deciding the key issues. This is what the Citizens Amendment will provide. It doesn't change anything in the system as established by the Founders, but it adds a bit to facilitate “We the People” to take charge of that system.

Those selected for Wisdom Councils could be anybody. They would be placed in a situation far different from what congressional representatives experience. They would have no constituency. They could speak their minds and hearts, and change their views without repercussions. They would have no predetermined topics to discuss, no special interests to represent, and no coercive powers to exert. The Wisdom Council is designed for a higher quality of conversation than elected representatives can achieve, one beyond debate and argument.

“But how can any group not argue? And how can they be expected to reach unanimous views on difficult issues?” you may ask. Actually, it's easy. It only seems difficult because our experience is rooted in the current structure, which is designed for battling. I once demonstrated this for an audience by asking them to choose a

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contentious issue that I would facilitate for 30 minutes. The group picked the abortion issue.

First, the usual pro-life and pro-choice positions were expressed. Our current system is structured for a discussion between these two positions. I captured them on flip charts as two possible solutions without trying to define the problem. Then I asked for more possible solutions. There was a period of silence because it seemed as if these two were the only possibilities. Finally someone broke the silence and asked a question. "How frequent are abortions anyway?" Then the group wondered if there wasn't some way to eliminate abortions altogether. At the end of the 30 minutes, this new perspective became the group's consensus. It wasn't a consensus on one of the two obvious choices, pro-life or pro-choice, but an agreement on a definition of the problem: "How can we achieve a society where all children are conceived and born into families that want and love them?"

This kind of consensus, a pulling together of what everyone thinks, *can always be reached*. Our current system doesn't encourage it, but the Wisdom Council does. Those in a Wisdom Council need not restrict themselves to one definition of the problem or some limited set of possible answers. In this setting of people, the consensus might be a problem-statement or a shared vision. They engage in a kind of talking and thinking that brings people together rather than tearing them apart. In later chapters, I'll go into more graphic detail about this and how it will affect the larger society.

### **Your Response**

At this point, if you are thinking, "These claims are too much. What real difference would this amendment make? Twenty-four is too small of a group. How can a diverse group of people reach consensus? Who will control the facilitator? It might be a good idea,

but why does it need to be an amendment? This has no chance of happening,” you are not alone.

Many of us are beginning to realize that our current system isn't working. Dee Hock, founder of VISA, International, says in his book, *Birth of the Chaordic Age*, “We are experiencing a global epidemic of institutional failure that knows no bounds. We must seriously question the concepts underlying the current structures of organization and whether they are suitable to the management of accelerating societal and environmental problems—and even beyond that, we must seriously consider whether they are the primary cause of those problems . . .”

Within our system, we can elect better leaders and promote better laws and programs. But these actions can't address the underlying system, our way of thinking. Most legislation gets compromised before it becomes law anyway.

Or we can focus on education and on raising the consciousness of people. But this isn't going to make the needed difference either, because we are dealing with a living system, more than with a collection of people. We must address the whole elephant as well as the individual pieces. Because the Citizens Amendment is unique in its ability to address the elephant, we can rapidly affect all issues and all people at once.

Remember the question that started this book? Take a moment to answer it before proceeding.

*What is fundamentally the most significant problem we face as a society?*

*Your answer:*

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Whatever you answer, to the extent that you *care* about solving it, and to the extent that it currently seems *unsolvable* to you, then you

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have identified a crisis in our society. It is when we are in crisis that we are most open to new ideas and to change. So, just caring about this issue and holding this crisis in mind can help you read this book. Whatever problem you name, I think you will find that the Citizens Amendment will provide a Breakthrough to solving it.

### **Getting Started**

Most books that tackle deep societal issues focus primarily on understanding and defining the problem, maybe ending with a chapter or two on potential solutions. But this book does the opposite. Except for *Chapter 3 — The Problem: We Are Caught in the Game*, the chapters of this book basically describe different perspectives of how and why the Citizens Amendment would work.

You will agree, I'm sure, that unnecessary changes should not be made to the Constitution. This document is to be honored and protected for what it has enabled us to do and become. But at the same time, our situation is changing and We the People are ultimately responsible for the actions of our system, including its effect on us. We must not abandon that responsibility.

Thomas Jefferson raised this same point in a letter he wrote to his friend, James Madison, on September 6, 1789. From the actuarial tables of his time, he had calculated that a majority of any given generation would be dead after about nineteen years. With this statistic in mind, he wrote: "It may be proved that no society can make a perpetual constitution, or even a perpetual law. The earth belongs always to the living generation. . . . Every constitution, then, and every law naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right."

He speaks an obvious truth. Because we ignore it, We the People of today are governed by a system we did not consent to, that was not designed for our times, that assumes the worst in us, and that has set us on an unsustainable path. Furthermore, we have been left by this

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system with a very small role to play in setting things right. We the People of today need to get ourselves back into the action and take charge. We need to do it safely, with little risk. The change proposed here is a way for us to do that.