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# HOW TO IMAGINE THE WORLD

a  
pocket  
guide  
for  
practical  
visionaries

Anthony Weston

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR  
*How to Re-imagine the World*

With the clarity of a minimalist, the creative thinking of an entrepreneur, and the humor of Lily Tomlin, Anthony Weston is a neo-nomad in the field of wild ideas — all in the service of social change. In his mind, the word “resign” quickly becomes “redesign.”

— Chellis Glendinning, author of  
*My Name is Chellis, and I'm in Recovery  
from Western Civilization*

We are blessed with many good books about the best tactics, strategies and policies for social change. Anthony Weston nicely complements them with this practical guide about how to bring more creativity and imaginative spark to activism today.

— Jay Walljasper, author of  
*The Great Neighborhood Book*,  
Senior Fellow at Project for Public Spaces,  
and Executive Editor of *Ode* magazine.

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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

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## 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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Spring Equinox, 2007

*Radical  
imagination begins with a  
move beyond complaint and  
resistance, beyond reactive tinkering  
or bunkering down or cynical  
accommodation. The first big move is  
to an alternative picture of how  
things could be instead.*

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# 1

## ***Work from a vision***

Affirmative vision is crucial. Be emphatically, visibly, clear-headedly *for* something, and something that is worked out, widely compelling, and beautiful — not just against the problems or the powers that-be of the moment.

Fear and anger push us — yes. But visions *pull* us, and far more powerfully in the end.

The US Civil Rights movement was one of the most successful social movements of the last half-century. Of course it was against things: discrimination, disenfranchisement, the routine terrorization of whole populations. It took on deeply entrenched resistance. But it never defined itself in predominantly negative terms. Always the

language, the imagery, even the demonstrations and legal briefs and political platforms, were framed by ideals and hopes. The iconic speech was “I Have a *Dream*.”

It could have been argued — in fact it was argued all the time by the “realists” — that dreaming was a luxury. But who would remember Martin Luther King’s great speech today if he had put all the same points negatively? “I have a *nightmare* that the children of former slave-owners and the children of former slaves will *never* sit down together at the table of brotherhood ... I have a *nightmare* that my four little children will *never* live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ...”? No — it was the affirmative vision that gave King’s words their power.

So where are *our* dreams, today? Cannot we highlight them just as brightly as our fears — indeed, like King, *more* brightly?

Take environmentalism. In the popular impression, environmentalists are the very model of nay-sayers. Opposed to this, worried sick over that, ill-disposed by reflex to almost any human impact on nature. The Voice of Doom. Yet we know very well what the dreams are. Why are we so hesitant about them? Speak them out: “We have a dream

that our own children and our children's children will again be able to freely drink the waters of rushing streams, breathe deeply in the morning air and see the glittering stars at night ... We have a dream that we ourselves might be able to come among the other creatures with composure and respect both ways ... We have a dream that the grandchildren of loggers and the grandchildren of tree-huggers will one day work together in a vibrant forest from which they can take what they need without taking its vitality ...” This is not just stating the obvious; it is *changing the key*.

Once I was involved in a heated battle to keep a major road from bisecting two state-owned forests — a “connector” to the Department of Transportation, a *disconnecter* from the point of view of the other animals and the land. Among other things, the “connector” needed endorsement from the County Commissioners, at that time chaired by a reactionary and fundamentalist insurance salesman universally disdained by progressives and environmentalists. The usual arguments — the road is bad for animals and waterways, it will create worse traffic — went up and just as quickly went down. Clearly it was a lost cause.

In the midst of this wrangling, the head of the anti-road coalition invited the Commissioners to

actually walk the route. The Chair, alone among them, accepted. And he returned from that walk, one fine spring morning, persuaded that the road should not be built. “It’s too beautiful to put a road there,” he declared. The County Commission proceeded to oppose the road, and although it took a few more turns of the wheel to persuade the governor to finally pull the plug, the Commission’s vote was a turning point. Why hadn’t we highlighted the beauty before — and tied beauty to the other values of intact ecosystems that we had already been speaking for, only too negatively?

Progressives are often cast as anti-business — and sometimes that’s what we settle for. Sometimes our economic ideas really are limited to mere rejection. But few progressive critics of business are simply *for* overthrowing the whole system. What we really want is to rethink, experiment and change. We are *for* more small-scale enterprises; *for* more community oversight; *for* the continuing attempt to harness capitalism’s magnificent dynamic energy within a more socially constructive framework. Not just limits on “business as usual,” then, and certainly not a pox on the whole capitalist house, but different *directions*. A new kind of “business as usual.”

Anti-war? But really *for* multilateralism and the framework of international law. *For* a society that genuinely “supports our troops” by giving them only honorable and truly necessary missions, along with decent health care and family support and educational opportunities back home. *For* giving the desperately necessary “nation-building” tasks following war and other disasters to new kinds of Corps actually equipped to do the job. Likewise *for* a society that honors so many others who also give their daily work and even their lives to build and sustain freedom; consequently *for* a society that is prepared to give them all and their children something genuine in return, like decent education and health care for everyone....