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## THE PATH FORWARD

Sharon Sund, MS

### Abstract

We in America all care about our democracy and want the best possible outcome for our nation. But how do we get there? What is your role and mine? Can we really make a difference? The American political system is facilitating the election of candidates whom citizens feel do not represent them. My personal experience living in Germany as the country was rebuilding after World War II, then living in Mississippi during school desegregation, and later in corporate America, and finally as a candidate for the U.S. Congress, showed me that good people can wait too long to act. This article is written to save people from regretting that they didn't do something when they had a chance. I show ways to advance ideals to help create a world we are happy to leave to the next generation. This article will empower readers to take action.

**Keywords:** Partnership; Collective Thoughts; Authoritarianism; Riane Eisler; Caring Economy; Political Action; Desegregation; Racism; Domination; Citizen Action; Democracy

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*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*

Proverbs 29:18 King James Version (KJV)

Through the ages, thinkers have recognized the importance of vision in creating a better world. Theoretical physicist David Bohm (1917-1992), protégé of Albert Einstein and author of *Thought as a System* (1994), theorized that what we see in the world (the wars, the rise of authoritarianism, the fear, and the retreat to living behind walls both within ourselves and collectively around nations), is directly created by our collective thoughts. In other words, we imagine a world of limited resources, of “dominate or be dominated.” We imagine a world of hierarchies and win/loss, and that is what we create. We allow injustice, inequity, the building of walls, because we

see no better way. We are afraid that if all people are free, there will be less for me and mine. We are afraid of change because others may get what we have or what we want. However, if democracy and the freedom we enjoy are to survive, we need to continue to evolve a collective vision of an economy, a political system, and a social system that work for all of us.

Over the past 30 years, thought leader and author Riane Eisler has developed a robust social and political model that presents a protective, supportive structure for our democracy. In *The Real Wealth of Nations* (2008), she proposes the well-researched and historical Partnership Model of organizing societies, which includes a caring economics. This new economic model has led to the development of more accurate measures of countries' economic success: Social Wealth Economic Indicators (SWEIs). One critical aspect of these measures involves including the impact that every decision we make has on the Earth, and on current and future generations.

#### **HOW DOES THIS INSPIRE AND RELATE TO ME PERSONALLY?**

I grew up in the military. From the time I was four until I was eight years old, my father was stationed at Rhein-Main Air Force Base in Germany. When we moved there, base housing wasn't available, so we lived in the upstairs apartment of a duplex. I spent a great deal of time downstairs with the German family, a mother and her two adult sons who worked during the day. I remember standing alongside the mother as she prepared meals, peeling potatoes with a quick hand. The "boys" would come home with lots of laughter and charm. Though language was a barrier, I felt the warmth of being included in the joyous gatherings. If I hadn't been downstairs to visit for a while, the boys would come upstairs and ask me to join their meal. This was my child's impression of Germans in general: that they were kind, friendly, and accepting.

When we left Germany, we moved back to the US, to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. I went to elementary school on base. At that school, I did not feel warmth and acceptance until the fifth grade, when I had a lovely teacher. She spent extra time

with me after school, teaching me to knit and crochet. It turns out this lovely person was Jewish.

In the years ahead, I witnessed political chaos—perhaps with a father in the military, the world was closer—from the assassination of John F. Kennedy when we were in Germany, to racial divisiveness and violence, even among kids on the Rhein-Mein Air Force base, to Martin Luther King’s assassination in my parents’ hometown right before we moved there for my father’s first tour in Vietnam. We also lived in Biloxi, Mississippi, while my father took extensive training before one of his tours. Because we are African-American, my brother and I were initially prevented from attending an all-White school and told to go down the street to the all-Black school. Because this violated the law, my parents protested, and then we were allowed to attend. Although the experience was traumatic for a number of reasons, I was a fairly good student and got along well with the “white” students.

As I grew older and learned about World Wars I and II, and specifically about the Holocaust, it caused cognitive dissonance in me. I could not understand how the good German people of my childhood could allow such terrible things to happen to the beautiful Jewish people of my fondest memories. I relentlessly pondered and researched this question until I came across the words of Martin Niemöller. Niemöller spoke out against the Nazis' treatment of Jewish people and others. He eventually was arrested himself and sent first to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and then to Dachau. Niemöller was an early Hitler supporter, as were many Germans. In *Of Guilt and Hope* (Niemöller, 1947) Niemöller writes that the first people who were purged by the Nazis were those with incurable conditions. Niemöller writes, “I remember a conversation I had with a person who claimed to be a Christian. He said, ‘Perhaps it’s right, these incurably sick people just cost the state money, they are just a burden to themselves and to others. Isn’t it best for all concerned if they are taken out of the middle [of society]?’” (Niemöller, 1947/2004, p. 79).

For me, I hoped never to be in Niemöller's shoes, wondering what would have happened if only I had done more before it was too late. I made a deep personal commitment to myself not to shut my eyes in fear and sleepwalk over my compassion as I suspect my German friends may have done, but to speak up at the first sign of public leadership minimizing the value of any specific groups.

This commitment intensified for me when I had children, and especially with the birth of my son, who has Down's syndrome, as well as my work with families who had children with disabilities and who needed additional support and aid. I first became concerned when it appeared that political decisions were being made based simply on financial consideration. There seemed to be little compassion for people who needed extra support. Laws were being made that were depleting and even destroying the Earth—laws that were devaluing the less fortunate, including the disabled, “the incurables.”

This led me to support legislation protecting our environment and the Earth, and then to work for legislation to provide health care for children and families that were uninsured. However, I became disillusioned with legislators who had their hands tied by corporations, big donors, and party interests, preventing them from doing what was best for people and our planet.

The question for me became, “How do we surmount all these barriers to create a country where all people can flourish?” A country that values every child born as a national asset, where all parents are supported in nurturing that national treasure, and all children are welcomed, encouraged, and educated to develop to their best, for their own good and that of their communities.

To do this, we need an economic model that is proven to support this vision successfully. Eisler's *The Real Wealth of Nations* (2008) describes a Caring Economy model coupled with a Partnership social construct that supports this vision. We also need a restructuring of policies to address this effort, with all policy makers

committing to the Precautionary Principle that allows for passing only legislation that does no harm to current and future generations or to our earth, air, and water (Myers, 2002). In this world that we create together, we can foster the compassionate side of our humanity rather than the selfish side. All citizens are free to work hard, to prosper, and to advance, provided their effort does no harm to others, our country, or our planet. I recognize the need to be protective of our borders and wise about our national and personal safety; however, as we become more compassionate, I imagine that there will be less need for armed forces protecting our cities and our nation.

This is not a pipe dream. In *The Compassionate Instinct: The Science of Human Goodness*, Dacher Keltner and his colleagues at the University of California Berkley have shown that we are not exclusively selfish beings, as our current economic model assumes; we are also instinctually compassionate (Keltner, 2010). The spiritual work of Wen Len in Hawaii (Vitale & Len, 2008), and the innovative work done in Norwegian, Dutch, Swedish, and Rwandan prisons are worthy of consideration (Aleem, 2015; Alexander 2016; Benko, 2015; Taylor, 2016). When we treat prisoners compassionately, the need for prisons is diminished.

## **AWAKENING AND ACTION**

So, the questions now become, “How do I deeply change myself to become awake so that I can participate effectively in advancing our democracy, our relationship with each other, and our economy? How do I partner with others so that our awakenings tap into the power of synergy? How does this combined/partnered energy change the world?”

Here is how that awakening has happened with me. I first partnered with myself. I recognized my own inertia, and my resistance to getting involved, which is rooted in the mechanical obedience that I was taught as a child. This acculturation had led me to believe that I could not change anything, no matter what I did. However, concern for my children, and what would happen to them and other vulnerable people,

overcame that unwanted indoctrination. Holding strong to my earlier commitment to be always on the lookout for the social tendency to minimize and reject the ones who appear not to be contributing to our society, I began to work to make this a more caring, compassionate nation.

Although I am fully committed to helping create a more humane world, I have had to recognize that I live in a society that still has strong authoritarian, dominator elements that invalidate me and cause fragmentation within myself and isolation from others. I continually must resist the forces around me that lock me away from my joy, my true self, and my ability to engage in creative action.

I wish I could say that I believed so much in myself and in the human spirit that I wanted to do everything I could to free and nurture that capacity in myself for its own sake. However, that alone could not shake me from my inertia. For me it was love of my children, and fear for the type of world we would leave for them. I was especially concerned about my son's survival in a political system that seems to value money above people. There is nothing wrong with money, but if money continues serving as a primary focus for our society we will lose our moral high ground, ending up in a sharp decline. And just as I learned happened with the "good German" people prior to World War II, the good people in this nation could allow inexplicable horrors by closing our eyes to cruelties that are being justified by blaming and devaluing certain individuals or groups. When we realize that things have gone too far, it may be too late to turn back.

The other concern that motivated me to break out of inertia is a politics that lacks civility, demonstrating the lack of focus on values by our body politic. This lack of civility suggests that there is a lack of intellectual and spiritual balance in our decision-making process. This lack is seen in the vitriol, the inability to be inclusive, the willingness to distort truth to make people fearful, and the placing of externals such as money and business above compassion and caring.

My evolution hasn't been a straight trajectory. My personal history and past experiences sometimes replay in my head. I occasionally have to step back and assess the stories that I tell myself about who I am, based on who I was and based on my past experiences and decisions, as well as my family's history, and even that of my ancestors. These stories kept me locked into the current economic and social systems, not able to see the possibility of a nation evolving around our true values. Yet belief in the writings of our Founding Fathers, though they had no thought of me, inspired me to believe that I too, as well as all others, had the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This, coupled with the belief that we are a nation of fairness that functions best with a level playing field, that there is within our reach a way of building a caring economy based around people rather than profits, gave me the courage to overcome my fear and shame. I realized that fear and shame had kept me out of touch with my own pain, partly because of our collective national stories reinforcing that one kind of person is more valuable than another, and discrediting partnership-oriented beliefs, attitudes, and activities as unrealistic.

I did not get over all my fear and shame before I got involved—I'm still working on that. I just got busy; I knew that I needed concrete, sustained action. We face huge problems that may seem insurmountable. Yet for our children's sake and for the sake of the planet, I know that I must do everything I possibly can—not only to protect the vulnerable and our planet, but also to unlock our individual and collective potential. I started by signing petitions. I then created petitions, and wrote letters to my representatives, going to their offices again and again with my concerns. I called my representatives over and over again until their staff knew me by name. I attended rallies, and organized rallies. I met with allies. I had wonderful conversations in big groups and small groups. I made donations. I went to trainings. I attended workshops. I read, I studied. I even ran for Congress.

I could do this because I found partners who shared my vision and helped to cultivate it. Partners who would lift me when I became discouraged, who were persistent and optimistic about the evolution of our economy and our society. Together we imagine a



caring world of unlimited human possibilities, of justice and equality, and of freedom from fear. We organize first in partnership with ourselves, then with each other, and then with our earth. Together we can promote a collective vision moving beyond domination to an inclusive, sustainable partnership nation. As we transform our thinking, we will experience what David Bohm theorized: that what we imagine and choose to see increases and creates that reality around us. Eisler's thorough research, writing, and, above all, vision of a Caring Economy are an empowering guide. This vision of a Caring Economy awakens us to the value of each life on earth and the individual responsibility of each to work to move us forward to a world where we end the domination of one person or group over another. Instead, we partner together, awakened to our own value and role in building a better, brighter future for all life and our planet.

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