

PRAISE FOR SOUL BOOM

...erving up a delicious smorgasbord of existential philosophy, reflection, social science, and *Star Trek*, Rainn Wilson explores the missing role of spirituality in the modern world. It will tickle your brain, warm your heart, and tickle your funny bone."

M GRANT, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *Think Again* and host of the TED podcast *Re:Thinking*

...the insightful exploration of spirituality that we desperately need now. As we all seek answers amidst an unceasing news cycle of dread and doom, Rainn Wilson's *Soul Boom* funnily but gently and lovingly opens a door to a deeper way to process all that is happening around us. Freedom in and on these pages will fill your soul and touch your heart."

A LING, coauthor of *Somewhere Inside* and host of *This is Life*

...electrifying manifesto on how to transform the world from inside out. Let *Soul Boom* enlighten and inspire you!"

ARIE KAUR, activist and author of *See No Stranger*



# SOUL BOOM RAINN WILSON

NEW

204 WIL

# SOUL BOOM

# WHY WE NEED A SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

  

# RAINN WILSON

New York Times bestselling author of *SoulPancake* and *The Bassoon King*

Public Library



53000011405



## CHAPTER TEN

# THE SEVEN PILLARS OF A SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION

We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.

—*Albert Einstein*

When I was a teenager, I had to buy my own car, and as I had no money, if I wanted it to run, I had to learn how to fix it. I was nineteen and working full time driving a delivery truck for Ballard Marine Supply and Hardware and attending the University of Washington on the side, and I bought an old Volvo for \$400. It was a dilapidated piece of junk. But thankfully, it was a *hardy* piece of junk. I affectionately called this car "The Newt," after the burning of the witch scene from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. The Newt's claim to fame was that I could pull the stick shift up and out of the transmission while driving, which would create a large hole that you could peer down into and see the pavement whooshing along about a foot and a half underneath the car floor. Occasionally, I would take a girl out on a date and, while driving, pull the shifter lever thingy out and let out a panicked scream as if I had lost control of the car before sticking it back in again. This never went over terribly well, but I continued doing it because it made me laugh and, unfortunately, that's just the kind of person I am.



Over the course of my year with the Newt, I personally changed the starter and the muffler and the brakes and calipers and the battery and the tires and routinely changed my own oil and filters. I got to know and annoy the guys at the local auto parts shop as I would pepper them with questions. I would love to say that all this effort and sweat set me up with a valuable set of life skills, but mostly it was just a colossal pain in the ass. I did learn something quite interesting about cars over that long, impoverished year, however.

A car, at its simplest, is a metal contraption with an internal combustion engine that transports passengers on four wheels. At its most complex, it's a series of interconnected systems all working together to power a moving vehicle. The number of structures that need to work in harmony are various and many. Besides its body and drive train, every car has an electrical system, a transmission, a fuel system, an ignition, and an exhaust system. And when something is not working, you look under the hood or crawl underneath or, if you have a real-life automotive garage, you put it up on the lift and take a look in order to try and determine *which* of these systems is not functioning correctly.

We can do the same kind of examination for the web of integrated systems that allow human society to operate.

Continuing with this terrible analogy, if we put the *car of humanity* up on a lift and take a look around at what's not working, what would we diagnose? Instead of transmission and brakes, we examine health care and education. Instead of exhaust and air conditioning, we shine our headlights onto international trade, human rights, or agriculture. Is it one or two systems that are out of whack, or is something more pervasive going on?

As we discussed in the previous chapter, it seems that practically every single societal structure has some serious irregularities and design flaws, and most importantly, the systems don't work together in harmony the way they're supposed to.

Before I give my personal SoulBoom diagnosis of what's wrong with the car of humanity (ugh, I truly hate this analogy), let's take a long look forward to where we want to go.

## HEY, KIDS, LET'S BUILD THE PERFECT WORLD

Earlier in the book we assembled some elements for a new, awesome religion. How about we do the same, John Lennon style, to "imagine" the perfect world?

Harkening back to "The Blue Marble" and all those sappy Miss America contestants from the '70s, what would the ingredients be to build this harmonious world? What is the SoulBoom vision for a peaceful, just, and united planet filled with a kind and fulfilled population?

Well, guess what? *We already know what the answer is going to be!* I really don't need to take up much space in these pages to explore it. It's quite basic really. The vision of what the aforementioned "kingdom of God on Earth" looks like is like *Star Trek* but instead of zipping around space we're dwelling peacefully on our home planet, Earth.

*Everyone gets along.*

As hippy-dippy as that may sound, it's really that simple.

In a nutshell, there's no more war. Armaments are just enough to defend a nation from attack. When there are disagreements, the various countries of the world come together to work out their conflicts with the greater good in mind. The differences between our cultures will be celebrated so that unity shines through a diversity of humanity.

There will probably always be some degree of rich and poor, but the extremes will not be so . . . well . . . extreme. There will be enough food, enough challenging employment, enough clean water, and enough cheap, renewable energy to keep our population both content and motivated. The arts and sciences will thrive and be incorporated into all facets of our various cultures. Education will be eminently available without any ideology or agenda except knowledge and enlightenment,



with some tangible job training thrown in. Health care will be accessible and thorough and treat every patient with dignity.

Like our Indigenous ancestors, we will cherish our planet, honor its resources and beauty, and seek to live sustainably for the generations that follow.

Most importantly, in emulation of Jesus Christ, we will all love our neighbors as ourselves. We will live in service to one another, with kindness and care for the downtrodden and a deep respect for one another.

You get the idea. Like I said, regardless of political view or religious belief, we can all visualize this utopian future quite easily.

*But*—and this is the trillion-dollar question—*how do we get there?* Do we achieve this lofty goal by making modest reforms, tweaks, and adjustments to existing organizations and ways of doing things?

Well, let's go back to my stupid car analogy. (Maybe, before this book ends, I can find a better one!) What do I see when I look under the hood of humanity? I see a series of systems, as we've previously explored, that have been faultily, unsustainably engineered. Design tweaks, legislation, and more checks and balances won't repair the essential brokenness. That would be the equivalent of using duct tape, Band-Aids, and chewing gum to try to jury-rig a solution to a much larger issue.

It comes down to this: The many and various adversarial systems that run our world are driven by and founded on some of the *worst qualities of our species*: aggression, self-interest, greed, disunity, hunger for power and self-aggrandizement. Ego. One-upmanship. Business, sports, and government actually all essentially run on this same fuel of combative competition. So to continue the preposterous automotive metaphor, we're headed for a breakdown.

We have a spiritual imbalance, a spiritual disease. And the answer, rather than being political, economic, or legislative, is primarily spiritual as well.

*A spiritual solution for an essentially spiritual problem.*

Of course, we need to acknowledge that in part we have an innate adversarial nature and that it's an aspect of our species, our history, and

our *Homo sapiens* reality. But we don't need to be victims of those baser impulses. We don't have to build our society on them and their dynamics.

We need to transition from basing our systems on the worst qualities of humanity to basing them on the best of humanity. And what is that, exactly? What is this rumored "best of humanity"? I'll tell you. It's the essential spiritual qualities illumined by the deep reservoir of religious teachings that go back to the dawn of time. Ancient wisdom combined with divine attributes and positive character traits: selflessness, kindness, compassion, humility, honesty, and generosity. And dozens of other virtues as well. As crazily simplistic as it may sound, it all boils down to working together in cooperation rather than opposing each other in competition and conflict.

The essence of this work is summed up by one of my all-time most cherished quotes by everyone's favorite philosopher/architect/futurist, Buckminster Fuller:

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

A new model that makes the existing model obsolete? Easier said than done, right?

Unfortunately, I, a mere actor, do not have the skill set to present on these few remaining pages an action plan that is thorough and expansive enough to inspire all of humanity to reorganize itself around spiritual principles. For that I apologize. I do, however, wish to leave you with a series of key concepts and action items that I believe will be crucial in igniting a transformation. "Seven Pillars," if you will, on which to potentially build this movement, or to at least give us a head start. It's an eclectic group of ideas that is, like the rest of the book, here to shake things up a little and inspire a deeper conversation. They are:

1. Create a new mythology.
2. Celebrate joy and fight cynicism.



3. Destroy adversarial systems.
4. Build something new; don't just protest.
5. Systematize grassroots movements.
6. Invest in virtues education.
7. Harness radical compassion.

Let's start with the most important one:

### WRITE A NEW MYTHOLOGY OF HUMANITY

Everything begins with a story. A story is the most powerful of art forms because it shapes how we think about the world. Remember, "history" has the word "story" embedded right in it.

As someone working in film, television, and theater, I've been privileged to be a part of telling dozens and dozens of amazing stories. I've witnessed their power and importance to the human heart. I've seen stories change lives.

For over a hundred years, we've heard and retold the legend of the *Homo sapiens*—how we evolved from living in caves to living in towns and then cities and then nation-states. We hunted, killed, and conquered. We've heard about how our species was propagated by survival of the fittest, and in this dog-eat-dog world, the most aggressive and technologically advanced nations and peoples prospered, while others were enslaved, oppressed, and left behind. We're taught over and over again at school that every human undertaking is based on a quest for power. It is epoch after epoch of wars. In fact, my son, Walter, took a preposterously stupid AP world history class that was almost entirely made up of memorizing the dates and locations of various wars and who won them. Because, as our children are insidiously brainwashed, "history was written by the victors," and "to the victor go the spoils."

Well, that's one way of looking at it.

But what if we started telling an altogether different story? What if we rewrote the legend of the *Homo sapiens*?

I once had a discussion in which a fascinating question was posed: What was humankind's biggest idea ever? What's the grandest concept we've ever come up with as a species? One of the propositions that arose was that *money*, and all its powers, complexities, and dynamics, was humankind's biggest idea to date. Sadly, I tend to agree.

Think about all the various facets of commerce and capitalism and how deep their tendrils have been woven throughout the whole of human society and history over the ages. It affects every single thing we do and has a deep, complicated, and dark history as well. Madman and philosopher Slavoj Žižek has said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism, and I kind of agree with him.

You have a thing and I want that thing and I pay you a sand dollar or a shiny rock or a shell or (eventually) a coin for said thing. I stockpile my shells or coins and leave them to my children. The more of this money I accrue, the more social capital, clout, and dominion I and my tribe can amass. Money becomes connected to ownership and empire. We eventually create moneylenders or banks that stockpile stacks of these currencies and lend it with interest, generating even more. Serfs have to pay off debt to landowners. Wealthy merchants fund sailing expeditions across oceans to bring back goods as an investment. Gold equals power. Labor gets compensated by wages in the industrial age. Money buys armies. Arms. Companies. Land. Homes. Prestige. Then there are stocks and bonds and Treasury notes. Then credit cards. Student loans. Budgets and deficits on a household and governmental scale. Subprime mortgages and global financial crises. The crypto gold rush.

On many levels the history of humanity can be boiled down to a history of money. In fact, the first known writing was a four-thousand-year-old tablet recording of what? A song? A myth? A fable? A funny story? No. Money. A recording in cuneiform of the wages of some Mesopotamian workers.



I don't mean to indict capitalism. Many could cogently argue that *all* of the progress that humanity has made to this point has been due to the exchange of goods and services, and money has been and still is the most convenient way to oil the wheels of commerce that leads to humanity's social and material evolution. They would posit that the epic list of improvements to quality of life and lifespan over the centuries couldn't have happened without some kind of currency or marketplace.

But at times it sure seems like the entire definition of humanity and its journey forward is about the getting and owning of things. Consumerism and materialism. The taking of things away from other people who have things. We end up with a culture that mirrors the famous quote by John D. Rockefeller, who, when asked by a reporter, "How much money is enough?" responded, "Just a little more."

*How much is enough, and can I make a little bit more?* That pretty much sums us up.

To quote the esteemed philosopher David Lee Roth, "Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy a yacht that sails right next to it."

Surely at this juncture in human progress we can find a bigger, grander, more all-encompassing idea than commerce. And maybe our new mythology can also rise above the dark, dystopian visions of the future that our children have been raised on through countless books and movies. A story about humans overcoming their differences, prejudices, and pettiness to create something global and beautiful, perhaps? Where is our big imagination now, at this most crucial of crossroads?

Here's an example. I remember in school being shown pictures of tall trees and short trees and how "survival of the fittest" applied to a forest. The tall trees "win," I was told repeatedly. The weak trees "lose" and die, we were taught. The tall trees get all of that precious sunlight and grow the deepest root systems while weaker plants struggle but eventually don't make it. Natural selection in the woods.

In her nature masterpiece *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard disproves this theory and instead shows a kind of collective altruism from tree to tree. She documents with science, personal history, and

exquisite emotional sensitivity how the interconnected ecosystem of trees operates. Before *Avatar*, she was pioneering research into this interplay and interdependence she calls the "Woodwide Web."

Simard discovered that trees and plants communicate and share information and resources like a vast green brain: "The network in the soil is a neural network and the chemicals that move through it are the same as our neural transmitters." No longer trees as solitary creations, seeking their own self-sufficiency, but repeated examples of mossy, loamy interdependence on a grand scale.

Dr. Simard revolutionized how we think about nature itself. In addition to helping inspire the "Tree of Souls" imagery in James Cameron's *Avatar* and the central character of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, Dr. Simard has single-handedly changed how botanists and ecologists and tree-ologists theorize about how a forest works.

All this by rewriting a story. A story of Darwinian "survival of the fittest" transformed into a tale of cooperation, connection, and mutual support. With mushrooms and root systems.

Can we not apply that same vision to our rich history of human cooperation and interdependence? And can we not look forward while holding that vision as a goal?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, "The atomized homogeneous groups that existed in the past are no longer the truth of our world. We must recognize that we are part of one group, one family—the human family. Our survival as a planet depends on it. *We are part of one family, and we are fundamentally good.*"

Humanity is one family, and we are inherently good. Now that's a story for us to get behind.

This is the first pillar of our spiritual revolution: the creation of a new mythology for humanity during its transformation into a lovingly united global community, based on a foundation of spiritual principles instead of adversarial ones. We will not obtain this story from any current world leader, politician, or internet personality, but rather think of it as something we all visualize, create, and *hope* for collectively.



Hope. There's an idea. This new mythology, this new story, this new *big idea* needs to have something in it that is unabashedly hopeful!

I'll give it a stab here. It may not be right, but it's a start.

The *new* legend of the *Homo sapiens*: When humans lived in caves and villages, community was everything. We sought safety, warmth, love, and family in the collective. We communed with nature, understood it, feared it, lived in harmony with it. Over the years, we aimed high and dreamed big, invented world-changing ideas and concepts, worked together to eradicate diseases, came together to try to solve problems and fight evil. Sadly, along the way, we also lost sight of our inherently sacred and spiritual selves. We found ourselves at a crossroads. Humankind had a choice: keep doing what we've always done or hit restart. We took a bold and revolutionary path of hopefulness, relying on the idea that the human spirit is inherently good, to build a new world based on heart-centered wisdom. We left behind our selfish, aggressive ways and came together as one family. And the result? Humanity achieved peace and unity and found, dare we say it . . . *joy*.

What do you think of my new mythic story? Or do you like the old one better?

Speaking of joy. This brings me to my next foundation for a spiritual revolution.

### FOSTER JOY AND SQUASH CYNICISM

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

—Emily Dickinson

I studied acting for a time with the great theater director and philosopher André Gregory. He was the subject of the amazing art film *My Dinner with André*.

He would have tea occasionally with his students, and as I was finishing a cup with him one day and getting ready to leave his beautiful West Village apartment, I turned to him and said something to the effect of, "Mr. Gregory, sometimes I just feel so bitter. So hopeless about the future. It's so hard to not be cynical."

I'll never forget what happened next. He *grabbed* me by the wrist, pulled me closer, looked into my eyes with a ferocious intensity, and said, "Don't do it! Don't give in to cynicism. If you do, they'll have won. They *want* you to be cynical because then nothing will ever change. You *must* keep hope alive. Keep going. Promise me you won't give in!"

I nodded, a bit overwhelmed, and stepped out onto the cobblestone street, seeing the world in an ever so slightly different way. I'll never forget that interaction for as long as I live.

And as I write this, I realize that not only was André Gregory spot-on, but there was most probably a pandemic I left off my list in Chapter 2: cynicism.

We're all so cynical, so bitter, so pessimistic these days. Myself included. I struggle every day to "not give in." And the more cynical we get, the more nothing gets done because, well, "what's the point!?"

This particular pandemic is insidious because we don't realize we're suffering from it. Especially the youth. To what extent is this wet blanket of hopelessness contributing to the deadly, overwhelming mental health epidemic they are suffering from?

David Brooks in *The Second Mountain* says, brilliantly, "Our society has become a conspiracy against joy. It has put too much emphasis on the individuating part of our consciousness—individual reason—and too little emphasis on the bonding parts of our consciousness, the heart and soul."

I think Mr. Brooks and Mr. Gregory are on to something with this idea of a conspiracy against joy. The forces that control and shape our world (and no, I'm not talking about some conspiracy about a cabal of the super wealthy, smoking cigars in boardrooms or in Davos, Switzerland) want things to stay the same so that they can continue to profit



from the world staying exactly the way it is. How could we ever “build a new model that makes the old model obsolete” if we believe in our heart of hearts that things will never change, that they will always stay in the same messed-up mode?

So what is the remedy? I propose that the opposite of cynicism isn't optimism. The opposite of cynicism is *joy*!

Why? Well, optimism has a kind of inherent clueless “look on the bright side” sheen to it. And recent research in the field of positive psychology tells us that there is such a thing as “toxic positivity,” where one can feel externally pressured to “be positive” at all times in a way that is insensitive to the difficulties that might surround a person. By urging people in a blanket way to always keep a positive mindset, we disregard the complexity and darkness of being human. This generalized positive attitude of “optimism,” frequently propagated on social media, flattens out any authentic experience and can cause shame in someone who is struggling to process superficial platitudes like “keep your head up” and “turn that frown upside down.”

Joy, however, inherently acknowledges sorrow. It doesn't disregard the hard stuff. Joy knows that negativity is a part of life as well. Joy says that life is hard but there is a place you can go, a tool you can use. Joy is a force. A choice. Something that can be harnessed. A decision to be made.

Even if one is “not feeling it” in one's heart, one can spread joy to others. 'Abdu'l-Baha gives us one of my all-time favorite quotes about joy: “Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener, and our understanding less clouded. We seem better able to cope with the world and to find our sphere of usefulness.”

In other words, joy is a superpower! It gives us strength, clarity, and resilience, and it helps us find our path, especially in helping others.

I completely identify with what 'Abdu'l-Baha is saying. As someone who has struggled with depression and anxiety my entire life, I find truth in his observation: those occasions when I feel more joyful, I'm more focused, productive, and open to new experiences, and my mind and heart work in far greater harmony.

Now, this is not a chapter on *how* to find joy. There are plenty of those works out there. (In fact, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama have an inspiring treatise called *The Book of Joy*!)

There are also about three gazillion books on happiness—how to find it, achieve it, and hold on to it. I don't have the space to explore this topic here, I'm afraid. But I will add another tremendous quote attributed to 'Abdu'l-Baha: “If you are so angry, so depressed and so sore that your spirit cannot find deliverance and peace even in prayer, then quickly go and give some pleasure to someone lowly or sorrowful, or to a guilty or innocent sufferer! Sacrifice yourself, your talent, your time, your rest to another, to one who has to bear a heavier load than you.”

I just love the message contained in this profoundly spiritual and utterly practical teaching. Essentially, if you're feeling down, give happiness and comfort to someone who has it worse than you do! The spreading of joy, in other words, has a positive impact on one's own emotional state.

This is what is referred to as “prosocial” behavior, and its efficacy has been backed up by innumerable studies in the field of positive psychology. Those who engage in altruistic behaviors have a greater sense of well-being than those who don't. Yet another example of where science and spirituality coalesce.

Joy is a depleted resource these days. As is hope, the thing with feathers. In a world with so much discord and disunity, how do we nurture them?

The international governing council of the Baha'i Faith (the Universal House of Justice) underlined a terrific way for all of us to move forward in a letter they wrote in 2020.

They challenged Baha'is and others around the world to “discover that precious point of unity where contrasting perspectives overlap and around which contending peoples can coalesce.”

This idea is both important and inspiring. Finding a precious point of unity as a path to finding hope.



I remember speaking with the brilliant climate activist Callum Grievess, who works with Greta Thunberg as well as other youth activists, and he told me essentially the same thing. He was speaking about his work on climate change and told me of the “clean air” initiatives he had worked on. He said that people’s opinions about climate change may differ in countless ways depending on their political point of view, but something like “clean air” is something that folks on all sides of the political spectrum can get behind. It doesn’t matter if you think that climate change is some kind of liberal hoax or the greatest possible threat to our future, *everyone* wants cleaner air for their children and grandchildren. It’s the “precious point of unity” at the center of the climate conversation. And guess what? Cleaner air means less CO<sub>2</sub> and other emissions that cause climate change. So win-win all around!

The author Alexandra Rowland made quite a splash a few years ago when she introduced a concept for an entirely new genre of fiction. In response to the unwaveringly dark works of fantasies like *Game of Thrones* and the hundreds of despairing dystopian novels, films, and TV shows churned out each year, which are sometimes referred to as “grimdark,” she coined the term for the opposite: “hopepunk.” Works of fiction in which a vulnerable and human protagonist fights against an unjust system and seeks to bring meaning, balance, and, yes, *hope* to the world.

She is quoted as saying, “Hopepunk says that genuinely and sincerely caring about something, anything, requires bravery and strength. Hopepunk isn’t ever about submission or acceptance: It’s about standing up and fighting for what you believe in. It’s about standing up for other people. It’s about *demanding* a better, kinder world, and truly believing that we can get there if we care about each other as hard as we possibly can, with every drop of power in our little hearts.”

Although hopepunk’s manifesto was built around the field of imaginary and speculative fiction, I envision the message and moniker spreading to ever-wider pastures as we collectively demand a better, kinder world. As we don’t shrug and retreat under the toxic wet blanket of pessimism and hopelessness.

Sign me up! Let’s weave hopepunk into the altogether new myth and story of our species.

And the better, kinder world that she speaks of is only possible if we rethink all those broken systems and start replacing them one by one.

## REINVENT ADVERSARIAL SYSTEMS

Over a decade ago, when crypto currencies (Bitcoin and several hundred others) and blockchain were first launched, there were hundreds of articles and blog posts written about how these new peer-to-peer digital currencies, not dependent on any banks or central governments, would change how money is used and would eventually transform the world for the better. Treatises were written about how crypto and blockchain would end poverty, revolutionize finance, and democratize banking tools.

Although we’ve only been collectively exploring this crypto world for a little over ten years, and there may still be some transformative benefit yet to be found, it currently seems to most to not be delivering on its promise. In fact, what started as an encouraging premise, for those who work in its sphere, has given way to the reality that the world of crypto is just as corrupt as other financial systems, if not more so.

Why? Because this brilliant new concept that reinvents financial infrastructure is ultimately driven by the same greed that drives the old-school systems. Instead of a coterie of banking and Wall Street elites raking in money from transactions, it’s a somewhat larger and different coterie of “crypto bros” profiting at other people’s expense.

And there is no incentive to stabilize crypto currencies, because the volatility itself leads to the variety of “pump and dump” get-rich schemes that flood and define the crypto marketplace. One friend who worked in the field described it as a “junkier stock market where the value of the currencies has zero correlation to performance.” The “market mania” of crypto is driven purely by self-interest and not by any purported altruistic intentions to transform the economic system.



The core of this system was built on the same old foundation of competition, self-interest, and greed. It is both a symptom of a deeper spiritual malady as well as something that exacerbates this imbalance.

I'll provide an altogether different example that I believe best highlights what the opposite looks like.

In her book *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*, *New York Times* best-selling author and *Wall Street Journal* and *Time* journalist Amanda Ripley investigates a seemingly modern but most likely timeless and universal human issue: when conflict gradually morphs into something larger and more toxic than the original disagreement itself. Her work tracks people who were able to get out of the loop of blame and outrage and move into *healthy* conflict from which they are able to grow and evolve. Partisan politics and the divides it creates is one of her central topics.

In her book, she actually uses the Baha'i Faith as an example and examines how it organizes and conceptualizes its elections. She says, "Baha'i elections are to politics what mediation is to the legal system: a different game altogether—one designed to exploit the human capacity for cooperation, rather than competition."

In the Baha'i Faith there are no clergy, so the entire administrative system is made up of elected common folk who are in service to a larger idea. On the local level, every year a community, town, or city will elect nine members to serve on what is called the Local Spiritual Assembly. Every year, Baha'is at the district level elect delegates to vote for a governing body for their respective country, called the National Spiritual Assembly. There are currently around two hundred of these national governing councils. Every five years the members of the national assemblies gather in Haifa, Israel, for the election of what is called the Universal House of Justice, a governing body that oversees the guidance of the entire Baha'i world.

Ripley describes the process like this: "Every spring, everyone in each of the seventeen thousand Baha'i locations gathers together to elect leaders. It's very close to a pure democracy, operating in 233 countries

and territories. Here's the twist: everything about these elections is designed to reduce the odds of high conflict. . . . People are not allowed to campaign for a position or even discuss who might be the best person to serve. They can only discuss which *qualities* are most needed."

These elections are undertaken in a completely unique fashion. There is no campaigning or electioneering. There are no nominations for potential positions or any kind of parties or coalitions to be formed either. Baha'is vote by secret ballot and are encouraged to choose those who are of "unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience," as Shoghi Effendi once wrote.

Not only that, but the voting process is also undertaken in prayerful silence and meditation. According to Shoghi Effendi, "The elector . . . is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold."

When you go to a Baha'i election, it is astonishingly different from any other you've ever witnessed in your life. A roomful of silent, prayerful people in deep contemplation about who in their community shows the greatest faithfulness, sincerity, and competence. Voting is done in silent-ballot fashion, and the tellers take great care to make sure no one's vote is known by others. No one makes position speeches. There are no fundraising emails. No yard signs. No canvassing or jockeying for position and favor. No debates, promises made, or gifts given to potential voters.

In fact, if someone were to behave in a way that sought to draw attention to themselves so that they might seem worthy of a position, this probably would be perceived by the community as conceited and antithetical to the spirit of enlightened service.

Ripley says, "The Baha'is try to select people who do not crave attention and power. . . . This is the opposite of traditional elections, of course, which self-select for people who yearn for recognition."

(She is essentially describing Socrates's proposal that a society should elect *unwilling* leaders because anyone who *seeks* a position of leadership is actually unfit for that position. The best ruler, according to Socrates,



has no interest whatsoever in leading but sees it ultimately as an obligatory service position.)

It is important to note that Baha'is who are elected to these various assemblies hold no special station above anyone else in the religion. Their opinions are not held with any greater esteem. They fulfill their duty as representatives only when in consultation with other members of the body to which they were elected and outside of the meeting have no authority or additional status.

I've seen incredibly powerful videos capturing the diverse members of various National Spiritual Assemblies arriving from all over the world to assemble at the Baha'i World Center in Israel, where they prayerfully vote for the Universal House of Justice. The delegates, wearing their native dress, silently but joyfully stride up to the stage in a convention hall as the countries are called on in alphabetical order. The sight gives me the spiritual tingles. Humanity at its very best. More than a thousand radiant and humble servants dropping envelopes into a wooden box in an atmosphere of hushed reverence to elect the body of nine believers who will guide the affairs of the Baha'i world.

Ripley sums up her discussion about the Baha'i election process by saying, "If social scientists designed a religion, it would look like this."

Compare that sublime vision to the reality of contemporary elections throughout the world, especially in the United States. Outraged yelling, bragging, and name-calling. Months of hypocritical, vain posturing, while countless millions of dollars are spent—only to have nothing change.

Let's envision how this process could work in the world at large. Let's imagine the small town of Pancake Flats, Colorado, which has a city council. The council members are getting fed up with divisive politics everywhere, even in their own little town. They decide that for the next election they will all resign their positions and pass a city code to disallow any campaigning or partisanship. They ask the populace to come together to the high school stadium on election night and instruct them that they can vote for any person over eighteen years old who lives within the city limits. They then ask community members to contemplatively

consider all the people they have ever met and to ask themselves, "Who are the wise, upstanding human beings I know in Pancake Flats who passionately care about fairness for everyone?"

After an allotted time of reflective silence right there at the stadium, all registered voters, silent-ballot style, vote for the best group of people they know. Now, many, many people will receive only a handful of votes, but eventually a majority or plurality will emerge. Some of the elected will be totally bummed out because they are busy businesspeople, or busy librarians, or busy plumbers or what have you, but they realize they have been *summoned* to this very important role in their cherished community. And because they are the best of citizens, they are willing to sacrifice their personal business and comfort for the good of the whole and choose to serve the town of Pancake Flats, Socrates style.

This is a small, feeble example of what it would take to enact the same method of electing a democratic leadership as the Baha'is do in the "real world." Would this scenario even be possible? Would a number of gradual steps need to be taken before we could hold an election like this? Or would humanity need to be significantly more mature before something like it could ever be undertaken?

Those are difficult questions to answer, but these examples stand as a total reinvention of a system that is grossly out of balance. If we are to undertake a spiritual revolution, we will need reconceptions of this sort across all manner of previously competitive systems.

Making these changes will require incredibly hard work and sacrifices all around. And in order to do it, we will need to shift our efforts away from protesting what is currently broken and toward building new models that make the old ones obsolete.

### **DON'T JUST PROTEST, BUILD SOMETHING!**

Humanity is incredibly effective at one thing: war. We are so very good at it. We kick ass at killing. We could destroy our world hundreds of times over with our nuclear arms stockpiles. Our global military



expenditures (well over \$2 trillion) and our arsenal of weapons of destruction are horrifically awe-inspiring. We can wipe each other out in all manner of violent and painful ways.

We even use war analogies and rhetoric for most everything we do. The marketplace is a battle. Politics is a war fought in battleground states. Sports are combat. We have a “war” on drugs. We “battle” diseases. We walk through metaphorical minefields at work. We “drop a bombshell.” We “come under fire” for something we’ve said. We “make a killing” in a business deal. Hell, Pat Benatar even sang that “love is a battlefield.” We fight, win out, fire salvos, lob grenades, arm ourselves, and fend off invaders at every turn.

This all-pervasive language influences our attitudes toward how we do most everything. Even if we’re attempting to achieve something positive—like protesting injustice. Because we live in a culture of oppositional protest. Protest for the greater good paired with aggressive antagonism—a combination that is inherently contradictory and ultimately self-defeating.

Part of the problem with our culture of overzealous competition (and I’m tipping my hat throughout this section to someone who says all this far more effectively than me—Dr. Michael Karlberg and his magnificent book, *Beyond the Culture of Contest*) is that a culture based on contest easily lends itself to a culture of *protest*.

When some grave injustice happens—a killing of an innocent black man by the police, a mass shooting, or an unpopular law is passed—we rise to battle via *protest*. And many times this is for a good, important, and just reason.

Online, however, not so much. Someone posts an innocent opinion, and a flurry of aggressive comments appear, trying to tear it down. The voices that present as the angriest are given the most credence. People cry out in outrage, many times out of fury and pain, but also in order to *feel* like they’ve done something or made some sort of difference.

Complicated social issues that would require an overwhelming amount of extraordinarily difficult work to attempt to remedy are often

reduced to simplistic sayings that fit in a hashtag or meme or on a protest sign. Think “Defund the Police” and “Abolish ICE” on the left, or “Build That Wall!” on the right, or “My Body, My Choice,” which has become a rallying cry for both, depending on whether you’re referring to abortion rights or vaccines.

Catchy, yes. Viral, definitely. Effective in creating real change? Maybe not so much.

After some of these flare-ups in our ADHD-like twenty-four-hour news cycle, a corporation releases a statement, an elected representative speaks out, there’s a general hubbub, a couple of Twitter apologies, and then we go back to doing everything the exact same way. Before long the whole sequence repeats itself as we move on to the next perceived injustice and ensuing outcry.

(Lest we forget, oftentimes the forces of disintegration, acting as forces of control, *want* the populace to have a certain measure of protest as a release valve. They allow the populace to blow off a certain amount of steam and anger, knowing that things will just settle down and go back to the way they have always been.)

This culture of protest is an inadequate response to the kind and number of problems that currently face us. And often power plays, factionalism, and infighting—in other words, *the self-same qualities that are being protested against*—take over these opposition groups and render what they are protesting moot. In fact, history shows time and time again when protest turns to rebellion, once those who used to be in opposition take power, they simply transform into the oppressors.

I have personal experience with this. I lived three years of my childhood in Nicaragua. Soon after we left, the communist revolution, led by the Sandinistas fighting against the dictator Somoza and his cronies, polarized the world and sparked the Iran Contra scandal and a US-funded Nicaraguan civil war that devastated the population.

However, the exact same things the Somoza regime was accused of were enacted by the new communist-leaning government to an even greater degree: cronyism, corruption, shutting down a free press, and



arresting the political opposition. Over and over again, those who rebel use the same battle-themed toolkit they once opposed and end up creating the exact same system.

As I consulted with Dr. Derik Smith from Claremont McKenna College about these ideas, he mentioned something important.

There is much talk in social justice circles about “decolonization,” the important work of undoing colonialism and its many ills. Ills that the colonizers of Nicaragua, including the United States *and* the United Fruit Company; inflicted on this innocent country. But what decolonization does *not* mean is switching the colonizers and their methods with the colonized so that they merely exchange places. It’s about replacing the entire power dynamic of colonialism itself. Getting rid of the adversarial “us versus them.” Good versus bad. Those who are subjugating (superior) holding sway over those who are subjugated (inferior). Othering.

Decolonization means finding a new way to coexist, collaborate, and create community, freed once and for all from the grotesque power hierarchies that colonialism creates. If we don’t rectify this essential dynamic, we’ll find the same thing happening time and time again, just as it did in Nicaragua.

Here’s the bottom line: *It is far easier to protest something than it is to create something new.* Especially something like a new model that makes the old one obsolete. Because it’s long, hard, difficult work!

It is far easier to send out an angry tweet about climate change than to collaborate with an environmental organization. It’s simpler to write an angry email about women’s rights than to educate and empower adolescent girls regarding the underlying issues. It’s easier to go to a march for a couple hours than to research a problem, assemble a like-minded team, and work for an actual solution. It’s easier to yell than to educate, to tear down than to assemble, to blame than to consult.

Because you don’t fight the darkness with more darkness. You fight it by turning on a light.

Obviously, I’m not suggesting we collectively ignore injustice and stop protesting altogether. We must lift up our voices and shout when

something is wrong, unsustainable, and unfair! And it goes without saying that there have been many effective long-term demonstrations combined with social action over the past decades that have significantly shifted policy and public attitudes. From #MeToo to the protests over the public murder of George Floyd. (Even #FreeBritney and #Oscars-SoWhite were effective in a smaller fashion.) Some campaigns have mobilized millions, led to substantive legal revisions, and demonstrated that protest can sometimes lead to tangible results. However, protests are largely ineffective in the long term unless they are used as a tool to *construct* something. That’s where *true* activism lies.

And in the vein of taking my own advice to write a new mythology based on hope, I want to remind you, dear reader, that examples of activism turned action are everywhere if you look for them. These heroic builders do not have one hundred million Instagram followers. They don’t have paparazzi following them every day. Cable news channels rarely feature them. They just do the work, quietly, for the greater good.

I’m looking beyond the Greta Thunbergs of the world. To people like Boyan Slat, who started the Ocean Cleanup Project at the age of eighteen and between 2014 and 2022 has developed tech that works with ocean currents to remove plastic from the Pacific Ocean—more than one hundred thousand kilograms of plastic between August 2021 and July 2022. Or Ron Finley, who was in his early thirties when he started guerrilla gardening to provide residents with access to fruits and vegetables in LA’s food deserts. There’s Ghetto Gastro, started by three friends in their twenties trying to provide healthy, vegan, non-GMO foods to poor neighborhoods in New York City. Or Cristina Jiminez, who was twenty-four when she started United We Dream to advocate for the dreamer immigrants who, like herself, came to the US when they were kids; she has spent more than a decade working to push DACA through Congress.

These are the builders. The doers. The people who strive to unearth the deeper root causes of imbalances and create community movements



to systematically address injustices. What is wrong with our society that these people aren't household names but people who do unboxing videos or silly dances on social media are?! These should be our cultural heroes; they should be on billboards and have statues in town squares. Forget the models, reality stars, and influencers, *these* are the folks whose every move should be emulated and adored.

And where and how did these local heroes create this change? At the grassroots!

### IT'S GRASSROOTS, BABY

When we created the digital media company SoulPancake, our team learned a great deal along the way—building our company from a staff of four to a staff of forty, growing from zero videos to more than seven thousand pieces of content, evolving from an unknown brand to an award-winning, profitable production company with an audience of millions and over a billion video views. (Sorry to brag, but it was pretty darn cool!)

But we also had our fair share of challenges and learnings. We took the audience interactions on our YouTube and social media channels very seriously, monitoring comments and watching our fans and their behaviors. One time we noticed a very interesting thing happen. A young man, obviously white and from Middle America, posted a comment on a video featuring black participants, writing something along the lines of, "I grew up poor and in a trailer park. Everyone calls me white trash. Real question: How do I have privilege and the people in this video don't?"

This being the internet, people were extremely gentle and understanding, guiding him toward a more nuanced perception of the issues with great sensitivity and tact.

Just kidding!

People jumped all over him. Many comments shouted, "RACIST!!!" Others said, "YOU ARE THE PROBLEM." Others wrote multiple-paragraph diatribes about the history of white supremacy and his unknowing

complicity in it. He tried to explain himself and his comment, but to no avail. "Racist!" they shouted.

In our moderation attempts, we asked people to be polite and respectful and to not "hit below the belt." It didn't work. He was lectured, shamed, blamed, and shunned.

Then we noticed something quite interesting. Another group of people approached him in the comments section. White men, it became clear. And *actual* white supremacists, not confused, lost kids like he was. They gently responded and interacted with him in the comments section. "See?" they would say. "These people don't understand you. They think anyone who's white is evil. *They* are the problem, not you. There are lots of people in the world who totally get what you mean . . . check out these other sites and videos." They used gentle and inviting language. They expertly guided this young, impressionable fellow to racist websites, alt-right newsletters, and anonymous social communities. They welcomed him with understanding, drawing on the resentment he was feeling about the venom he had received online and planting the seeds for him to become a fellow white supremacist.

And just like that, his comments became more and more volatile and violent until he was gone from the SoulPancake community. We watched this play out in front of our eyes. It was astonishing.

And this was our takeaway: *the other side is extremely well organized.* (The "other side"? Am I being adversarial? Probably just a little. My bad.)

To sum it all up: in order for the forces of progress, hope, and unity to combat the forces (another war analogy!) of *disintegration*, we would need to be as organized and systematic as they are!

Loretta J. Ross, a black feminist professor at Smith College, is combating "cancel culture" by offering classes such as "Calling In the Calling-Out Culture."

In the *New York Times*, she talked about how being called out on social media falls into a few categories: "presumption of guilt (without



factors or nuance getting in the way); essentialism (when criticism of bad behavior becomes criticism of a bad person); pseudo-intellectualism (proclaiming one's moral high ground); unforgivability (no apology is good enough); and, of course, contamination, or guilt by association."

Can you imagine if the ignorant young man on SoulPancake had been "called in" instead of being publicly shamed? Because that's exactly what the overtly racist faction did. They called him in, all right . . . to a racist way of life.

People *need* a movement. To be a part of something bigger than themselves, larger than their own small self-interests. To feel like they belong. Collectively, we want something to fight for.

Unfortunately, we often think of social movements and progressive initiatives as best undertaken in small, impromptu groups. As something that just arises at a flashpoint, almost out of thin air. People mistakenly see big sweeping campaigns for social change as having come together randomly or by accident. We often feel that "grassroots" community work should be inspired but disorganized and that a systematic approach should be avoided at all costs.

This could not be further from the truth. The most effective "grassroots" campaigns require orderly, organized, systematic, and thoughtful planning. Many ingredients need to be in place in order for the populace to rise up and for public opinion to shift.

Let's take the civil rights movement as an example. It was anything but disorganized, impromptu, or piecemeal. When I was taught about the movement in school, this is what I learned: a bunch of sit-ins, strikes, marches, and activations sprang up out of an angry response to grave systemic injustice. Sounds good, right? The problem is that is not how it went down. I'm certainly no expert, but I do know from reading a bit about Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that the movement was anything *but* ad hoc, reactive, or improvised. It was systematic, well thought out, and expertly choreographed to achieve maximum impact on both the legislative side and on the totality of American public opinion.

Rosa Parks was not some random "tired seamstress"; she was an activist (secretary of the local NAACP) who came from a powerful line of activists in her family and community. Her courageous act of resistance was born out of a long history. A bus boycott had been planned well before her brave act of defiance, and after the catalyst of her arrest, the well-organized Montgomery Improvement Association sprang into action under the new leadership of Dr. King.

As an example of their organization, when black taxi drivers were penalized for aiding protesters by giving rides to black folk, a citywide car-pool system was set up, with three hundred drivers giving rides to black residents. When eighty boycott leaders were charged with conspiracy, many arrested and fined, including Dr. King (whose home was also bombed), the movement continued forward with new leaders who rose up to take the reins as needed. And then, victoriously, about a year later, the Supreme Court finally ruled that bus segregation was unconstitutional.

The larger movement then had the momentum it needed to continue for the next decade or more to tackle crucial systemic changes to laws and attitudes concerning the rights of black citizens. But always systematically!

The nonviolent social protest work of Gandhi was studied like a science and put into practice alongside the Christian ethics of most of the organizers. King once said, "Christ showed us the way, and Gandhi in India showed it could work."

Throughout the movement, there were countless (and I'd imagine quite difficult) strategy sessions on how the work would ultimately lead not only to greater justice but also to an awakening of public consciousness around the issues at hand. "Schools" were set up to provide nonviolence training for the imminent torment that marchers and protesters were going to have to endure: the spitting, the beatings, the hoses, the jail time, the ugly threats, and even the dogs. Throughout, there was continuous disciplined action behind the scenes.

Black newspapers provided context and information about what was at stake for readers across the nation. Black intellectuals used the



newspapers to disseminate a system of thought and to inform citizens about the movement's ultimate goals. Because if you don't know what your ultimate vision is, it's impossible to persevere through the drudgery and difficulty of the many steps that need to be taken along the path.

Churches provided activists with food, shelter, space for organizing, and emotional and spiritual support, as they had been doing for their communities for decades.

All in all, a well-oiled machine, filled with conflicts and disagreements, yes, but with a foundation of consultation and a unity of vision to transform the lives of millions and influence justice all around the world. A movement that was created with systematic action and highly focused organization, *not* an impromptu rising up of various pockets of resistance.

My point in all of this, going back to our racially clueless friend at SoulPancake, is that the side of injustice, of division, of *dis*integration is ready, organized, and waiting. The other side already has a movement in place, and THEY ARE ORGANIZED! They are systematic. They have hierarchies, blueprints, and action plans.

We should as well.

Soul work is tough work, real work. It requires great thought and careful planning. Spiritual revolution is difficult stuff that is formed in the trenches (yet another war analogy!). Everyone is needed, and all are participants. No one is going to do it for you. This is *not* a top-down enterprise. We all have a role to play. We are all protagonists for social change, not passive followers waiting for some leader to initiate action. We need to build community at the grassroots. Start small. Gather your friends and neighbors; log on to Next Door, Facebook, or Meetup.org; and find a common issue in your area that needs addressing. Create a community with a common cause that might, perhaps, build toward a movement. A community that "calls in," spreads joy, highlights service, and begins to launch a whole new story.

Remember what Mother Teresa once said: "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love." Love. It's the queen of all virtues.

## VIRTUOUS EDUCATION

Here are some of the things I learned in school: how to be an effective crossing guard; how to make a paper snowflake; how to write in cursive; how to find a book using the Dewey decimal system; how to square dance; how to make finger puppets, dioramas, and pretty much anything from paper mâché; how to recite the state capitals, lists of presidents, and obscure facts about Washington state history; and—believe it or not, because this was the 1970s—how to properly dive under your desk in case of a nuclear attack.

Here's how many of those I put into use in any kind of regular way: the nuclear desk one.

Other than that? Mostly useless.

Now, I understand that education is a complicated thing. Many assigned tasks—learning the periodic table or trigonometry, for instance—that we may not use very much in our daily lives have tremendous value because the act of learning them does wonders for the growth of our rapidly developing brains.

But perhaps, just perhaps, we are doing some essential things completely wrong when it comes to education. Because when you ask people what they *wish* they had been taught in school, the lists are illuminating.

Here are a few topics that top various lists:

- How to take care of one's mental health
- How to take care of one's financial health (i.e., banking, finance, debt management, investing, saving money, and monthly budgeting)
- How to deal with mistakes, failures, and rejection



- How to use social media safely and healthily
- How to meditate
- How to buy and maintain a car
- How to sustain relationships
- How to manage time and how to focus
- How to apply and interview for jobs
- How to communicate effectively
- How to grow a garden

A delightful combination of the totally practical (cars) and the abstract/psychosocial (failure).

I find the fact that the things in the above list are not taught to adolescents disappointing and frustrating.

We come out of school knowing the quadratic equation (although fewer than a third of eighth graders have grade-level math fluency) but not how to balance a checkbook. We know the internal organs of the frog but not how to apply for a job.

All this being said, there's an altogether different subset of skills that I believe every child should be not only taught but diligently encouraged to master: *spiritual virtues*. I mentioned the importance and relevance of virtues earlier in the book, remember? In the death chapter, when I discussed my idea for a revised Game of Life?

A brief refresher. From a completely spiritual perspective, virtues are those attributes of the divine that we seek to cultivate in our hearts and through our actions. They are ineffable traits that we take with us when we exit this material plane. Soul qualities. Characteristics that one thinks of when pondering God and the beautiful effulgence of His holiest of teachers, such as the Buddha and Jesus.

Here's a refresher: kindness, humility, compassion, generosity, mercy, trustworthiness, sincerity, tenderness, patience, wisdom. Love.

Spiritual attributes can also be categorized as qualities that describe *how* one pursues one's goals and undertakes actions. For instance:

determination, imaginativeness, confidence, cheerfulness, cleanliness, resilience, self-discipline, enthusiasm, flexibility.

I get why some might recoil when they hear the word "virtues." For some people the word might be associated with Sunday school or a certain brand of Christian philosophy and the way that orthodoxy was sometimes taught. Some might think some kind of religious indoctrination is associated with them.

For those of you who have this reaction, I simply ask that you reframe the phrase "spiritual virtues" by defining these same attributes as "character traits," "positive qualities," or even, for the more practically business-minded, "leadership skills."

Everyone loves a positive leadership quality, right? Regardless of whether one is religious or not. We like leaders who are honest, trustworthy, kind. We admire people who are courageous and humble. We emulate those in our lives who are wise and compassionate. Most people know someone with real "character" when they meet them. And I'm sure we all have people in our families who are naturally patient or curious or loving or creative.

I believe all children are born with these attributes to some degree. That's the miracle of these behavioral habits. I also believe they are universal. Although their importance might vary a bit from culture to culture, throughout the world humans are drawn to essentially the same list of positive character assets. It's why all parents—even those without religious affiliations—frequently report wanting to raise their children to be kind, loving, responsible adults.

Some of these virtues come naturally, and others we need to work on. My wife, for instance, is almost outrageously compassionate toward everyone. She deeply connects with how others might be feeling like she's some kind of alien empath. Me, not so much.

Some personality assets we might naturally develop over time. For instance, I'm much more gentle and less aggressive now than I was in my twenties or thirties. (But, then again, I'm super-duper old.)



However, it is a gross mistake to think that spiritual virtues can't be taught and that, instead of being trained or coached, they are learned through a kind of sociocultural osmosis. But, unfortunately, this is what the majority of the population seems to believe.

Sure, in school teachers might give the occasional lecture about how important honesty is when someone steals a couple dollars from the cupcake fund. And yes, parents involve themselves to varying degrees in the character development of their children. Some might occasionally work with their kids and point out positive qualities in others they have interacted with. Oftentimes certain virtues, such as cleanliness and courteousness, are highlighted regularly. Still others might teach through negative feedback: "Don't be so impatient!" "Don't call your sister names!" "Clean up your room!"

Aristotle defined it like this: "Virtue means doing the right thing, in relation to the right person, at the right time, to the right extent, in the right manner, and for the right purpose." And I believe that we can all learn to follow Aristotle's definition to an ever-increasing degree.

But collectively we seem to *not* believe that spiritual virtues or positive character traits are something that need to be actively cultivated through instruction and guidance.

I'm here to tell you they can be, and not only that, but it is also *imperative* that we turn our attention to a lifelong pursuit of spiritual virtues education, especially if we ultimately want a true spiritual Soul-Boom revolution.

Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel describes their use as similar to working out: "Altruism, generosity, solidarity and civic spirit are not like commodities that are depleted with use. They are more like muscles that develop and grow stronger with exercise. One of the defects of a market-driven society is that it lets these virtues languish. To renew our public life, we need to exercise them more strenuously."

I experienced this firsthand. I was involved for many years in helping to lead a diverse youth group in a fun, Baha'i-inspired series of empowerment courses called the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment

Program. In this terrific series of books that we used, we engaged young folk ages eleven to fifteen in many deep and difficult conversations around some profound moral quandaries.

A focus on character building through the lens of developing virtues was also a core part of the curriculum, and I witnessed that aspect of the program having a tremendous effect on the students. Let's say for example that our virtue of the week was generosity. We would study it. Learn about it. Read stories around it. Provide examples of times we had seen it in the real world. And then we would task the students with observing that same virtue throughout the course of the following week. When we would next meet, we'd go around the circle and share stories about generosity that we had witnessed. We would also share examples of times we were generous ourselves. And then, having that quality in our virtues toolbox, we'd move on to another virtue for the upcoming week.

I was amazed over the course of a few months of doing this work how the language, energy, and power of this type of character education began to seep into all aspects of the work and the conversation at large. We would use the language of virtues on a regular basis. When we read a story, the first question we asked would be, "What spiritually rich personality traits were shown by the characters in the story?" If someone would ask a question, the kids would support them by saying something to the effect of "Great way of expressing curiosity!" If someone brought cookies to a fellow student whose cat had died, their compassion was complimented. If someone helped clean up, we would all comment on their quality of helpfulness.

Before too long we saw behavior improve and mature. We also witnessed regular evidence of the pleasure a young person might receive in being kind, respectful, joyful, and humble.

And where does this all lead? To values. To real identity. And ultimately? To *Character* with a capital C.

What do you value in others, and what do you value in yourself? What are your character defects, and how, by focusing on the spiritual



virtue that needs attention, can you transform those deficits into character *assets*? By continuously using the language of virtues, we create a strategy for empowering the best in kids as well as in ourselves.

If we want a spiritual revolution, we need to arm ourselves, our children, and our youth with all the tools they will need in this endeavor as they walk along the *Kung Fu* path of the spiritual activist. These tools are not prioritized in our present-day world, but they should be—they work both on a mystical level, revealing the divine light of the Creator, and on an utterly practical one, making our lives richer and our efforts more successful.

It is important to note that virtues not only build character on an individual level but also create a social condition in which all human beings can flourish and live their very best and most vital lives. When one is in alignment with these special qualities—qualities that illumine the very best aspects of what it means to be a human—both children and adults become more fulfilled and the environment they inhabit becomes a safe and radiant space in which they can thrive. And isn't that what we truly need?

Of all these magnificent qualities, *compassion* may well be the most crucial, powerful, and transformative.

## RADICAL COMPASSION

Infamous movie critic and cinema legend Roger Ebert once labeled films “empathy machines.” In the stories we see on the screen, we see ourselves reflected right back at us. We're allowed to walk in another person's shoes for about 112 minutes and experience the world the way they do. In the best examples, we're allowed to take in the reality of what it's like to be in captivity in *12 Years a Slave*, or to be someone with facial abnormalities as in *Mask* or *Wonder*, or to be caught in the middle of a Jewish pogrom in stories as diverse in tone as *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Schindler's List*. Or, occasionally, to see the world as a frequently misunderstood, wildly attractive paper salesman/beet farmer.

But is film really an empathy machine? Does it work as one? Have we become more emotionally attuned to others over the last one hundred and some years since film was invented? We certainly know what it's like to be Michael Corleone or Forrest Gump or what choices we would have made in a Squid Game, but have we viewers changed our behavior in any way because of the insights film has given us into the consciousness, emotional and otherwise, of people who are different from us?

In a similar vein, virtual reality was supposed to bring about the advent of greater cognitive and emotional empathy. In fact, in France they recently did a trial use of virtual reality with men who were perpetrators of domestic abuse to try and increase their emotional understanding of what it might feel like to be a victim in those situations. They put the men right in the middle of a violent domestic conflict, but from the point of view of the woman or child. In 3D vision and surround sound. The results, from what I could determine, were inconclusive, but the idea is fascinating and has a great deal of potential.

I want to take this idea further than film and VR. What if we humans were able to build ourselves the ultimate compassion machine? Imagine if part of one's educational experience was an emotional empathy training program that involved an immersive experience of witnessing the life or consciousness of someone quite different from you *vis-à-vis* some kind of virtual device. An experience greater than a movie and even more effective than VR that fed *directly* into the sensory and feeling areas of your brain. Maybe it would require wires on your skull, perhaps it would be like sliding into an MRI tube filled with monitors, I'll let your imagination come up with the technology, but the result would be to experience the emotional life of another human in such a way that we physiologically and psychologically undergo the reality of their suffering and want to alleviate it.

And imagine if, as part of our educational journey, we were required to spend many hours in this Compassion Machine™, relating to dozens of different subjects all around the planet. People who are incredibly



different from us. A queer kid getting bullied on a playground and crying around a corner, wiping their bloody nose. A Haitian laborer traveling to the Florida Keys on a makeshift raft in the noonday sun, longing to see his children back home. A woman giving birth in Sudan with no water anywhere around. A Ukrainian soldier who had lost his entire family, shivering in a trench, waiting for artillery to land. A scared child singing a song while hunting boar for the very first time in a remote jungle somewhere.

(You know what? Now that I think about it, this whole endeavor I describe could make a terrific sci-fi film!)

Imagine if, through this systematic, deeply virtual educational technology, humans were able to fundamentally conjoin with experiences outside of the normal ken of our daily lives and the lives of our local “tribe” and consequently emotionally mature. What if humanity, through this method, took a gigantic leap toward world peace with the help of our Compassion Machine? We would eventually get to a point where we simply could not stand to allow the suffering of any of our fellow human brothers and sisters.

Good news. We already have this machine! Each and every one of us. And guess what, at risk of being totally corny . . . it’s called the *human heart*. If we *train* this pulsating muscle, use it more frequently, focus on it, harness its power, we can join in a very similar precious and profound union with someone less fortunate than us. Someone a world away.

Now you might notice that I’ve specifically been using the word “compassion” and not “empathy” or some other words that might seem to mean the same thing. Let’s explore.

The *Harvard Business Review*’s “Potential Project” actually published a breakdown of the words we use to describe our understanding of another person’s experience. In a rough way, it’s like this:

**Pity** is the lowest form of this understanding. It is the experience of “I feel *sorry* for you,” which, to me, also implies someone holding oneself above others.

**Sympathy** is the sensation of “I feel *for* you”—the passive response of “that’s rough” to someone’s pain that feels superficial in its emotional connection.

**Empathy** is closer, expressing the idea of “I feel *with* you.” But in my personal experience, empathy is a heart-based reaction to what another person might be going through (i.e., you cry when you see a friend cry because you feel their pain), but that’s where it stops.

**Compassion** is described as “I feel with you, and I am *here to help*.” It captures the most significant willingness to provide support and *action* to relieve another’s suffering. True compassion, in other words, transcends empathy because if you are experiencing compassion, you are driven to action to *alleviate* the pain. And that’s *exactly* what humanity needs right now. I would argue this human/divine virtue is our most surprising superpower.

*Radical* compassion is somewhere between the divine and the practical. It’s a pragmatic and commonsensical way to build emotional bridges between parties that wouldn’t normally intersect. And at the same time, it’s one of the most transcendent of spiritual qualities that cries out for a life-altering opening of the heart. Compassion is both the most human of emotions and the most sublime. And, like all virtues, it is a muscle in the chest that can be trained, nurtured, and honored.

If the Notorious G.O.D. is able to hold us in His gaze, in the palm of His hand (metaphorically), with nothing but utter love and forgiveness, my hope is that this is something we can emulate one to another right here on old planet Earth.

And why “radical” compassion? Because regular old compassion just ain’t cutting it. We must expand the number of people we are able to deeply “feel with” and want to help, as well as increase the depth of the feeling itself. Until, finally, the intensity of that feeling, like water burst through a dam, leads to real transformative action.



Regular compassion pauses at the point of empathy, while radical compassion demands action. And finally, seeking to relieve other people's suffering ultimately requires the pursuit of justice.

"The best beloved of all things in My sight is justice," writes Baha'u'llah. "Turn not away therefrom if thou desirest me."

The Dalai Lama is the living embodiment of this concept. He has a daily practice of compassion for the Chinese invaders who killed one million of his fellow Tibetans during their annexation of the territory, while at the same time forcing many of the residents to become atheist, to burn holy books and renounce their elders.

He says it perfectly: "Real compassion comes from seeing the suffering of others. You feel a sense of responsibility, and you want to do something for them."

And finally, his holiness sums the whole thing right up when he says, "If you want *others* to be happy, practice compassion. If *you* want to be happy, practice compassion" (italics mine).

Science confirms this wisdom to be true. In a study of one thousand people over seven years reported in the *Journal of Translational Psychology*, researchers found that higher levels of compassion toward others (versus toward self) predicted statistically better physical and mental health outcomes in nine out of ten adults.

As a matter of fact, Matthieu Ricard, a seventy-six-year-old Tibetan Buddhist monk, has been called the happiest man in the world. Why? Because during brain scans his happiness levels were off the charts and broke every previous record. And what was he doing when he achieved the highest recorded level of happiness? Why, a meditation that focuses on compassion for all of humanity, of course.

And there's the payoff. All this radical compassion for others, and the actions we then undertake, comes right back around and helps us with our own sense of inner bliss. A vitally needed source of individual and personal rocket fuel that can help kindle and sustain our desperately needed spiritual revolution.

And there you have it, a compendium of some concepts we might draw on for our global, transformative revolution. Some spiritual solutions for some spiritual problems. Pillars to build on. As I said, we're really going to need a few dozen more of these that have been fleshed out to a far greater extent and to a far more exacting degree, but it's a start.

Because when I examine under the hood of the car of humanity, what I find is . . .

Dammit!

I just can't do it anymore. I need to find a better analogy. (Pauses.)

OK, found one.

But you're going to need to read the conclusion to find out what it is.