

# The Peoples Café

*Peoples Cafes* are a FREE, ongoing series of cafe discussion groups in many communities.

They include table conversations and group dialog. Since we meet in public cafes, efforts are made to draw other patrons into our discussions. Our commitment is to be non-partisan politically, religiously, and philosophically. Why have these Peoples Cafes? ~ The main element that has degraded representative democracy in this country is less about the policies or legislation of today's government, and more about an absence of dialogue and critical analysis.

The vacuum caused by this absence has been replaced by the monologue of corporate and military-industrial owned big media. It's time for the dialogue to return to our communities.

People thrive in community. Though sourcing authentic human values is a personal process, gaining understanding and a social perspective originates from the communal experience. With the best of intentions, when we isolate or surround ourselves with uninspiring chatter, our spirit diminishes. Supportive community, honest communication, and sharing of objective information tends to uplift the spirit and augment our human values. With a strong spirit and clear values, when we act in unison, real change is possible.

**These cafe gatherings stimulate and facilitate real dialogue. Our discussions involve issues and perspectives originating from human values. And from these values, we become involved and we act in unity.**

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## A Core Analysis

We live in interesting times.

Okay, it sounds like a cliché, but the intended point is that, unless you've been deeply involved in studying world affairs, or engaged in politics, social activism, or environmentalism, to name a few hobbies, it's difficult to get a good handle on describing where we stand in today's world.

Most know that things are far from okay, there's much-too-much war, carnage, genocide, and ecocide going on. Global warming is not on the horizon, but hits us in the face as we walk out the front door. Obviously, certain regions of the world are encountering much more strife than others. For now, let's talk from the perspective of a resident of the good ol' USA, especially since that's the only region where "official" **Peoples Cafes** are meeting, so far. And since we know that our modern world is so inter-connected, let's take the perspective from the United States, but taking into account the US's role within the greater planet. First of all, it's important to establish that this nation, the USA, was founded as an *experiment* of a fair and democratic society, with a representative government to support and enhance such a society.

Democratic terminology from the U.S. constitution is still commonly quoted in modern U.S. society. The freedoms that are so often referenced as a product of our democratic government are typically associated with the victories of the Revolutionary War, the twentieth-century's World Wars, the abolition of slavery, womens' voting suffrage, and racial civil rights.

Yet our modern democratic government has strayed far from its ethically-intentioned origins. The Democratic and Republican parties, unlike most European and South American political parties that struggle among many in proportional or parliamentary systems of government, do not presently exist to drive any specific legislative or social agenda. Rather, they serve to advance the interests of their party members, and, in particular, those at the highest echelons of the parties.

The Republicans, for the moment, support the Christian Right because it serves their needs. The Democrats, for the moment, support Labor (sort of) and Womens' Reproductive Rights (sort of) because it serves their needs. Both parties would ditch their present "constituencies", however, in a flash, if doing so proved a direct path to power.

With such a system as a backdrop, we are challenged to formulate our own *world view*. It is easy to rely on commentaries, analyses, and opinions on the state of today's world to shape that view.

It can also be just a knee-jerk reaction to join with the angry voices that rebel against the policies and actions of today's powerful governments. Such reactive voices frequently express the demands and slogans originating from the "**anti-war**", "**anti-globalization**", and "**anti-Bush**" sectors. But in order to respond in intelligent ways, we require an informed analysis that digs deeper than the surface level--- we need to know "*...the rest of the story*".

An informed analysis, enriched by insights derived through community dialogue, can lead to a *visionary* response, with practical and positive outcomes.

Also critical to an effective analysis is the understanding that the fabric of our society, along with the state of our government, are rather inseparable. Our American world today can simply be described as a **techno-consumerist society**. In many ways, though such a cultural orientation may feel comfortable enough, especially if one can afford the modern consumerist comforts, it ultimately works *against* us. The relationships between social norms, lifestyle habits, and elected government, need to all be included in our analysis.

For a clearer understanding about our current condition in the US, here are some results of a recent (2006) domestic poll taken in many parts of the nation by **Princeton Survey Research**:

- 74% of Americans are “dissatisfied” with the way things are going in this country. (The highest in 13 years).
- 54% think “America’s best days are behind us.”
- Asked about their level of satisfaction with politics in America, 15% say they are satisfied, and 70% say they are dissatisfied. (Only 3% say they are “very satisfied” and 44% say they are “very dissatisfied.”)
- 82% agree that “America has become so polarized between Democrats and Republicans that Washington can’t seem to make progress solving the nation’s problems.”
- Quality of education of our children: 72% see as crucial
- Threat of global terrorism: 71% see as crucial
- Availability of quality health care: 68% see as crucial
- America’s dependence on foreign energy: 67% see as crucial
- Situation in Iraq: 66% see as crucial
- The increasing national debt: 62% see as crucial
- Corruption in Washington: 62% see as crucial
- The issue of immigration: 50% see as crucial
- Global warming and climate change: 44% see as crucial
- Guns in our society: 39% see as crucial
- Abortion: 30% see as crucial
- Gay marriage: 22% see as crucial
- 61% of Americans say the 2008 presidential election is “the most critical election in years.”
- 73% agree that “it would be a good idea for this country to have more choices in the 2008 election than just Republican and Democratic candidates.”

## Our Self Awareness

We all source our own self-awareness in individual and creative ways. Many describe the primary function of a human lifetime as a journey of self discovery. When people come together to transform society, a common perspective or experience is typically sought to build unity and integrity of purpose. But true transformers of society can be distinguished from the reactionaries by their discovery of identified **personal values**.... values that reflect a journey of self discovery.

Values like these may sound self-evident at first, but accessing and nurturing them is no easy feat. This is why a "transformational social movement" cannot be viewed upon as simply an ideology or philosophy. True intentions need to arise from inner-sourced values. And we can spend much time documenting what we believe such values would be, but there's a more direct and authentic vehicle to get there: **Self Awareness** (or "consciousness").

Well, I guess if we're able to read this page, we must be conscious, rather than being unconscious. But what we're really identifying here is the process of **conscious awareness**. It may be true that the pathway of being aware of one's existence can lead to many life-enhancing, and even mystical experiences, but it also holds the capability of generating values derived from an appreciation of all life, including a genuine compassion for the earth and her inhabitants. Once these values are sourced within ourselves, the actions required for transformational work in the world become so much clearer. Some metaphysical philosophies have a tendency to polarize the experiences of "conscious awareness" and "social action", as if the two are not capable of co-existing. But a consciously-aware individual breaks through such barriers, and engages such awareness into fruitful action.

Community members attend Peoples Cafes for a variety of interests, with the most common objective of wanting to affect societal change via community dialogue and action. But experience in the café gatherings has shown that when participants' interests are more **ideologically-driven** than **value-based**, dialogue tends to remain theoretical, and social action is done reactionarily.

However, those participants who have spent time in self exploration tend to hold a deeper perspective on making a difference in their community and in the world. Concern tends to not only be about *our own* interests, or just our economic class, or even just our nation. Rather, concern expands to all life, in all places... and also with a greater interest in creating a better world, than in chastising those whom we deem responsible for today's problems. Self awareness could also lead to self-evaluation; what has been *my own* role in formulating the community, and the world, we live in? What are my lifestyle choices, my willingness to talk with others, and my involvement in community or civic activities?

Self awareness can also lead to a process of tapping into our own platform of **life values**. When these values are not defined by political affiliations, religious doctrines, or ideological theory, but rather by our own internal experiences and our relationship with life, they can take on a whole new meaning. One of the most powerful potentials of holding and identifying these life-values is that they can replace issue-positioning on the platform of our engagement in the world. What this means is that we no longer need to play the polarization game when it comes to speaking or acting with individuals, groups, organizations, or even political parties. Polarization quickly takes place when our position on an issue becomes opposed by someone else's position. Such differences of opinion will naturally and frequently occur, and sometimes even some of the healthy disagreements can devolve into harsh criticism, accusations, projections, and even demonizing of the "others".

But when we approach the policies, choices, and decisions of the day from a platform of **values**, not only can many of these polarization scenarios be circumvented, but it also becomes far easier for people to get a clearer understanding of our intentions and desires. And when these values represent sane, cooperative, and respectful policies toward our world, it becomes **DIFFICULT** for others to argue against-- whereas a position on any **issue** is **VERY EASY** to argue against, and to be misconstrued. This suggested approach doesn't portend that we never engage in making choices on the issues of the day. After all, decisions still need to be made, ballot measures need to be selected at the voting booth, and daily choices still need to be carried out. However, experience has shown that *personally accessing*, and then *skillfully presenting*, one's own values when it comes to life's affairs, not only leads to much more enjoyable forms of communication, but moves us to our goals of building a better world more quickly.

This method has been repeatedly proved at the Peoples Cafe gatherings. Expressing personal values about life and the world leads to much deeper conversations, even when values greatly differ-- whereas getting hooked into strong debates on differing opinions of specific issues sometimes leads to the type of contention that pulls people apart, rather than bring them together as community. And community building is why we meet in the first place.

## A Representative Democracy Movement

Why a **Representative Democracy Movement**? First of all, aren't we as citizens, at least in the USA, already in a democratic nation? And aren't we supposed to be represented by our elected government?

Yes, and yes. But unfortunately, it's not working very well these days. And not only is it revealing its obvious flaws, but the "representative" component needs to be urgently admitted into *Intensive Care!*

It's likely true that an accurate reading of a society's active democracy is hard to gage, because it's a moving target. But for democracy to be real, the citizenry as a whole must be represented by its government, its social services, and its election system. When that breaks down, when big-moneyed corporations call the shots, when special interests control public policy, and when being a millionaire is a basic candidacy requirement to run for any significant public office, then the democracy devolves and becomes a sham.

Many of us have worked for improving, or restoring, democracy via a variety of vehicles: social-justice activism; electoral politics; non-profit organizations; charities. All of these efforts have helped in their own way, but unfortunately not enough to restore real social representation across the spectrum of economic class, race, ethnicity, and nepotism.

The histories of the world, as well as US history, have demonstrated that shifts of major social change have successfully occurred over time. But aside from violent revolutions, these social shifts have rarely occurred as a result of benevolent acts or policies by government officials, including heads of state. Nor have they been a result of specific platforms chosen by political parties, or their candidates running for office.

Also, rarely have small numbers of idealistic, outspoken political activists, citizen petitions, or issue-focused public-awareness campaigns drastically transformed the fabric of a society.

The reality is that major social change comes about when transformation is SO badly desired by the people as a whole, that a mass social movement grows within a society, attracts people of all persuasions, and becomes an un-mutable voice and WILL of the public. When that point is reached, there's no turning back, and major change is the result! We've seen it played-out in US history with the public's dissatisfaction with the Viet Nam war, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, and earlier movements for womens' suffrage and abolitionism. Numerous other historical examples exist worldwide.

So the first step, perhaps, is to believe that it is do-able. And this present moment is our unique window in time to build real community as a foundation for growing a grass-roots democracy movement. Real community creates social interdependency, emanates from our core **self-discovered values**, and is diverse in its form of expression. The time of organizing from a position of reactive-anger and polarized "*Us vs Them*" orientation is coming to a close. When we react or merely protest to the actions or policies of imperialism and corporate domination, it is typically a sign of defeat, not of empowerment; it indicates that the public majority has been largely asleep-at-the-wheel, probably for decades, and was unsuccessful in preventing our current dilemma. Expressing displeasure to actions and policies is fine, but still disempowering. An empowered movement can do more, and create more.

A good example here is that about one year before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, few people predicted such an outcome. But fall it did, as a result of a building momentum that gathered force. An accumulation of hard work by underground activists, in combination with drastically changing economic conditions, propelled the cause for freedom past the point of no return, and surprisingly, the wall came down. Who says that a freedom-and-justice oriented **democracy movement** cannot have similar success here?

It's also important to recognize, in the course of movement-building, that people working for social change often operate in a state of high stress, driven by the sheer magnitude of the problems we face, the suffering in our communities, and declining social and environmental indicators. Additionally, they may be angry at those with power whose greed and unconsciousness continue to create injustice, wars, and environmental destruction. Yet increasingly, activists are coming to appreciate that fear and anger, while they are often an important part of *awakening* political consciousness, are not ultimately the best fuel for making change. Many of us have responded to the words of Gandhi: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." To really become part of the solution rather than part of the problem, it becomes necessary, even in the midst of chaos and struggle, to go beyond railing against what we don't like. We must learn to keep our hearts open, and to dream the positive future we want to create.

From this perspective, and a foundation of more self-awareness, stems what we're naming **inspired engagement**. Such engagement in world affairs has been rare to find, but is now increasing in example. Stemming from a base of heart-felt caring, social concern, or metaphysical experiences, along with those involved with committed spiritual practice or religious faith, inspired citizens are recognizing that disconnecting from the problems of today's world as a form of "spiritual safe haven" can begin to feel hypocritical. Finally, the point is reached where one cannot stay home and block away the world's suffering any longer. What we're noticing with the emerging activities associated with **inspired engagement**, whether it be via personal lifestyle choices, or by connecting with social or faith-based activist groups, is that the actions are more connected with feelings of global compassion than with reactionary judgment or blame.

Social movements don't naturally appear the way the seasons change, nor do they become slogan-ized by way of Madison Avenue marketing campaigns. They arise because of great and desperate needs. According to John Maguire, a "Freedom Rider" for civil rights from the 1960's, "Suffering and oppression are not enough to create a movement. A movement begins when the oppressed begin seeing themselves not just as victims, but as new men and women, pioneers in creating new, more human relations, thus advancing the evolution of the human race." Additionally, the **representative democracy movement** will be built as the supporting base broadens and diversifies. Leaders *emerge* from the movement, they do not *found* it. The model has a collective leadership so that no one individual has the power to determine the alliance's path.

For a new movement to matter, there must be active collaborative dialog among African American activists, Hispanic activists, Muslim American activists, GLBT, labor, Department of Peace activists, students, Asian Americans, veterans, progressive Christians, Palestine/Israel activists, international grassroots organizations, Native Americans, organic farmers, environmentalists, anti-nukers, young people, feminists, and so on. What we need is a multi-racial, multi-class social movement with strong participation and leadership from racial minorities, labor, women's, and other organizations. Failing the development of such a peoples movement, or a major collapse of U.S. power abroad, the trend in the U.S. is for a stronger national state, stronger global state, and weaker municipal and state governments. The trend is also for more corporatization of public institutions, especially public education. And the trend is for rigged elections on a whole new level, along with a concurrent growth in popular disenchantment with elections and voting.

Regardless of political party or preferred system of government, we all have values that, when applied to the world, can result in enough food and shelter for families, clean air and water, sustainable food-production practices, and general fairness to others. This is where we recognize our shared values and collaboratively take steps to make the vision real.

Movement-building begins with grassroots communication. And the place to begin is at the neighborhood level, then extending outward. As community members regularly gather to listen and talk at local **Peoples Cafe** gatherings, the first steps of movement-building are taken. Talk leads to understanding and trust, trust leads to solidarity, and solidarity leads to collective action.

## Pro-Active Solutions

Our social movement will be supported, and driven, not merely by our words, but mostly by our actions.

Collective, pro-active, solution-focused projects in our communities, are our best demonstration of **reclaiming our democracy**.

Breaking free of the economic strangleholds of consumerist capitalism, and replacing it with creative, collaborative activities to improve our world, is the best medicine for our pain. The old slogan of **think globally, act locally** is more practical now than ever!

We reside in a society oriented around the system that author Harvey Wasserman identified as *King C.O.N.G.* (Coal, Oil, Nukes and Gas). And there are plenty of ways to start breaking our oil addiction, including investing significant resources in solar and wind power, promoting fuel efficient vehicles, and focusing on conservation and efficiency. A "low-carbon diet" is now being prescribed!

As Gandhi stated, "We must be the change which we wish to see". When we open to our own conscious awareness with an open mind and heart, personal values emerge. And these values may project a vision of a wonderfully transformed world, including a cooperative society and authentically democratic government.

But if our own lives are not a living example of what we wish to manifest outside of ourselves, how righteous can our ideological ambitions be?

For example, many of us have an easy time criticizing the recent foreign policy of the U.S. government, especially when so much attention and dollars are directed to other nations, while we suffer domestic economic hardships. This is a great example of how we need to get our own house in order first.

We have the blessing and the curse to be living in a time in which scientists have repeatedly reported on the imminent destruction--and in many cases, collapse--of major parts of virtually all of the earth's principal ecosystems. The rate of destruction, overall, is accelerating rapidly. In spite of this abundant and verifiable evidence, political leaders continue to be elected, both in this country and abroad, who clearly do not place a high priority on protection of the environment. While it is politically correct to mention the importance of environmental conservation, the voting records of politicians make their priorities clear to see. And so we drift rapidly toward further impending disasters of catastrophic dimensions.

There are many excellent resources on the nature of the problems and what needs to be done about them. These informative resources include Web sites, books, documentary videos, educational events, and visits to areas where you can directly experience environmental degradation (although it may indeed already be evident in your neighborhood) and witness those who live without even the basics for a decent, healthy life. The good news is that there is a lot of agreement on viable solutions and the means to actualize them, though we still clearly lack the collective political will to implement these solutions.

It is also crucial to become aware of the many proposed alternative models to existing conditions. A better world is indeed possible, and an increasing number of organizations are coming up with workable designs and blueprints for a sustainable future.

**Please visit the People's Café website:**

**[www.PeoplesCafe.us](http://www.PeoplesCafe.us)**