

COLLECTIVE VISIONING



**How Groups Can Work Together
for a Just and Sustainable Future**

LINDA STOUT

An Excerpt From

***Collective Visioning:
How Groups Can Work Together for a Just and Sustainable Future***

by Linda Stout
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers



I write this book in honor of my parents, Kathleen and Herschel Stout, who modeled core values of honesty, respect, and compassion while teaching me principles of equality, justice, and peace. But most of all, my parents supported me and believed that I could accomplish anything I wanted to. I deeply miss them and know they are proud of who I am today.

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preface

I HAVE come from growing up in extreme poverty to being a leader of a national organization. If anyone had told me when I began working—first, in tobacco, later in a hosiery mill, and then moving my way up to be a secretary—that I could make real change in the world and actually write books, I would have looked at that person as if he or she were talking another language. I was not the leader type and did not have the education or confidence to do any of these things.

When I first started organizing, I went to trainings that were pretty conventional. They taught me a lot about working for change. I also began to ask why some of the techniques I was learning didn't work for me and other poor people in my own community. I would go to leadership workshops and leave feeling that I could never be a leader, or I'd go to fund-raising workshops and leave knowing that I could never raise money. And I always knew I could not write!

Obviously, that has changed. It took a long time for me to find my own voice and power, but I did, and I've helped others find theirs, too. Still, over the years, I've battled a self-doubting voice that says, "I'm not good enough to be

a leader or to write a book.” The messages I got as a young person who grew up poor and the assumptions that some people made about me because I did not get to graduate from college have stayed with me. Even though I’ve been exploring what it means to be a leader for decades, and even though this is my second book, the voices of doubt are still there. My experiences have shaped how I think and work now. My passion and my life have come to be about making this world a place where all people can feel powerful and take leadership in creating a just and sustainable world.

I started organizing for peace when I lived in Charleston, South Carolina, and helped start a Quaker meeting there. I had no clue how to organize around peace, but I met another young woman named Carol who came to the meeting because she was also interested in starting a peace group. She was about my age but very different. While I was working as a secretary, she was a hippie with tattered Birkenstocks held together by duct tape who lived on an old sailboat. We went to my house after the Quaker meeting and made a plan for the first meeting of our own group. I had been looking for someone who could lead a peace group that I could be a part of. As we started to put together the agenda, she said, “You have to be the leader.”

I looked at her in shock and said, “I can’t do that.”

She said, “You have to. Look at me. No one would listen to me!”

I knew she was right. People would discount her not only because of how she looked and dressed but because she wasn’t southern. I was scared, but all it took was that one person to help create a plan and to support me. We began to organize. Very soon, a number of interns and medical

students joined our group. They had been motivated by a film from Physicians for Social Responsibility about nuclear winter, an environmental catastrophe many believed would happen if a nuclear war took place, making the earth uninhabitable for most life.

We soon joined up with the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, a national effort to stop and disarm nuclear weapons. The campaign grew powerfully and successfully, and eventually, I was asked to serve on the board. After Ronald Reagan's election as president of the United States, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and Physicians for Social Responsibility mushroomed into mass movements. Historian Lawrence Wittner refers to this history in his article "What Activists Can Learn from the Nuclear Freeze Moment." In June 1982, nearly a million Americans turned out for a rally in New York City against the nuclear arms race, the largest political demonstration up to that point in US history. The nuclear freeze campaign drew the backing of major religious bodies, professional organizations, and labor unions. Supported by 70 percent or more of the population, the freeze was endorsed by 275 city governments, 12 state legislatures, and the voters in nine out of ten states where it was placed on the ballot in the fall of 1982.¹

Thanks to popular pressure, the administration largely lost the battle to develop its favorite nuclear weapon, the MX missile, securing funding for only 50 of the 200 originally proposed. The administration also opened negotiations on eliminating strategic nuclear weapons, abandoned plans to deploy the neutron bomb in Western Europe, and accepted the limits of the unratified SALT (Strategic Arms

Limitation Talks) II treaty (though previously Reaganites had lambasted the treaty as a betrayal of US national security). Moreover, according to Wittner, the president began to proclaim that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”²

Historian Lawrence Wittner concludes, “If this dramatic reversal in US public policy could be produced when the Reaganites controlled Washington politics, then a similar turnabout can be fostered today.”³

Despite the huge successes, the movement has dwindled in numbers and lost the power it once had. There was a brief rise at the beginning of the first Gulf War (1990–91) and again at the beginning of the second Iraq War (2003 to present), but soon those gains fell away as well. Many people and organizations are still devoting themselves and their resources to peace, but nothing currently compares to the earlier powerful numbers of the freeze movement.

So why did such a powerful movement fall apart? Why is it almost nonexistent in most people’s minds and in the news today? I believe that there are three major reasons.

First, the national peace movement failed to mobilize most working-class people, low-income people, and people of color. Certainly, the members of this movement made valiant efforts, but they were unsuccessful because of their lack of attention to cultural differences and education levels and their inability to make the connections to the economic issues facing poor people.

Second, many of us in this powerful movement shared a sense of doomsday and worked mostly from a place of anger and fear. We didn’t understand how to move that anger and fear into sustainable, positive action. We used films and

maps to show what would happen in the event of a nuclear bomb explosion and how the radioactive fallout and the environmental effects of a nuclear winter would destroy the earth as we know it. We demonstrated the firepower of nuclear weapons in the world with BBs. We would ask people to close their eyes and imagine that the next sound they heard was equivalent to the total firepower contained in all the weapons used in World War II. We would then drop a single BB into a metal can. Again, we would ask them to think of all the firepower used in World War II, such as bullets, bombs, grenades, and the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. And again, we would drop a single BB. We would explain that since World War II, nuclear weapons had multiplied significantly, primarily owned by the United States and Russia. Then we would ask them to close their eyes and tell them the next sound they would hear was equivalent to the nuclear weapons present now; it did not include bombs, grenades, bullets, or other conventional weapons. We would slowly pour 2,225 BBs into the can.⁴ I remember doing this exercise many times and seeing a look of fear and horror and sometimes tears on people's faces. Many people joined the campaign out of their horror and fear of a nuclear war.

Third, and I believe most important, the freeze movement fell apart because it was *a movement without a vision* of what a peaceful and cooperative world would look like. I still deeply care about this issue, but when I was in the middle of the campaign built on fear, I suffered from nightmares and constant fear that life as I knew it would be destroyed at any moment. Many others I have talked to who were part of the beginning of this movement say the same thing. Others

compare it to the fear of environmental and climate disaster today. I believe it is impossible to sustain a long-term movement without a positive vision of what we can accomplish, what the world would look like on the other side.

So, instead of continuing to focus on the doomsday pictures, I now ask, "What do we want the world to look like?" Those who work for change from a place of joyfulness and hope are more able to be effective, reach more people, and win what they want. The movement is more sustainable.

I have been accused by other activists of being utopian or too optimistic, of not looking at reality. That is far from my truth. A vision in itself is a critique of the present times. Sometimes people think of collective visioning as an escape mechanism or as not being grounded in reality, but how can we move toward what we want if we can't envision what it looks like? That doesn't mean we don't acknowledge the current realities we are up against, but it's a different frame to work from—a frame I believe can sustain us and give us hope against the horrifying issues and problems facing us today.

People are already afraid. But I know that if people had a vision filled with hope of what could be, knew what they needed to act on, and believed in their power to make it happen, we could create a just and peaceful world today. This book is my next step in helping us get there.

LINDA STOUT
Belchertown, MA
March 2011

Creating a Different Future



This book is for all of us looking for a different, more fulfilling, and sustainable way to work that creates real and lasting change for ourselves and future generations.

In *Collective Visioning*, you will learn how to create a vision with others of the world you want to live in and how to work together to make it happen. This is a guide to how to change your community, your organization, your faith group, your school, and beyond. I know collective visioning works for many different kinds of people and organizations because I've used it with so many different groups: small gatherings of junior high school students in New Orleans after Katrina, urban immigrant communities, activists in Iowa, hundreds of churches and spiritual gatherings, students at Ivy League universities, networks of educators, and folks working (with stunning success) to get out the vote in North Carolina, among many others.

In my work for justice over the past thirty years, I have seen many amazing accomplishments. In the chapters to come I will tell you the stories of how some of them happened. At the same time, I know that many things have continued to get worse for many people and that there is

greater poverty, homelessness, and economic and environmental crises than we've seen in many decades. Yet I hold enormous hope about creating a future that works for us all.

Understanding the value and power of collective visioning for the future of our communities and our world is critical to our ability to inspire others to move to action. Many of us who have worked for change have been focused on problems and creating strategies and plans to address these problems. By always focusing on the problems, we get locked into patterns of negativity and critique, not allowing ourselves the ability to look at the bigger picture or set goals that inspire and help us and others through the hard work of change. Our focus is on what we are against rather than what we are for. People who join in the struggle for change often come from a place of anger and fear. This makes emotional sense given the urgency of current problems, but it isn't sustainable for the long haul.

Authors Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson point out in their book, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*, that the majority of people in this country hold positive values: a concern about the environment, peace, homelessness, hunger, and poverty. At the same time, their research found that a lot of these people are turned off by movements on both the right and the left, which they see as extremist, negative, and judgmental.

As a result of these perceptions, many people who care about the environment and social justice stay away from organizations in favor of individual actions such as volunteering, carrying a cloth bag to the grocery store, recycling, donating food, or working for a food bank on holidays. While all of these actions are important and worthy, we

need efforts that inspire people to address the larger root problems we face.

When people vision together, they get excited and become much more invested in creating the future of their dreams. They begin to take more ownership in their organization, school, or community and take on responsibility for the plan they create together. They begin to say “we” and “our” and feel that they are a critical part of the process. They volunteer to do more and are more accountable than is usually seen in groups that are not grounded in a collective vision and action plan. People develop a deep sense of community and connection. The work comes from a place of joy and hope.

In *Spirit in Action*, my current organization, we have experienced this many times in the work of building networks. It’s amazing to see how many people step forward to help when times get tough. They also help each other, sharing resources and skills. These are much more connected and deeper networks than most. Those in a group share a sense of being part of a community, a family, even though people in most of our networks are scattered across the country.

When we ground our work in a collective positive vision, the process builds a strong and connected community. Not only are we more successful in winning the issues, we transform ourselves, our communities, and beyond. We look at what we need to do in a more cooperative, resourceful, and inclusive way than when we are focused on just fixing problems. While we take into consideration urgent and current issues, our ongoing action, based on a collective vision, is strategic and intentional. Not only does visioning guide our

work, it inspires and motivates people to stay in it for the long haul despite the hardships. It leads us toward lasting, proactive, positive action for change.

We need to work together to come up with a collective vision for what is possible, identify seeds of hope already planted, and then learn how to make real and lasting change. We need to acknowledge and heal from our fears—the fear of others, of global warming, of terrorist attacks, and of losing our identities—and learn how to transform these fears into real action for change.

Most of us will need to relearn what it means to live in a community, that is, a diverse community that goes beyond our usual circle of friends or those who think just like us. If we understand what we can gain from being part of deep, connected, and diverse communities, we can learn how to work in a way that is joyful, fulfilling, and life sustaining.

I've witnessed this kind of work, and sometimes I've been part of making it happen. I want to make it easier for you to be part of it, too. When people vision collectively, their achievements are amazing. For example,

- In North Minneapolis, people have a vision of reclaiming and rebuilding their neighborhood from a place of violence and decay into a place of community involvement, beauty, and safety. Their vision is to have all children born in the community be prepared for college when they graduate from high school. Not only are people from the community committed to this goal, but also elected officials (including the mayor), artists, businesspeople, and many others are working together to make this vision a reality. They have already bought many foreclosed homes and rebuilt them as sustainable green homes and have

rebuilt businesses owned and controlled by community people. They have also created a youth art center, an arts park, a youth-run bakery, and a community theater with youth involvement and training.

- A poor community in Tallulah, Louisiana, fought for over ten years to close down one of the most abusive, oppressive prisons in the country—a prison that incarcerated young people. After community members won this important fight, the state immediately voted to reopen the prison as an adult penitentiary. Not until the community members turned to visioning—“What do we want instead of a prison?”—were they successful in getting the state to vote to close down the prison with the idea of turning it into a community college.
- Children in New Orleans changed the way new schools are being rebuilt after Hurricane Katrina to include community gardens, green space for outdoor classes, restorative justice circles, and cafeterias that serve healthy food and have hand-washing stations.

I will tell you more about how collective visioning worked in New Orleans and Tallulah later in the book.

Imagine if these examples were all seeds. What could happen if our whole country worked together collectively to grow these seeds into nationwide and worldwide actions?

Imagine if we could mobilize to elect leaders dedicated to *real* democracy, leaders who truly represent us and what we care about and are accountable to us, the people, rather than corporate power and money.

I started Spirit in Action in January 2000 after an extensive listening project with activists from all over the country

conducted in 1998–99 by Peace Development Fund while I was the executive director there. We asked people who worked on many different issues at every level what was needed to build a powerful movement to create a just and equitable world. When we started Spirit in Action, we continued this exploration and began to identify clear issues that needed to be addressed.

We decided to search for answers about three powerful issues people had identified. The first issue was that we activists were really good at talking about what we were against but not good at talking about what we wanted to build—the kind of world we wanted to live in. We lacked a collective vision that we could all rally around and work together to create.

The second issue was all the ways that people get divided—by race, class, age, gender, sexual preference, and religious or spiritual beliefs, as well as by competition for turf, credit, and funding. People felt that we needed a new way to learn to work together and that the ways we were doing antiracism and anticlassism work needed to be more inclusive. We needed to work to heal divisions rather than polarize people.

The third issue was what I identify as “spirit” or “heart.” I use the word “spirit” in the broadest sense. People talked about what motivated them to work for justice. Many were motivated by religious and spiritual beliefs. Others were moved by parents or other people they’d known who had deeply influenced them. Some had experienced or seen injustice in their lifetimes and, as a result, felt called to work for a different kind of world. All of them came into this work from deeply held heart or spirit values, but often they

felt isolated because they were unable to express those values. People felt uncomfortable about sharing their whole selves in diverse groups. Many also felt that we often didn't have time to work in a way that allowed us to bring our whole selves into the work. As a result, many felt disillusioned and angry and often spoke of burnout.

Many people we talked to felt that there had to be another way to work—a way that was inspiring and fulfilling. Spirit in Action was formed to begin to find answers about those three issues from other organizations and many individuals. Some of the answers we found are in this book.

My own spiritual practice came to be about listening. As a lifelong Quaker, listening to spirit led me to listen to what people needed, to what people weren't saying, and to the people who had no voice in the groups I was a part of. Eventually, I was listening to as many people as I could, including my friends and family of different political backgrounds—from extremist left to extremist right, and the many in between—to friends who were Buddhist, Quaker, atheist, Pagan, Fundamentalist Christian, Conservative Christian, Progressive Christian, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, and agnostic. I even listened to people who had been members of the Ku Klux Klan. I realized that, deep down, most of us share many of the same fears and values. We all hope for a better future for our children and generations to come.

It is no secret that I am a spiritual person and very progressive in my political views. All of my friends know this, and I often have loving conversations with my conservative friends about our different beliefs. We learn from each other in powerful ways. My uncle Ed once started a conversation with "Well, I know you believe differently than I do, but I

still love you, and I want you to read and think about this article about the war.”

I said, “I love you, and I will read or think about this, but I would like for you to read and think about something I send to you.” We agreed to do that.

My aunt Carolyn and uncle Ed talked with me about this book when I was first thinking about it. After we talked, they sent me several Bible verses about the importance of visioning, like this one, Proverbs 29:18: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

So why am I writing this book about collective visioning at this time? Because I’ve seen people join together to make incredible changes in their communities and lives. I know that if we work together we can create a different world, not only in our lifetimes but for generations to come.

In this book I want to

- Tell stories of goals that have already been accomplished
- Give you guidelines on how to vision a collective future in order to create a just and sustainable world
- Help you learn how to start building deep and collaborative connections with others to work together for your visions
- Offer guidelines about how to build a stronger and more diverse community
- Empower you to work from a place of inspiration and joy

During the 2008 Obama campaign, I saw thousands of people, especially young folks, working for change because they had hope for the message of a different future. The message of hope and change energized and moved thousands of

people to take action, many for the first time in their lives.

While it would be wonderful to think that electing the “right” president or other government official would solve all our problems, unfortunately we have a political system that is so driven by big money and corporate power that even people we have elected who share our values of justice and equity and want to make change often come up short of what they promise. It’s easy for us to sit back and blame or resent the government, but the truth is, until a majority of people believe they have the power to create that kind of change, we will continue in the same way, with corporate power and money driving the policies that affect our lives.

We are now living in a time of great change and upheaval in our society. We see a level of decay of infrastructure, schools, jobs, government, and community we have not seen in decades. We have become a nation of individualists, reduced to protecting and building for ourselves, rather than for the good of the whole. We instinctively know how to be in community and to support each other—we saw examples of this after the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center in New York and after Hurricane Katrina. At the same time, we saw examples of our divisions and fear of others in these catastrophes, divisions that oppressed people because of their race, ethnicity, class, and religion. The challenge is to figure out how we can build a sustainable culture of working together in a way that embraces all of the diversity that is our ultimate strength.

Many people feel helpless about making change in their lifetimes. The truth is that we all have the ability to make these changes, but only if we learn to understand the

“other” and to act on what we really want for ourselves, our families, and the earth. In order to create a different future, we must first create a collective vision and learn to work together effectively to make it happen.

The popularity of self-help “visioning” books reflects a population hungry for hope and positive vision. However, the concepts in many of these books inspire people to create a vision for what they want personally. This moves them to an even more isolated, individualistic, and materialistic place and the belief that if you are not becoming wealthy or getting the perfect job, it’s your fault for not thinking positively enough. There is a place for individual visions in my work, and I’ve included a chapter about them in this book, but when you begin to join your vision with those of others, true excitement and change begin to happen. I believe that this alternative message is what people are eager for—one that breaks our isolation, builds community, and most importantly, gives us hope for the future.

In this book, you will find that I often use the words “we” or “us” instead of “I” or “me.” That is because so many people contributed to the formation of these ideas. Many of the ideas come from knowledge that has been with us for ages. Much of my methodology comes from Spirit in Action’s first experimental Circles of Change. These took place all over the country, with twenty-seven trained facilitators. Hundreds of people who participated shared their knowledge and insights with us. Our methodology also came from many organizations that had information, insights, and strategies that we learned from. I list many of those in the resources at the end of the book. We also have a strong

team of staff, volunteers, and consultants who have come together to help create the work we do today.

When I first started using visioning for myself and in my own community, I was not aware of the decades of research by sociologists, historians, futurists, and others about visioning. If you, like me, think you might find having a historical perspective and information on academic research about visioning useful to help you understand more deeply the role it can play in social change, you can find more about this work on my website.

In addition to our own collective knowledge, it's important to remember that we stand on the knowledge of many others who have passed their wisdom down to us. I have read about visioning in indigenous cultures that predate Christianity. I have learned from my elders and peers. Even more, I have come to learn from the young activists in my life. They inspire me, challenge my thinking, and make me want to work for a better world for them to inherit. Because of all of these people and what they have taught me, I have taken on my biggest challenge: to write another book! I have learned so much and have so much to share. I hope you will find this work as inspiring and exciting as I do—and will believe, like me, that you, too, can help change the world.

This book will help you see the importance of collective visioning in working together to create a healthy and sustainable world. And it will give you concrete steps for how to do it.

First, in chapter 1, I explain what collective visioning is and how it is done and give you guidelines for how to lead a collective visioning exercise.

In the next three chapters, I give you information about how to build trust and gather a diverse group of people to do collective visioning together. I help you with strategies for how to find the leaders in communities other than your own, how to create a truly welcoming and inclusive space, and how to best prepare people to work together. I offer ideas on how to use personal visions as a way to move toward collective visioning. I explore the power of storytelling in healing divisions and building trust.

In chapter 5, I take a look at how change happens and at ways to develop people's skills and willingness to work together by using different strategies to reach toward the same vision.

In chapter 6, I help you use the collective vision to develop a plan for action.

In chapter 7, I look at ways to sustain work for change in the long haul. I look at cultural shifts around power and positive focus, the broad cultivation of visionary leadership, and strategies for holding the vision and continuing to act while facing setbacks.

Throughout the book, I give you exercises, tools, guidelines, and suggestions for how you and your community can create your own models for change. Feel free to adapt and use what fits for you and your community. Leave out what doesn't.

Visioning is not the only action that creates change, but it is a critical first step. As an activist and organizer for justice, I believe that we have to leave behind many of our old ways of doing things and work collaboratively toward collective vision and action. *Collective Visioning* is an invitation to vision, dream, prepare, and work for a just and sustainable world.

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