



## Global Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A “Micro” Perspective

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### Abstract

*The main goal of the present paper is to make a suggestion about global leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century from a perspective somewhat removed from the most (and justly) dominant one. Great powers, international institutions, and grand strategies appropriately get the most attention. It is to them that we look to create the peace, prosperity and justice with which we are all concerned. There is another perspective that is important, however, a “micro” perspective, one that concentrates on small things—like grains of sand that can freeze the gears of the great engines of progress.*

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*“The whole of what human beings do with and to one another and to the world around them everyday—is visibly the primary agency of sustainability. And a review of the Agenda and the Goals quickly makes clear that such agency and such a culture cannot arise fundamentally from coercion, for the spirit of both the Agenda and the Goals is one of empowerment.”*

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The suggestion is this: the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals, both expressions of a decidedly “macro” perspective outlining central challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are ultimately dependent on what is commonly called *the grassroots*. Global sustainability will require a global culture of sustainability because the great ensemble of regular human activity—the whole of what human beings do with and to one another and to the world around them everyday—is visibly the primary agency of sustainability. And a review of the Agenda and the Goals quickly makes clear that such agency and such a culture cannot arise fundamentally from coercion, for the spirit of both the Agenda and the Goals is one of empowerment. Sustainability without grassroots “buy-in” and engagement is an absurdity.

It should be quickly added that the empowerment sought is *for* something: responsibility. The Agenda and Goals aim to empower global humanity to act responsibly, and responsibility implies both objectives and discipline. The discipline envisioned, however, is ultimately *self-discipline*. The Agenda’s architects were wise in that design, if only because little in our

experience suggests that seven, or soon ten, billion people can be coerced into consistently doing something they do not want to do. But everyone who takes the Agenda and Goals seriously knows it was wise, as well, because they are each the expression of a deeply humane spirit and project a deeply humane future. Genuine humanity cannot be coerced.

Humane aspirations and all too human observations both suggest the need for *self-discipline*, which in practice amounts to *active engagement*. So it is necessary to ask how that engagement could be brought into being.

The idea of “grassroots” is preliminarily instructive. The *grass* is anchored and nourished by the *root* of which it is an integral extension, and they both emerge from a *seed*, which blooms into a healthy plant under the right conditions. We are first asking, then, *What is the seed?* and *What are the conditions?* of the healthy integrated whole, *grassroots*—with *healthy* meaning active engagement in sustainability, or more fully, sustainable *development*.

Juxtaposing the integrated metaphorical integrity of both seed and plant with the duality of sustainable development raises an old and large question. Commonly, *sustainability* is understood as a standard to be applied to *development*: development must be *made* sustainable. That formula is weighted, however, with the troubling implication that the source or foundation of the standard is distinct from the force to which it is applied. If so, a *culture of sustainability* in the sense meaningful in the modern world (a world committed to *development*) will be essentially a dyad, and to that extent unstable and at risk of collapsing into a unity defined by the stronger of the two forces. In textbooks, enlightened self-interest might be theorized to be sufficient to stabilize the whole. In real life, people more often vote for their passions than their interests, and certainly more often than their enlightened interests. The meaning of *health* within our sought-after conception of *grassroots* (and by implication *leadership*) evidently requires a mode of activity or being in which *development* and *sustainability* are so integral to one another as to be indistinguishable. They are one.

There are likely many seeds and many effective conditions. Here we are concerned with just a few of each as they are illustrated by some brief but relevant histories, and with conclusions that can be stated briefly by highlighting some links between those histories and what lies ahead in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Some facts and events related to the American civil rights movement are pertinent. The United States harbored the enslavement of Africans and their descendants for over 200 years, as is generally known. Slavery was brought to a formal end by the American Civil War, but after the assassination of President Lincoln and a relatively brief period of “reconstruction,” a system of apartheid was established to return African Americans effectively to subjugation, exploitation and abuse. Estimates vary, but as a mark of the spirit of that system, 4000 to 5000 African Americans were “lynched” between the 1880s and the 1950s, and many uncounted more were murdered, maimed, or “disappeared” (to borrow a term from another period).

One reason to mention these things is to highlight how far people can go, and might think they need to go, to coerce a culture into being and attempt to sustain it. Another is to prepare the ground for a second observation: while the rise of the civil rights movement and much

else in African American history demonstrates the ultimate futility of such a strategy, it also demonstrates that a terrorist-agrarian society can be very effective at breaking or suppressing the active engagement of people in their own development. It would need to be considered how far a technological-industrial society can do the same. In any event, African Americans had much to overcome, both in the larger society and within.

The word *within* is used advisedly because one of the greatest (if not so widely known) figures of the American civil rights movement was an African American woman named Septima Clark, and Ms. Clark entitled her second autobiography *Ready from Within*. Ms. Clark identified a great challenge of leadership, including I think leadership of global society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: how to cultivate that *readiness from within* without which African American voting rights then, and grassroots-dependent sustainable development now, are wistful aspirations. And she discovered that challenge, that great question, when looking out at the future and fate of people who by her time had experienced despotism and inhumanity for the better part of over three centuries, and of whom few expected much.

Septima Clark was first a teacher in Charleston, South Carolina, public schools. She lost her job for participating in civil rights activities. In about 1954 she took a position with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee (more later) and her work took her to Johns Island, South Carolina, one of the Sea Islands not far from Charleston, working with another extraordinary person, an African American man named Esau Jenkins.

The Sea Islands at that time were still pocked with and surrounded by swamps, alligators, mosquitoes, disease and the like, making them inhospitable to the land and slave owners. So the owners tended to live further inland—in Charleston, for instance, which was the biggest slave market in the United States—and leave the slaves to tend to the crops on the islands. The Africans and their descendants interacted less with the whites and developed a distinctive culture, creole language, music and the like, which was much closer to the African original than in many other locations in America. To some degree, that culture continues to this day.

The former slaves and their descendants on Johns Island and the other Sea Islands were poor and knew little of the outer world. Esau Jenkins, who was from Johns Island, was industrious in finding ways to help others on the island advance. And one of his projects involved teaming up with Septima Clark of the Highlander Folk School to create what were soon called “citizenship schools” in which illiterate African Americans learned to read in preparation for taking voter registration literacy tests that were designed specifically to keep African Americans from voting.

Many of those who would become participants in the Johns Island citizenship school were understandably frightened at the idea. They could only expect abuse and worse if the white community learned what they were doing. So they built a cinder block building in the front room of which there was a little country store, and they held night classes in the somewhat concealed back room.

Participants’ success at the Johns Island citizenship school became the seed and model for a voter literacy program across the American south. That citizenship school program was

run by Andrew Young, supported by Septima Clark, beginning in 1961, under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The same Andrew Young who worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr., was later elected mayor of Atlanta, Georgia, and was appointed US Ambassador to the United Nations by President Carter. The schools played a leading role in creating the grassroots foundation for the voting rights movement, the active engagement of African Americans from Johns Island to the Mississippi Delta in the effort to secure African Americans the right to vote, requiring committed engagement over a protracted period and at substantial risk.

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It is important to highlight several aspects of Ms. Clark’s approach to teaching in the Johns Island citizenship school. Although she was herself a teacher, she found someone else to do the teaching of adults—her niece, Bernice Robinson. Ms. Robinson was a beautician, and as such had something of a special standing in the community. She also disclaimed being a teacher. Her primary qualifications, it was said, were that she knew how to listen and respected adults who wanted to vote. Bernice Robinson began her first adult education class by saying “I am not a teacher, we are here to learn together. You are going to teach me as much as I’m going to teach you.” Her reading materials were the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the South Carolina state constitution. She discarded children’s reading material as too juvenile for the adult students. Together they developed the curriculum day by day—writing letters, filling out money orders, making up stories about the vegetables they grew, and the like. And her students learned how to read well enough to pass the voter registration tests.

In brief, Ms. Clark set in motion an educational experience that took her students seriously and facilitated their becoming active learners—mainly to teach themselves—something that they wanted to learn for their own reasons and for which they decided to attend the class once intelligent material and security provisions had been provided. She and Esau Jenkins created the conditions amidst the people she wished to serve that would facilitate their activation in a manner that did not simply deliver information, but engaged their spirit, interests, judgment, and agency in a cause she held in common with them.

The full story of the spread of the program across the American South is more complicated than can be outlined here, but the decisive feature for present purposes is that she and her Highlander colleagues relocated the program (and herself) to an organization better capable of facilitating its spread. She was not building, sustaining, serving or captured by an institution. She was not building a resume, LinkedIn page, career or public profile. She was working for a purpose of immense importance and the institutional and occupational context and her

choice of associates were instrumental to that work. Like those whom she served, she was *ready from within*.

The Highlander Folk School was established in 1932 and developed by a white man named Myles Horton who was from a very poor family that lived in the southern Appalachian Mountains. Mr. Horton knew poverty and knew the poverty of others. He was angry about it and the system that allowed, created and enforced that poverty. He developed the conviction that education of a certain sort could be an important instrument in upending that system\* and spent quite some time exploring what others had done and what kind of education might work.

Mr. Horton eventually wrangled a location, a farmhouse in the Tennessee countryside and, together with colleagues Don West and James Dombrowski,<sup>†</sup> established Highlander—essentially by hanging out its shingle and living off of the most modest of material provisions.

In its early days Highlander was especially concerned with the union movement in the American South. In the course of his work, Mr. Horton occasionally got involved directly in organizing within the union movement. He found he had a special gift for giving speeches, which at one point he had to do regularly. Eventually, however, Horton stepped back from that role, judging that while his words set people in motion, they did not facilitate self-motion. His impact was really limited to the immediate situation and better served his self-regard than the cause for which he was working. Someone might need to give speeches, but he knew how to do more. He returned to education.

The education that he eventually developed at Highlander (which was shut down by the authorities for a time and had to be reopened at another location and with a modified name) involved mainly assembling groups of activists and aspiring activists to discuss their challenges in advancing their causes. Highlander provided a place for collective study and exploration and ran it in a manner consistent with their overall convictions. In an age of apartheid and “Jim Crow,” African Americans and whites ate together, met together, and learned together and from one another in the segregated state of Tennessee. Highlander also organized expertise as requested by the activist-participants or as seemed useful given the challenges they were discussing. But Highlander did not instruct, was not a think tank, and did not stand on its expertise. Horton tended to shy away from requests for advice, in part because what he wanted the participants to learn was how to solve problems for themselves.

Horton also included music and other performing arts in the activities of the school. His wife directed the music program until her accidental death. Afterward, it was directed by another individual of immense historical significance whose name, like that of so many at Highlander, seems known only within some small, scattered circles, Guy Carawan. The song

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\* Highlander was a controversial organization for many years, in part for its alleged affiliation with the communist movement in the United States. The philosophical orientation of Horton and others associated with Highlander is an important question but does not bear very directly on the question of its strategy for cultivating grassroots movements. There are indications that key people at the School differed in various ways on fundamentals but largely agreed on grassroots strategy, which is our sole concern.

† Don West left Highlander for personal reasons and amid some uncertainty about where it would be located after the first year. He established a school in Georgia, and in 1967 established the Appalachian South Folklife Center in Pipestem, West Virginia. James A. Dombrowski stayed at Highlander as Executive Secretary for several years before taking a position at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938 and in 1948 as Executive Director of the Southern Conference Education Fund.

*We Shall Overcome* became, one could fairly say, the anthem of the American civil rights movement. It was sung at the March on Washington and in jail cells in small towns from the Atlantic Coast to the Mississippi River and was a galvanizing force. Horton's wife, Zilphia, first found the song at some labor movement events in Charleston in 1945. She brought it back to Highlander where it was polished up over the years into the song we now know. Martin Luther King, Jr. attended some sessions at Highlander in 1957, where he heard the song, and driving to his next event he commented, "*We Shall Overcome*—that song really sticks with you, doesn't it." Pete Seeger helped polish the song a bit and took it to a wider audience. Guy Carawan, as Highlander's music director, polished as well and spread it (and countless others) through the civil rights movement.

At the end of Highlander sessions, Horton often asked participants what they intended to do at home with what they had learned. One participant responded she did not know—she needed to think more about that. Not long after, she refused to give up her seat and move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. By that action in 1955, which got her arrested and could have gotten her killed, Rosa Parks set in motion events that culminated in a year-long bus boycott by the Montgomery African American community, a seminal event in the civil rights movement that would transform American life.

To summarize, *conditions* for cultivating *grassroots* in the view here outlined include:

- Having a place—a base-camp—but mainly for creating ideas and practices to be taken into the field and among the people ultimately being served.
- Providing as much safety as possible, which may involve a certain amount of stealth.
- Earnest respect for participants—their experience, knowledge, desire to learn, capacity to discover collaboratively, and ultimately for their cause, their goals.
- Appropriate materials and specialized expertise, *as needed*.
- Modest teachers who do not “teach” so much as facilitate learning and learn themselves.
- Teachers who are flexible, creative, and can keep “their eyes on the prize.”
- Low “overhead”.
- The wise use of music and other performing arts.

The *seeds* of such a grassroots are the individuals who, if given the right conditions, will bloom. They are angry, impassioned, alert to dangers, courageous, thoughtful, strategic, practical and determined. Given even limited opportunity, they act. They do not need the limelight and even see its risks and pitfalls. They mean to get something done. One of the best accounts of Highlander was written by an individual who was at one or another time “a newspaperman, truck driver, one-time college drop-out, cobbler, and farm laborer.” He entitled his book *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*.

The world is today facing multiple crises simultaneously, including crises of both sustainability and development. Many causes of those crises are well known but not of immediate concern here. What is of concern is the question of the leadership required to overcome them.

A *micro* answer to that question, we have suggested, might lie in cultivation of those capable of being an actively, creatively engaged grassroots, served by teachers of a certain sort and capable of driving action at ground level. For a grassroots to be *that* grassroots, they would need to have understood in their minds and in their hearts—to have fully absorbed—the transformational insight behind the observation that *development which is not sustainable is not development*, which implies that important elements of technological-industrial modernity have been an illusion. They must also have become impassioned by what they have understood. In today’s context, the enormity of the grassroots activation challenge might well seem daunting and deflating. But at least two questions would nevertheless remain: *What is the alternative?* And, *How daunting did the voting rights challenge look to a middle-aged African American woman sitting in the back of a cinder block building on a South Carolina Sea Island surrounded by swamps amidst the ascendancy of Jim Crow apartheid?*

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The coronavirus pandemic that has enveloped the world should not go unmentioned. It surely poses important risks and challenges to work on behalf of sustainable development. But anyone committed to addressing the sustainable development crisis should be braced by the awareness that the coronavirus crisis is in its own way a preview of what lies ahead for humankind if the rise of atmospheric temperature is not stopped. Humanity depends on a weave of conditions that can be pierced, as the current pandemic has made manifest. Such rare events that rend that fabric only highlight its vulnerabilities, however—they do not exhaust them. And it requires optimism unmoored from judgment to suppose that deep changes in atmospheric conditions that have prevailed since the last glacial age will not activate disasters comparable to or overshadowing today’s.

The worldwide economic crisis the virus is precipitating will require a great deal of public investment. It will take some time for that project to mature, if it matures, but the *grassroots* should not be without influence over how that investment is targeted. It is worth saying a word in the present context about the sources of *grassroots*. For, though most of them are well known, an important addition could be made to the usual list: the *professions*—engineers, architects and other designers, managers, lawyers, physicians and others who by virtue of their knowledge, skills and employment play pivotal roles in creating the world in which we live, but who render the idea of a *profession* hollow if their action is guided by no more than technical and market considerations bereft of principles of informed leadership. What conditions or education might be required to render the professions ready from within is an important question.

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