

Exercise 3.5
Imagining a Better World

Part 1: 30 minutes

Part 2: 30 minutes

This exercise is in two parts—one cerebral, the other imaginative. The first part asks you and a supportive, interested friend or friends to think deeply about an issue, how things came to be the way they are, and what might help create positive change regarding that issue. The second part calls on your imagination to move beyond the rational thought process to an imagined state of an improved world. The two parts do not have to be done together. Again, detachment can help you move forward to intentional choices. What emerges here can be very personal and emotional, which will be useful later in using your personal connection to an issue to make change in that sphere. Allow yourself to explore issues fully and from many different angles and perspectives. An example of doing this exercise using the topic of homelessness follows.

Choose one topic that is of significant concern to you—something you'd really like to have an effect on in the world (you may have identified a topic in the questions above or you can refer to the list of issues in Chapter Two).

Topic: _____

**Part 1: How did things get the way they are?
What might help them to change?**

With your friend who shares your interest or concern, brainstorm about what you know about this issue and present some of your main questions. You may want to consider the effects of key historical events, public education and opinion, and the interests of proponents and opponents of various actions that could address the issue. This part of the exercise may lead you to do some research to inform yourself more fully about the issue. When you've completed your thinking, list some of the ways the issue has been dealt with in the past and possible ways to address it in the future.

Part 2: Imagining a better world

In some quiet time alone, or with your companion of Part 1, imagine a world in which the issue you discussed in Part 1 has been completely changed for the better. For example, imagine an end to discrimination, or all endangered species flourishing. Daydream about the specific circumstances that would be different in this new world. What had to happen to make your vision possible?

When you're finished, reflect on your vision the way you would if you were thinking about a dream from which you had just awoken. Choose one piece that strikes you. Look for what is most exciting, intriguing, or surprising in your vision, something you would love to see in your eyes-open, real-life world. Brainstorm with yourself or your friend about ways this piece could inspire a new area to fund or a new approach to your giving.

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Imagining a Better World, Cont'd

AN EXAMPLE OF IMAGINING A BETTER WORLD

Topic: Homelessness

Part 1: Why is there homelessness in the United States?

What might help this to change?

Key Historical Events, Public Opinion, and Interests

- Federal policies have cut back on resources and services for the poor and the mentally ill, leaving many of them on the streets without the community services they need.
- Other federal cutbacks have severely reduced funding for subsidized housing.
- The real value of wages for many working people has decreased as costs of living have escalated.
- The millions of Americans without health insurance are only an illness or an accident away from using all their savings on health care.
- Widespread corporate downsizing and relocation to other countries have left many low-wage workers without jobs.
- After many years of widespread, visible homelessness, the general public has become hardened to it and concerned about their own safety; many cities have instituted “panhandler” laws prohibiting homeless people from asking for money.
- Many city governments seem more concerned about keeping homeless people out of downtown areas where they disrupt commerce than with trying to meet these people’s needs for food and shelter.
- Continuing trends include the isolation of individuals and the dissolution of communities.

Questions

- What is involved in people becoming homeless right now?
- What impact has welfare reform legislation had on homelessness? On immigration and homelessness? On migration and homelessness? On the increases in the prison population?
- What are the characteristics of different populations of homeless people (women with children, substance abusers, and so on)?

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- What role does addiction play in the lives of homeless people?
- What are the specific needs in my city? For example, are there enough shelters? Do they stay open year-round?
- What is my city doing to integrate people of diverse economic status and reduce isolation?
- What helps people to find homes and jobs again?
- Can philanthropy help find an effective, long-term solution to the gap between the homeless and those who are not homeless?

Possible Actions and Keys to Change

- Proactive and humane government policies
- Job training for jobs that are actually available
- Subsidized housing programs
- Establishment or development of multiservice centers
- Recovery programs and better education about addiction
- Government enforcement of shifting handouts helping people get into stable programs that have longer-term impact
- Public education that emphasizes how close many families are to homelessness
- Community development groups that connect people around shared community interests
- Expanded and improved government assistance systems that provide minimum financial security, basic health care, and mental health services, especially for families in distress
- “Living wage” campaigns, affordable housing campaigns, small business loans, and tax reform—all of which would contribute toward a more equitable distribution of wealth

Part 2: Imagining an end to homelessness. What characteristics would our culture have in order to eliminate homelessness?

Our culture would place a high value on everyone’s quality of life. Communities of caring would support all of their citizens. Nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, and governments would support the infrastructure that provides

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services such as job training, career counseling, and apprenticeships. There would be enough safe, clean shelters for people who needed them, including adequate facilities for women with children. People who lost their jobs or suddenly had their income threatened for some other reason, such as family illness, would have access to friendly and forthcoming government welfare programs, including housing, food, and transportation vouchers, and health care. There would be multiservice centers that help those in need with support, referrals, and training all in one place.

How to begin to help

One piece that might strike you is the need for job training and career counseling programs available to anyone who needed them. You could begin by phoning your local church, synagogue, mosque, homeless shelter, or city hall to find out what programs exist. You could then contact some of the programs to find out what they need most. They may need volunteers to help job seekers go through the newspaper's classified section and phone employers, or they may need interview clothes and voicemail services for people looking for jobs, or bus and taxi vouchers for people going to interviews. You might host networking events to help connect individuals so they can share skills, experiences, and opportunities. You might see a way that you personally could begin to make a difference in the lives of some of the homeless people in your area. Beyond such immediate help, you may hear about campaigns to change laws or regulations affecting homelessness and how to become involved at that level.