# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
## Spirituality · Community · Justice

**How Change Happens:**
**Why do some social movements succeed & others fail?**
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I appreciate Nick's choice of "There Is More Love Somewhere" for our Musical Mediation. If you open your gray hymnals to #95 and look in the lower right hand corner, you'll see that the tune for this hymn is BIKO. It is named in memory of a Black South African activist named Steve Biko.

Starting in the late 1960s, Steve Biko was a leader in the Black Consciousness Movement, a grassroots anti-apartheid campaign. He was also a founder of the South African Students' Organization, which centered black leadership in the struggle to end racial segregation. In 1977, pro-apartheid members of the South African government arrested him under the so-called "Terrorist Act." Tragically, he was killed during the first day of his imprisonment from cruel and inhumane interrogation methods. He was only 30 years old.

He is a powerful example of the saying that, **"One person's *terrorist* is another person's *freedom fighter*."** His martyrdom for the anti-apartheid cause inspired many others to carry on. Over 20,000 people attended his funeral, and his story was further immortalized in the 1987 film *Cry Freedom*.

The lyrics to the hymn named after him are simple but profound:

There is more *love* somewhere. I'm gonna keep on 'til I find it.

There is more *hope* somewhere. I'm gonna keep on 'til I find it.

There is more *peace* somewhere. I'm gonna keep on 'til I find it.

There is more *joy* somewhere. I'm gonna keep on 'til I find it.

Steve Biko was willing to risk his life to act for more peace and justice in the world. Both his life's work and posthumous legacy were significant parts of the movement that led, in the early 1990s, more than a decade after his death, to the beginning of racial integration in South Africa. In a similar spirit, I would like to invite us to reflect on some recent social movements over the past few decades here in the United States, seeking insight on what does (and doesn't) work in building the better world we dream about. **Why do some movements for social change succeed while others fizzle or even fail?**

For considering this question, one of the most helpful resources I have found recently is the book How Change Happens by Leslie Crutchfield. She is the executive director of Georgetown University's Global Social Enterprise Initiative. She and her team have researched some of the major recent movements for social change in the United States to find common patterns.

How many of you remember going out to eat at a restaurant that had a "smoking section" and a "non-smoking section"? (Not a separate room, but a designated set of tables—as if the smoke was supposed to somehow know to stay on a certain side of the room?) Or how many of you remember when smoking was allowed on airplanes, which was until 1988 for most domestic flights—and until 2000 on some flights? At the time, many people considered ubiquitous smoking to be "just the way things are"—and/or too difficult to change because of powerful, monied interests intent on blocking change by any means necessary.

But today,

> Youth smoking rates have dropped down to 6 percent. For adults, from an all-time high when more than half of men in America smoked, rates have flat-lined to around 15 percent on average. **Tobacco is banned from most places in the United States—offices, airports, malls—and in some states, even in casinos.** (1)

Individuals are, of course, free to smoke at home and in various designated places if they so choose, but that's a remarkable shift around smoking that I did not necessarily expect ever to see.

Similarly, MADD ("Mothers Against Drunk Driving") succeeded in **"cutting by half the alcohol-related driving deaths since the 1980s"** (3). A 50% decline in drunk driving deaths—incredible! That's another tremendous social change in a relatively short period of time.

I should hasten to add at this point that around this same time period, there was also social change in more *regressive* directions. For instance, **"Gun laws today are more lenient than at any point in modern U.S. history…. There are more gun shops in the United States than there are McDonald's and Starbucks** *combined***"** *(2).*

So what can we learn from these various movements about what does and doesn't work? I'll start with the bad news. According to Leslie Crutchfield and her team at Georgetown, who have crunched the numbers and compared the data, **"There's no real recipe for social change, no 'movement in a box' that we can put in place to create a more equitable, just society"** (ix). But there is good news: These researchers have identified **six strategies that "seemed to distinguish the effective movements from the others"**:

1. Strong grassroots
2. Builds momentum state-by-state
3. Changes hearts *and* policy
4. Partners with "Adversarial Allies"
5. Partners with Corporations
6. "Leader-full" (12-14)

I'll say more about each of these factors in turn. As I do so, keep in mind the groups and causes closest to your heart. Are there one or more strategies that you or others might be able to help implement to increase your chances of creating the social change you dream about?

**First,** *strong grassroots:* lots of ordinary people committed to local, bottom-up activism. For example, the single most important reason that the NRA has been so successful in expanding gun rights in recent decades is that, **"Gun control advocates historically have failed to match the scale and intensity of the NRA's grassroots**

**field movements"** (23). This same factor—the "size and intensity of the base"—was also decisive in the success of MADD ("Mothers Against Drunk Driving") and the coalition of LGBTQ+ groups that catalyzed the legalization of same-sex marriage (23). In contrast, the (to date) much less successful movement to prevent gun violence, embodied in organizations such as the Brady Campaign, were most often focused— not on the grassroots—but on elites at the national level in trying to pass a comprehensive gun control bill through Congress (24).

The good news is that in just the past few years there are new players on the field, such as Everytown for Gun Safety, who are trying to learn from both the mistakes of the past and the successes of the NRA (42). Now, **"(E)very time dozens of [grassroots NRA activists] show up at a town council meeting in their neon orange hunting garb, an equal number of passionate women sporting bright red "Moms Demand Action" [to prevent gun violence] T-shirts show up on the opposite side"** (45-46). I love that! There are no guarantees. But empowering a strong base of grassroots activists is one way to significantly increase your chance of creating social change.

**Second,** although it is tempting (and sometimes possible) to create change in one fell swoop at the federal level, the more time-tested and reliable strategy is to *build momentum incrementally: town-by-town, city-by-city, state-by-state*. Two decades ago, there was essentially no chance of achieving LGBTAQ+ equality on the national level. In fact, the opposite was happening. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (defining marriage as only between opposite-sex couples), and there were thirteen states with ballot measures attempting to ban same-sex marriage (2). Fast forward a decade and the outlook didn't seem that much better: "More non-discrimination bills were passed in 2005 than any year since 1992" (54).

From that low point, a new way forward was dreamed up called the 10/10/10/20 = 50 Vision—a targeted approach to achieve incremental victory that would hopefully snowball:

- 10 states with full marriage,
- 10 with full civil unions,

- 10 with some form of relationship recognition laws (like domestic partnerships),
- 20 (the remaining ones) with either non-discrimination laws or significant cultural change (55).

This piecemeal approach laid crucial groundwork that helped make possible the Supreme Court decision in 2015 (*Obergefell v. Hodges*) recognizing same-sex marriage rights in all fifty states.

Here's the thing, though: these strategies can be used by anyone. NRA activists used a similar strategy to roll back gun restrictions in state after state, similarly laying the groundwork for a Supreme Court victory in 2008 (*Columbia v. Heller*), ruling—to my mind, incorrectly—that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to posses a firearm "unconnected with service in a militia" (62).

In 2012, my hope was that we would get sweeping federal change around banning military-style assault weapons after Sandy Hook, but the reality seems to be that we need to do the slow town-by-town, city-by-city, state-by-state work to achieve common sense reform for preventing gun violence. And the good news is that in the last few years, Everytown for Gun Safety has had significant success in about half of U.S. states (71). If you are interested in this movement, I encourage you to google "Everytown for Gun Safety" and get involved.

**Third, *have a dual focus on both hearts and policy*.** Traditionally, common sense held that humans "think-feel-do," in that order. Researchers used to believe that people first *think* differently (i.e., we change our minds), which makes us feel differently, which finally makes us behave differently. *Think-feel-do*. But recent science has shown that changing our minds most often comes not first, but last. So the actual order is usually "feel-do-think." Our visceral, emotional reactions cause us to act in various ways, which we then rationalize after the fact. *Feel-do-think* (97).

The feel-do-think approach was used to great effect in the marriage equality movement, particularly when relatives and friends shared their stories of loved ones coming out of the closet (89). People's hearts were moved; then they began to open more to LGBTQ+ friends and family members, and finally, they found their minds had changed.

Recall that our third point is emphasizing both hearts *and* policy. Marriage equality activities were successful because they were simultaneously seeking to change hearts *and* the law of the land. In contrast, #OccupyWallStreet effectively captured many people's hearts and minds with the powerful slogan "We are the 99 Percent," but they never coalesced around specific policy demands (99). The key then is to *emphasize both hearts and policy*.

**Fourth, *partnering with "Adversarial Allies."*** Here's another surprising point where we need to name some more hard truths. Have you ever heard the term "Liberal circular firing squad?" That's when progressive activists sit around squabbling and feuding amongst themselves (103). In the words of one activist from the tobacco control movement whose experience is echoed in many similar stories: "I did not anticipate the ferocity, the nastiness, the viciousness. **It was not the industry opponents who surprised me. It was the people and organizations whom I assumed were allies**" (111). The lesson here is that in movements that have succeeded, various folks had to set aside their endless parsing of differences, their egos, and their control-issues to work together in a coalition for the greater good. That's what it means to partner with "adversarial allies."

**Fifth, *partner with Corporations.*** Especially in the wake of *Citizens United* (the infamous "corporations are people" Supreme Court decision), corporations are often viewed as the villains whose power needs to be curtailed in the struggle against wealth inequality. That's often true, but it is also true that in the history of social change, businesses have often played a crucial, *positive* role: modeling progressive policy changes, serving as partners in advocacy and education, and innovating supporting products such as electric cars, breathalyzers, "smart guns," and Nicorette gum (126-127). In seeking social change, corporations can be crucial allies.

**Sixth, *be "Leader-full":*** find a balance of shared power between the extremes of a "leaderless" anarchy or a completely hierarchal dictatorship. For instance, have you ever heard of Founder's Syndrome? It's when an organization is unable to grow beyond the reach and abilities of a single charismatic leader. A movement can be hampered if it is limited to what one finite person can micromanage. And a movement

can fall apart if that linchpin burns out, quits, retires, or dies (146). To avoid this trap, be leader-*full*: distribute power at various points throughout an organization (165).

It's also important to avoid the other extreme. Occupy Wall Street, for instance, was *leaderless*, and having a leader (or many leaders) can be crucial. For example, I spoke earlier about how effective the NRA has been at the grassroots level, but they also have a strong primary leader in Wayne LaPierre. (He is often a force for evil in the world—an incredibly effective one.) In the wake of Sandy Hook in December 2012, LaPierre

> refused to concede that guns were part of the problem. "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun," he proclaimed…. His tone deaf response was appalling to millions…. But **the NRA went on to secure even more gun rights victories, not fewer.** (153)

Having an effective leader can make a crucial difference. Let's take the lessons wherever we can find them, and apply them in our work for good.

For now, I'll give the last word to the final paragraph of Leslie Crutchfield's book *How Change Happens*:

> As Robert F. Kennedy said,
> "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself,
>> but each of us can work to change
>>> a small portion of events.
> It is from numberless acts of courage and belief
>> that human history is shaped.
> Each time [someone] stands up for an ideal,
>> or acts to improve the lot of others,
>> or strikes out against injustice,
> [they] send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and
> crossing each other from a million different centers
>> of energy and daring,
> those ripples build a current
>> which can sweep down the mightiest walls

of oppression and resistance."

That is how *change happens*. (182)