

EXERCISE 3.2

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. 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. An example of doing this exercise using the topic of homelessness is on the next page.

Choose one topic that is of significant concern to you—something you'd really like to have an effect on in the world. (If you're having trouble defining a topic, refer to the list of issues in Chapter Two.)

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 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. On the next page is an example using the topic of homelessness.

Part 2: Imagining a better world

In some quiet time alone, or with your companion of Part 1, project your imagination into a world in which the issue you discussed in Part 1 has been positively changed 100 percent. 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. Consider your vision for a just society.

When you're finished, reflect on your vision the way you would if you were thinking about a dream you had just woken from. 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 ways this piece could inspire a new area to fund or a new approach to your giving.

EXERCISE 3.2 continued

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 in the early 1980s sent a majority of patients in state institutions to the streets, and failed to provide the community services promised to help them
- Other federal cutbacks in the 1980s and 1990s have severely reduced funding for subsidized housing
- Many cities have instituted “panhandler” laws prohibiting homeless people from asking for money
- Widespread corporate downsizing and relocation to other countries beginning in the 1980s 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 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

Questions

- What is forcing people to become homeless right now?
- How has the welfare reform legislation of the 1990s had an impact 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)?
- What are the specific needs in my city? For example, are there enough shelters? Do they stay open year-round?
- What helps people to find homes and jobs again?
- Can philanthropy help find a good, 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
- Public education that emphasizes how close many families are to homelessness
- 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. Nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, and city governments would support the infrastructure that provides 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.

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, 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 see a way that you personally could begin to make a difference in the lives of some of the homeless people in your area.