

THE ANSWER TO 'WHEN?' IS 'NOW'

BY DENNIS SPARKS

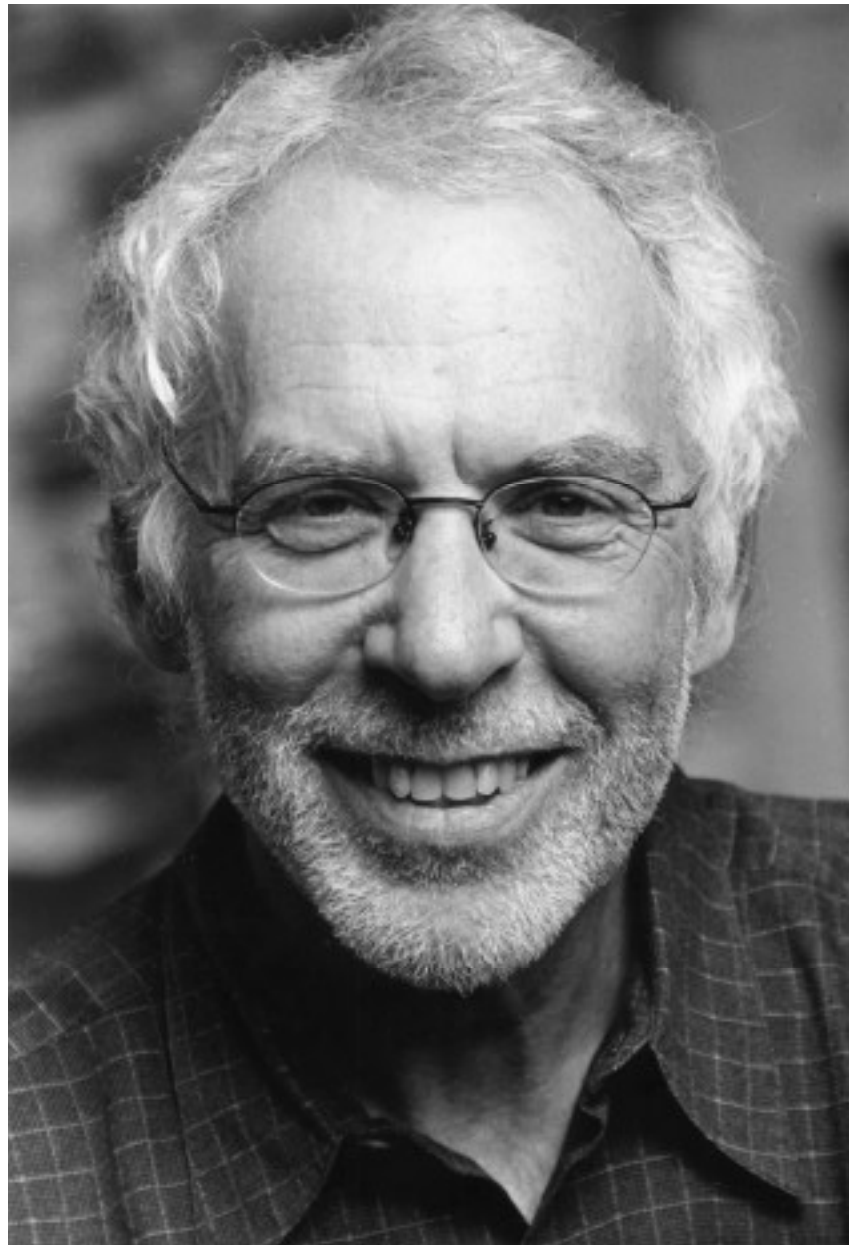
JSD: I enjoyed your new book, *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters* (Berrett-Koehler, 2001), so much that I want to devote a great deal of time to its content. In it you say that we focus too much on methods and not enough on purpose, and that people already know a great deal about how to improve things.

Peter Block claims we already know enough about how to improve schools. It's time to take action.

You wrote, "Individually and collectively, we have the wisdom we need to get the results we want. The challenge is to trust and act on the wisdom. How many times have we brought in an outsider to tell us what we already knew was true?" Later you observed, "My presumption is that we have all the skills, the tools, the training that we need."

Block: People say they need more training, they need more skills, they need more tools. People believe there's something missing in them that needs to be added before they can make a difference. I'm trying to shift the focus from skills and methodology to issues of the spirit, of will, of courage.

I began this book out of frustra-



Peter Block

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tion with the constant questions about how long change will take and what tools are needed. They are disempowering questions. We ask those questions, I think, as a defense against the unpredictability and accidentalness of life. I talked to a market researcher who said that his job is to take the uncertainty out of decision making. That's an unfulfillable promise because the world is dangerous and risky. It's important that we face that by acknowledging that we know enough and we are enough, and if we have a problem, nothing else is required.

NO ONE RIGHT WAY

JSD: That reminds me of something else you wrote: "Seeking certainty in human affairs breeds doubt and the belief that we are not enough. ... Seeking certainty assumes that if we knew more or knew better, we would know what to do." You also wrote, "We think there is a right way, that someone else knows what it is, and that it is our job to figure it out. And the world conspires with this illusion, for it wants to sell us an answer."

In education, that view has led to a large industry of "experts" who claim they have the solution to the problems of teaching and learning even though they often vehemently disagree with one another. This has often led teachers and principals to believe that their job is technical and nonintellectual and requires that they mindlessly implement what the "thinkers" tell them to do.

Block: I think you are generous when you call them thinkers. Mostly they are overseers. They are academics and legislators who have in mind what others should be doing and who believe that standards, high-stakes testing, and incentives will increase performance. People say that school people don't know what they are doing and that schools should operate

more like businesses. Those are expressions of disappointment and contempt, not of care and love and a wish to make things better.

Those who want to privatize and commercialize public education, and their academic allies, have an economic incentive to be right and to have people follow them. But you have to also ask why the education community is willing to buy this type of intervention, to purchase an answer. It takes collusion.

USE WHAT YOU HAVE

JSD: I'd like to stay with the subject of expertise a bit longer. In *The Answer to How Is Yes*, you wrote, "What matters to us does not suffer from lack of knowledge or skills. To say we need more skills before we can do anything is usually an excuse." Many of us have a default mechanism that directs us to study and learn more rather than to take action using what we already know.

Block: Absolutely! We identify with our tools. When confronted with a problem, if I'm a teacher, I try harder at teaching. If I'm a manager, I provide more management. I want to break that frame. More teaching or management may not be required. It's important that we begin by looking at issues of purpose and experience and relationship rather than at our preferred interventions.

COURAGE IS KEY

JSD: A moment ago you emphasized the importance of spirit, will, and courage.

Block: Spirit, will, and courage are elements of our freedom and our connection to each other. They wither in high-control, punitive institutions. If we want our schools to support these qualities, we need to replace the patriarchy and oversight in our schools with more local choice, greater engagement of the whole community, and a deeper investment in

the next generation. Not one child's life has been changed by greater efficiency or getting tough on evaluation and control.

CONSIDER WHAT MATTERS

JSD: In your book you ask readers to determine what really matters to them before worrying about tools and methods.

Block: In our culture we value speed and efficiency for their own sakes. But are we being efficient about things that really matter? While questions of methodology eventually have their place, if addressed too early they end up restraining our possibilities.

YOU CAN'T COERCE CHANGE

JSD: You wrote, "People resist coercion much more strenuously than they resist change. ... Others will choose to change more readily from the example set by our own transformation than by any demand we make of them."

Block: We believe people don't want to change so we have to seduce them into it. That leads to treating people in their smallest versions. It is not change that people resist, it is us. I don't like the thought that someone else is having a meeting deciding how I ought to be transformed.

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INVITE CONSENT

JSD: What you're saying brings us to something else you wrote in *The Answer to How Is Yes*: "The colonial nature of organizations is most visible when leaders think they (we) know what is best for others."

Block: Colonialism is when someone with power dominates others and thinks they are doing them a favor. So much grows out of that idea. Anyone who has consulted knows that one of the first issues brought up is how we will change other people.

That's why the language of my work now is about invitation and consent, about strategies that are inclusive and put people in charge of their own futures.

STOP BEING A VICTIM

JSD: In your book you ask us to consider our own role in our problems and the ways we create the world we live in.

Block: People see themselves as an effect rather than a cause. We believe we are caused by our genes, our culture, or our upbringing. It is a huge but empowering shift to believe that we decide what the world is to become. We declare that we are responsible for this world and stop being victims.

DO WHAT MATTERS

JSD: So much of what you say, Peter, is a contradiction to how many of us think about the world and our lives. Here's a simple example: In your book you claim that there is always time to do what really matters. And yet most of us would say that we must do lots of things, that we have no choice in the matter, and that that's just the way it is.

Block: My experience is that whenever something really matters to me, I have time for it. Time ceases to be a problem once we accept that we are not going to get everything done. We exaggerate our centrality in things, not recognizing that the world will go on just fine without us.

I don't question that people are very busy. We kid ourselves, though, if we believe that busyness is in the nature things. There is no excuse for not doing what matters in a way that matters to us. Of course there's not enough time to do everything. So what?

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WE CAUSE OUR EFFECTS

JSD: While you were just speaking I found myself thinking about the cause-effect language we often use to describe why we do or don't do certain things. For instance, we might say, "I can't do what matters most to me because I don't have enough time."

Block: Getting rid of linear cause-effect language would help. Then we would recognize that we are the cause as well as the effect. There's no one to blame. That's a grown-up thought.

TRUTH VS. OPINION

JSD: People often speak to one another in ways that indicate they know the truth and that those who hold another point of view are wrong. Sometimes people even kill one another over their conflicting views of truth. You wrote in *The Answer to How Is Yes*, "I generally avoid the word truth except when it refers to the voice of God. ... What is called truth is usually opinion."

Block: People use their views of truth as a tool of domination. At least that's my opinion. I'm wary of people who claim to have the truth; it's a conversation stopper. Say to others and the world what you want to say, but don't package it as the truth.

TRUTH BE TOLD

JSD: In *The Answer to How Is Yes* you point out, "The higher up you go in an organization, the more anxious the people are. Those at the top seem

pressured to believe they have the answers. ... Retirement parties are often the first place where the truth is told in public." One reason people higher up in organizations have anxiety is because they believe they are supposed to know the solution to every problem and have the answers to all questions.

Block: It's hard to work with some higher-level executives because they are so anxious and frozen. They are geniuses about their businesses but know little about themselves or how they are perceived by others. We contribute to this because we want them to be parental figures. We don't want to know their flaws. They are supposed to know things, to be something larger than a normal human being.

Because of these things it's much harder to get these people to open up, to share, to be vulnerable with others. They've learned to be very careful about what they say. When you go to a superintendents' conference, you are usually swimming in a sea of pronouncements. There's little curiosity and vulnerability and a lack of any real questioning of what they are doing or how they are thinking about it. Anxiety shuts down their capacity to learn.

It's interesting that people claim their freedom to say their truth when they leave institutions. I think it's better to work on it while we're part of it rather than when we leave it. I don't want freedom and integrity to come to me in my last moment.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

JSD: Something else you discussed in your book may also help explain the problem. "(T)he whole idea that bosses should motivate their people ties us all in knots," you wrote. "Instead, bring your employees together and stimulate the right conversation. This is an important role for any boss — to support the com-

AN ADDITIONAL interview with Peter Block is included in *Conversations That Matter: Ideas About Education I Can't Wait to Share*, by Dennis Sparks. It is available through the NSDC online bookstore at <http://store.nsd.org/> for \$30.

munal pursuit of what matters. Let this be motivation enough.”

Block: I think the idea that bosses will motivate employees is a mistake. It’s more important to ask what motivates us than to wonder what motivates others. For me what is motivating is intimacy, full self-expression, idealism, and people talking about their experience with others listening deeply to what they are saying. This releases enormous energy. It’s interesting that at meetings or learning events people often display far more energy during the breaks. I want that type of energy to be the norm when we work together.

A LIFE WORTH LIVING

JSD: There’s a clue to how that energy is generated in your views about the power of creating. You wrote, “As soon as I begin to discuss what I want to create, I am in the position of cause, not effect.” Later you write, “Citizenship means that I act as if this larger place were mine to create, while the conventional wisdom is that I cannot have responsibility without authority. That is a tired idea. ... I can participate in creating something I do not control.”

Block: That’s an argument against the conventional wisdom. Creativity is an expression of our freedom, and it gives us a reason for being alive. Most people say they are not responsible for their work because they do not control it. I’m trying to push back on that by saying it’s a defense against being responsible, against being accountable for the well-being of the whole.

I believe I can care for anything I choose to care for, and I’m not limited by my position. For instance, I can leave this room and walk out into my neighborhood and invest my energy in things that matter to me. Will I affect change? I don’t know. Will I be acknowledged and rewarded and appreciated for what I do? I don’t

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know. But that’s just a barter mentality, a view that I should only invest in things from which I reap a return. The world is more than economics.

We are human beings who can invest in what matters to us. It is possible through my language and commitments to create a world that matters to me. Out of that comes a sense of having lived a life worth living. It also means I don’t have to wait to do something that matters.

ACTIVISM BREEDS STRENGTH

JSD: You’ve written about the social nature of transformation. “All learning is social,” you say. “It is with our peers that we will ultimately find our voice and change our world. It is in community that our lives are transformed. Small groups can change the world.”

Block: I don’t accept the view that it is only great men and women who truly make a difference in the world. Where does that leave the rest of us? Establishing a community around us can have tremendous impact on our emotional and physical health and on our capacity to perform. Strong communities with high rates of civic engagement have healthier children. Being activists in the world, feeling that we are not alone in the world, knowing that we have something to offer the world, is good for our communities as well as ourselves.

LIVING ON THE MARGIN

JSD: I’m curious about the things you do to nurture yourself so that you can sustain the work you do in bringing ideas to people that may not

always be the easiest or most comfortable ones for them to hear.

Block: I tried for a long time to live a normal life. It just didn’t work very well for me. At some point I realized that I am someone who lives on the margin. That took some of the wear and tear out of being an outsider. While these ideas seem unconventional, they make sense to people. They don’t disagree with the ideas themselves but only whether they can be applied in their lives. I’ve been doing it for a long time and I still feel like I’m still getting ready to do something useful. ■

PETER BLOCK

POSITION: Block, an author, consultant and speaker, is a partner in Designed Learning, a training company that offers workshops he designed to build the skills outlined in his books *Flawless Consulting*, *Stewardship*, and *Empowered Manager*. His work currently centers on bringing service and accountability to organizations and communities.

EDUCATION: His bachelor’s degree is in industrial management from the University of Kansas, and he received a master’s degree in industrial administration from Yale University.

PROFESSIONAL HISTORY: Co-founder of Block Petrella Weisbord and Designed Learning Inc.

PUBLICATIONS: Books include *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*, 2nd ed. (Jossey-Bass, 1999); *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self-Interest* (Berrett-Koehler, 1993); *The Empowered Manager: Positive Political Skills at Work* (Jossey-Bass, 1987); *Flawless Consulting Fieldbook & Companion: A Guide to Understanding Your Expertise* (Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2000); *The Answer to How Is Yes: Acting on What Matters* (Berrett-Koehler, 2001); and *Freedom and Accountability at Work: Applying Philosophic Insight to the Real World*, co-authored with consultant and philosopher Peter Koestenbaum (Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001). In addition, Block has published more than 60 articles on organizational change and building productive communities.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS: Block serves on the board of directors of Connecticut Public TV and Radio and helped found the School for Managing & Leading Change. He has received several national awards for outstanding contributions in the field of training and development, including the American Society for Training and Development Award for Distinguished Contributions; the Association for Quality and Participation President’s Award; and *Training Magazine* HRD Hall of Fame.

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