

Want to Change the World?

**Accelerate Your
Nonprofit or Cause**

Tom Peterson

Stakeholder Press

BOOKS TO MAKE THE WORLD BETTER

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ISBN: 978-1-7324222-1-6

Editing: Melanie Raskin

Front cover illustration: Tom Peterson

Author photograph: Ash Jackson

Cover and book design: H. K. Stewart

Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on archival-quality paper that meets requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences, Permanence of Paper, Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

To **you**...

who obviously answered **Yes** to the book title
because you are now reading this.

Thanks for engaging in your
patch of world change!

And to **Walt** and **Eliot**

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Your bold goal

“My goal is simple,” said Stephen Hawking. “It is a complete understanding of the universe.” Impossible? Of course. But with a less ambitious goal, how far would he have gone? As he reached for the stars (*sorry!*), what they’re made of and all things related and unrelated, Hawking stretched our understanding of the universe. Does it matter whether what we’re trying to do is ambitious? Absolutely! What we accomplish is directly related to our goals.

In the 1980s, I was part of the mission-oriented Oakhurst Baptist Church in metro-Atlanta. It had recently gone through a transformation. In the 1970s, the all-White neighborhood it sat in was integrating and many of the church members fretted over what would happen if an African-American tried to join. So, the pastor stood in the pulpit one Sunday morning and made it clear that there wasn’t going to be a vote—any of God’s children would be fully welcomed as members. When the first Blacks joined, most of the Whites quickly left, shrinking the church from more than 1,000 members to around 150. By the time I arrived in 1980, these remaining members and some new ones had leased out some of the larger buildings to the telephone company and retreated to the oldest building. But, by embracing integration, they’d run off the

folks who weren't going to do much world-changing and they attracted those who were. The small but mighty Oakhurst congregation spawned a number of missions: a restaurant for people experiencing homelessness, a residential addiction treatment program for unsheltered men (third floor of the church), a local Witness for Peace group, and a sanctuary for Central American refugees. The church housed the regional office of Clergy and Laity Concerned, founded by Martin Luther King, Jr. The Baptist Peace Fellowship was founded there, as was *Seeds*, a national magazine about U.S. and world hunger, where I spent almost a decade. Not too bad for a small congregation.

Oakhurst's approach to mission was borrowed from the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. To start something new, a member first had to have a "call" to take on some challenge, such as homelessness, loneliness, world peace. Then a second person had to join in the same calling. Next, they invited others to join them in discovering a way to address the issue. After they had developed their plan, two questions had to be asked before they could move forward: *Is this task impossible? And is it likely to fail?* In order to proceed, the congregation had to agree that the answers to both were Yes! Surprised? Oakhurst wasn't interested in taking on anything that wasn't impossible and wasn't likely to fail. By the way, many of the mission attempts bombed. We honored those that didn't work and moved on. Had the Oakhurst do-the-impossible groups waited until they had eliminated all or even most chances of failure, not one of those efforts would have ever taken root. If you're taking on something that's going to change our world, it probably *is* impossible. Nelson Mandela, who spent twenty-seven years of his life in prison before becoming South Africa's president, said "It always seems impossible until it's done."

Build your world

“If this world does not have a place for us then another world must be made.”

—Zapatista saying

George R.R. Martin’s world in *Game of Thrones* captivated millions with its imaginative geography, languages, cities, attire, customs, and strange creatures. Many novelists tell their stories in familiar settings. But some—particularly science fiction and fantasy writers—have the added task of world-building, constructing an entire fictional reality. Their stories unfold in created settings of a distant planet or a school for witches and wizards. They have to answer a myriad of questions. What are the landscape and the weather like? Where do characters live? What is their daily life like? What do they wear? How do they get from one place to another? What plants, animals, or other creatures live here? Likewise, those of us trying to change the real world should have at least a rough picture of the one we want to create. What does this new world look like? Maybe we can’t see it clearly. But we should try. World-building in the real world is tough! Let’s say we want to improve health care in a remote Appalachian town. Tolkien could tap a new affordable clinic into existence with his typewriter. We can’t. If we want a different world, as the Zapatista saying goes, we’ll have to create it the old-fashioned way. But first, we have to imagine it. In her TED animation, *How to Build a Fictional World*,⁵ children’s book author Kate Messner gives some pointers useful to both writers *and* those of us who want to change our world:

- Start with a place and time so you’ll know where you are.
- Create a time-line to show how the world came to be. What events shaped it?

- Draw out details of the world: What rules are in place? Who has power? What does the society value most?
- Ask, how do the inhabitants live? How do they treat one another?
- Ask what technology exists.

Civil rights activists imagined a world where all people were treated equally. Martin Luther King, Jr., was world-building when he said, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Mahatma Gandhi was great at it. He imagined, against all odds, the British kicked out and an India ruled by Indians. He also imagined and worked for a classless society (a radical idea in a culture rooted in caste), where people of different religions peaceably coexist. Going further, he imagined the ideal village:

It is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many other wants in which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land available, it will grow *useful* money crops, thus excluding... tobacco, opium, and the like. The village will maintain a village theater, school and public hall. It will have its own water works ensuring clean water supply. This can be done through controlled wells and tanks. Education will be compulsory up to the final basic course...”⁶

Business management guru Peter Drucker said, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” And the first step to *that* is to imagine it. What’s your vision? If your focus is a better food system, think about your world in twenty years. What does the ideal setup look like? Who grows the food, and where and how is it processed and moved to the dinner table? Who owns the food stores? What

kinds of warehouses are there and who owns them? What rules make the food safe and healthy, and how did they come about? The visioning part of planning is too often seen as an obligatory activity, a box to check along the way, but imaginative world-building can be powerful. Many successful people, including athletes, entrepreneurs, and entertainers, as well as everyday others, use visualization techniques to help their goals become reality. For them, imagining an outcome increases its odds of happening. The envisioned world draws us toward it because it speaks to both our reason and our aspirations.

A bold, audacious goal

“The tragedy of life doesn’t lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn’t a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim, is a sin.”

—Benjamin Mays

In 2012, President Obama awarded Bill Foege the Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor. Foege was not as well-known as some of the others awarded at the White House on that April day—Bob Dylan, Madeleine Albright, John Glenn, Toni Morrison—but he has arguably helped save more lives than any living person. Among other positions, he has directed the CDC, headed The Carter Presidential Center, and has been advising the Gates Foundation on health initiatives. I got to know him when he served on the *Seeds* magazine board of directors. In the early 1980s, UNICEF director James Grant approached Foege with a proposition: UNICEF and the World Health Organization may be able to get beyond their turf wars and do more good if a third party,

Foegen, would chair a Task Force for Child Survival. This campaign would help the world's children on an unprecedented scale. At that time, there were a number of low-cost ways to save millions of children who died each year, but they weren't being deployed on a global scale. Having already led in the remarkable eradication of smallpox, Foegen agreed to serve. He was now signing on to an even greater challenge, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal.

In *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, authors Jim Collins and Jerry Porras describe their conclusions from six years researching the question: *What makes companies exceptional?* One finding was that most of the visionary companies they examined had a bold mission or "Big Hairy Audacious Goal" (BHAG, pronounced *bee-hag*). They point to the difference between "merely having a goal and becoming committed to a huge, daunting challenge—like a big mountain to climb."⁷ It's "clear, compelling, and people 'get it' right away," says Collins in *Good to Great*.⁸ "A BHAG serves as a unifying focal point of effort, galvanizing people and creating team spirit as people strive toward a finish line." But there's a difference between a good and a bad BHAG, he says. A bad one is set with bravado while a good one is set with understanding. A good BHAG, he continues, will be found in that intersection between three questions: "What are you deeply passionate about? What can you be best in the world at? What drives your economic engine?" The very same principles apply to doing good and changing the world.

Many explorers had bold goals: Columbus wanted to reach India by sea, Magellan wanted to circumnavigate the world, Lewis and Clark explored the American northwest as they made their way to the Pacific. Audacious engineering goals include the U.S. transcontinental railroad, digging a fifty-mile canal across Panama, and Henry Ford's dream to manufacture an automobile the average person could afford. Sometimes a movement's bold goals culminate in specific legislation: abolishing slavery (1865), gaining

women's suffrage (1920), ending child labor (1938 and other years), achieving civil rights (1964), striving for equal pay for equal work (pending). Along with bold goals, of course, come bold failures. All of these examples had them, and so will we all...that is, if we're trying to do something great.

A BHAG realized: the Child Survival Revolution

Back to our story about Bill Foege and the effort to protect children... In 1980, fifteen million children under the age of five died each year: forty thousand every day. Yet most of these deaths were preventable. In 1982, a collaboration of groups launched the Child Survival Campaign. Its goal was simple: cut the number of child deaths by half and do it within five to fifteen years using low-cost technologies and new social mobilization practices. Reaching the goal meant seven million children would be saved every year. The campaign focused on four approaches: 1) tracking an infant's monthly weight on a growth chart so the parents know if the baby is not growing properly; 2) oral rehydration therapy, a simple mixture of salt, sugar, and water that can save the life of a child with diarrhea; 3) the promotion of breast feeding; and 4) immunizations against the basic childhood diseases. Over time, the campaign engaged every U.N. agency, every government in the world, faith-based communities, civic clubs (Rotarians donated hundreds of millions of dollars for polio eradication, for example), and virtually every sector of society. It showed what a unified global effort could accomplish.

In 1988, I sat down with UNICEF chief James Grant in his New York office for *Seeds* to discuss what drove the 1980 idea. "We talked about the possibility for a child survival and development revolution. What we meant by the word *revolution* was not violent turmoil, but dramatic progress within a limited period of years, progress you would normally expect to take much longer," he told me.

“An analogy would be the Green Revolution of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, when a series of countries managed to double their wheat and rice production. This would have taken twenty to forty years to accomplish.”

When we launched the Child Survival Revolution, it was like launching a missile into space. Was it going to take off? And it did. In the first month it received support, beginning with the Secretary-General of the United Nations but also encompassing people as different as Margaret Thatcher, Rajiv Gandhi, and Olaf Palme. This brought us a very satisfying feeling.

Tremendous satisfaction also came after the initiatives in Colombia, the first country to apply these social mobilization concepts in this form.... Salvadorans discovered that more of their children had died in 1984 from not being immunized than the total killed or injured in the country's war. The society convinced itself that the least it could do is lay down its arms to shoot its children with vaccines three times a year. And they did this in 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1988. This example has been picked up in Lebanon, in Uganda and several other parts of the world.⁹

Grant told me that the immunization launch was the most spectacular he'd seen, “Immunization levels have risen from less than 10 percent in 1980 to well over 50 percent today [1988].” This was a remarkable achievement in just eight years. James Grant died in 1995, so he didn't see his goal fully reached, but he had witnessed the campaign's trajectory. By 1990, the number of child deaths had dropped from fifteen million to twelve million. By 2011, it had dropped below seven million. It took a little longer than visionaries like James Grant and Bill Foege had hoped, but the bold goal of cutting child deaths in half was reached. This is doubly impressive because the global population grew from less than five billion in 1980 to seven billion in 2011: There were more children to protect.

The global effort was successful because people understood and believed in that singular goal. Of course, it was supported by countless sub-goals, and sub-sub-goals. Some may worry that such a singular target will thwart creativity, but it didn't slow down the technical and social innovations needed to save the children; it just focused them. Innovations ramped up as the various hurdles and opportunities appeared. Each country and region had its own unique challenges needing unique solutions, but the power was in the fact that everyone was working toward the same thing: cutting the number of child deaths by half. Reflecting years later on the campaign, Bill Foege said they found from the beginning that "It's important to define, What is success? What's the last mile? When will you know that you've achieved it? Then people sign on for a definite end, rather than signing on because they're interested in a project."¹⁰

Rallying to do the impossible

After four decades of build-up, by 1980, the United States and the Soviet Union had a combined twenty-five thousand nuclear weapons pointed at each other. Clearly, the world would not survive a nuclear exchange, yet thousands of new weapons were still being stockpiled. A conventional war between the superpowers would almost certainly escalate into a nuclear war. Political scientist and activist Randall Forsberg decided to do something bold. She pushed to reduce the nuclear arsenals to lessen the risk. Her four-page "Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race¹¹" pointed out that in half an hour a fraction of the weapons could "destroy all the cities in the northern hemisphere." Yet twenty thousand more nuclear warheads were planned. This escalation, she wrote, would "increase hair-trigger readiness for a massive nuclear exchange."

The Nuclear Freeze campaign's goal was bold and simple: Don't build any more nuclear weapons. The effort mobilized people

across the nation. Massive public demonstrations of support for the freeze took place around the country, including one in Central Park with as many as one million people. Twelve states and two-hundred seventy-five cities endorsed the effort: 70 percent of Americans supported it. In 1983, Democrats in the House of Representatives passed legislation calling for a freeze and made it part of their party platform in 1984. Similar responses were happening in Europe and elsewhere. That year, hawkish President Reagan suggested his openness to nuclear abolition. The global massive outcry became a leading factor that led Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev to agree to begin to reduce nuclear arsenals in 1986. The out-of-control proliferation of weapons was slowed by a simple, clarion call. Behind great accomplishments are people who deliberately and persistently pursue a singular big goal.

Aligning around a focal point

An effort aligned with an ambitious goal can accomplish the impossible. In 1961, President Kennedy announced a goal of sending astronauts to the moon. “We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard... because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win.” Space stations have orbited Earth since the seventies, so we’ve gotten used to people being out there. But in 1961, a moon trip was a dizzying notion. NASA would have to be transformed, infrastructure would have to be built, 400,000 people would have to be engaged, and (in today’s dollars) \$100 billion would be spent.¹² Thousands of problems would have to be solved. The effort would, in Kennedy’s words, “organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” Eight years later, the world watched in awe as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon’s surface. Ambitious goal achieved. Check.

Long before a step-by-step plan, a goal's superpower is its ability to focus and align thoughts and actions over time. Without a goal, even good organizations with talented leaders and staff are doomed to wander in the land of mediocrity. They may be doing good work but a great opportunity is lost. Having an audacious goal doesn't mean you'll know *how* you'll reach it. No one in 1961 knew how to send people to the moon. It's a statement of intent, an organizing point. Everyone is focused, asking, "How do I help us get there? What must we do next?"

To launch your bold goal, consider the following:

- **It will take a village to reach.** The nonprofit KaBOOM builds playgrounds with community participation. To reach their goal of placing a playground "within walking distance of every child in America," they will have to join with all kinds of local partners. Engaging the help of many people for a bold cause can increase your odds of success.
- **It has to be believable.** A goal focuses your energy on a vision, as well as you can imagine it, of what you want the future to be. It can *look* impossible, but it's *got* to be achievable. Bill Foege, who has spent a lifetime pursuing bold global health goals, said that an important ingredient of eradicating smallpox "was simply the belief that it could be done. In fact, in retrospect, the belief that it could be done seems like the most important factor in the global eradication effort."
- **Your ambitious goal is part of a historic continuum.** Malala Yousafzai struggles for the right of children to have education. For that effort, she is the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Her goal is to ensure that every girl in the world has access to twelve years of free, safe, quality primary and secondary education by 2030. She didn't invent the priority of educating girls. In fact, she benefitted from others who sought to make sure she had an education.

Our goals build on decades of accomplishments of those who have gone before us.

- **Your goal is connected to other goals.** Even if the scope of your bold goal isn't global, it will likely contribute to other greater goals. Citizens in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh recently set a world record of planting almost fifty million trees in twenty-four hours. This effort was part of India's larger goal of increasing its forested land from 192 million acres to 235 million acres by 2030. And that goal is one more step toward an even greater goal of restoring more than 800 million acres of forests worldwide. A number of groups are now calling for the planting of one trillion trees (there are about three trillion trees on earth today).¹³ This could be nested in an even larger goal of fighting climate change, and so on. It's all part of the ultimate Big Hairy Audacious Goal of saving humanity's ability to live on the planet—as soon as possible!
- **Your goal can be about filling in gaps.** The Y2Y vision is a two thousand-mile interconnected system of wildlands and waterways that will stretch from Canada's Yukon to Montana's Yellowstone National Park to ensure the survival of animals such as caribou and grizzly bears. The East Coast Greenway is a three thousand-mile off-road bike trail from Maine to Key West, Florida. Both efforts are literally about filling in gaps in our landscape from point to point. And both find local partners to help fill in those local gaps. While not always so literal, the giant gap between where you are presently and your ambitious goal can be broken down into many smaller gaps. Each one will be filled in through persistence and creative energy.
- **Reaching the goal will be messy.** No great accomplishment was achieved without stumbles. Some worse than others. Many people died building the Panama Canal, trying to sail

around the world (including Magellan himself), and freeing India from British colonial rule. There's no easy, smooth path. You hit dead-ends and have to back up and try another way. There are never enough resources. Shortcuts, mistakes, and sometimes even disasters occur along the way. Do what you think is best at the time. At the very least, you'll learn something to help you take another step.

- **Ambitious goals transform.** An organization committed to doing something great will never be the same. It will be stretched and reinvented. Your goal may be local, like making sure all veterans in your city have housing, bringing a dying neighborhood back to life, or radically increasing high school graduation rates. You may not send someone to the moon, but as you strive to reach your bold goal the lives of those involved will be transformed.

Half Earth: an ambitious goal to save the planet

"I am convinced that only by setting aside half the planet in reserve, or more, can we save the living part of the environment and achieve the stabilization required for our own survival."

—E.O. Wilson

Scientists measure Earth's 4.5 billion years in eras and epochs. Humans have been around for only two hundred thousand years and civilization for about six thousand. To put that in perspective, if the history of Earth were compressed into one year, humans don't show up until after five o'clock on the evening of December 31, civilization begins just one minute before midnight, and Leonardo Da Vinci is painting the Mona Lisa just twenty seconds before the year ends.¹⁴ The Holocene epoch began 11,000 years ago with the

end of the last ice age. Today scientists increasingly agree that we have begun to wreak enough havoc on our home planet to warrant a new geologic age, *Anthropocene*. It began somewhere between the industrial revolution and the first atom bomb, when humans began to impact the atmosphere, geology, hydrology, and ecosystems of the earth enough to alter its natural cycles. In this fleeting moment, we have halved the number of trees and changed about half of the earth's surface. Signs of the Anthropocene include the shrinking polar ice sheets; rising seas; climate disruption; the loss of tropical forests; acidification of oceans; the sharp rises of CO₂, methane, and other gasses; and climbing global temperatures.

The most sobering sign is the massive extinction of plant and animal species due to ecosystem disruptions—and the growing possibility of our own demise. And the rate of extinction is accelerating. There are roughly eight million species (including microorganisms) on the planet. In 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services reported¹⁵ that about one million of them are threatened with extinction, “more than ever before in human history.” What is causing this mass extinction? A commonly used acronym HIPPO lists the human actions in order of importance: Habitat destruction; Invasive species; Pollution; Population growth; and Overhunting (and Overfishing). In his book *Half-Earth*, biologist E.O. Wilson cites a major survey that found that one-fifth of the roughly twenty-five thousand mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians are threatened with extinction. But it's not all bad news: Many of these are being stabilized through conservation efforts. He points out that “while 22 species had slipped into extinction, 227 had been saved that would likely have otherwise disappeared.” For example, conservation efforts have cut by half the extinction of bird species, and saved such animals as green sea turtles and bighorn sheep. However:

The declining world of biodiversity cannot be saved by the piecemeal operations in current use alone. It will certainly be mostly lost if conservation continues to be treated as a luxury item in national budgets. The extinction rate our behavior is now imposing on the rest of life, and seems destined to continue, is more correctly viewed as the equivalent of a Chicxulub-sized asteroid strike played out over several human generations.¹⁶

Of course, reality doesn't give a damn whether some people pretend this isn't happening! Wilson says that the Earth with its complex and interdependent ecosystem is rapidly losing ground...literally. "The only hope for the species still living is a human effort commensurate with the magnitude of the problem," he says. Fortunately, Wilson points out, every country has some kind of "protected-area system." But, combined, they only safeguard approximately 15 percent of the land mass and just 3 percent of the oceans. It's nowhere near enough. The biodiversity crisis won't be solved with postage stamp-sized nature reserves hemmed in on all sides by our bad practices. Wilson proposes: "Only by committing half of the planet's surface to nature can we hope to save the immensity of life-forms that compose it." This is a Big Hairy Audacious Goal for all times: Set aside half of the planet—half the water and half the land—as wilderness to stabilize the threatened species. If he is right, in one future we continue foolishly down the path of habitat destruction and mass extinction, in another future we do something radically different.

Wilson's book is short on exactly how to go about doing this. But so was President Kennedy's announcement of landing on the moon within a decade. Remember, we don't have to worry about The How; to start, we only have to focus on The What, the believable goal. Case in point: Thousands of groups around the planet are already contributing to Wilson's Half-Earth solution. They are taking on the questions, *Is it realistic?*, *Is it possible?* And they are creating answers. Of course, these questions are eclipsed by *What happens if we don't?*