

## **Systems Vs. Ecosystems: understanding and deserving the society we covet**

As a society, we aren't cogs in a machine, but we are workers— we're repairmen of that machine. We are part of an ecosystem that aids and mends the infrastructure put in place. There's often a negative connotation to being part of a "system" because people associate "the system" with a place where something is going wrong or something is missing. It's always in reference to a system that isn't working instead of the viewpoint of being a part of an ecosystem. Ecosystems "fail." They mess up. They fluctuate, and they recover. Above all, ecosystems call for the establishment of an attentive evolutionary society. That is what a sustainable free society should look to emulate.

### **What is a free society?**

Roger Soder defines the term by sixteen necessary conditions rather than one singular answer in his book *Sustaining a Free Society*. The sixteen conditions include: Trust, social capital, respect for equal justice under law, freedom, recognition of the necessary tension between freedom and order, recognition of the need for *E Pluribus Unum* ("One from many"), people are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty, knowledge of rights, self-interest well understood, words and facts have to have stable meaning, respect for civil discourse, free and open inquiry, recognition of the difference between a persuaded audience and a more thoughtful public, ecological understanding, ability to counter threats to a free society, and an understanding that the political process takes time. The definition of a free society is not simple, nor should it be. The point of a myriad of conditions is to highlight the complexities of the situations we are examining. Soder explores these things as they apply to small and big picture circumstances; however, individuals of society must understand each of these aspects, so they can determine how they are to fit into that society, that ecosystem. In fact, Soder even encourages the reader to think of conditions they would add or detract from the list. Thus, executing exactly what he calls for, creating an active reader, thinker, and community member.

While investigating a free society, its infrastructure, members, and leaders, it's easy to get lost in absolutes and deterrents. As we uncover the type of community we want and what that means, the steps between where we are and where we want to be can appear abysmally infinite. So, it is vital to approach this expedition with a spirit of open-mindedness, imagination, and possibilities. That way, we can design a desirable ends and establish the means without feeling utterly helpless or incapable. This approach includes two key aspects: the ability to understand the necessity of a long-term timeline, all the while breaking down elements of our ideal into "bite-sized" pieces—the first step in becoming an ecosystem.

## Long term Timeline

The difference between short-term and long-term timelines is something Soder outlined in his book. Essentially, the short term is often a materialistic viewpoint within a smaller, more immediate timeline, whereas the long term refers to a broader timeline with comprehensive solutions. Say you are hungry. You can cook something or purchase a sandwich, but you receive immediate satisfaction to your hunger either way. Now, say a village in a developing nation is hungry, and you ultimately wish to solve their hunger. That takes more time and more resources, but it is longer lasting when done correctly. It's that whole "bring a man a fish, and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime." However, the lifetime or perhaps multigenerational-time attitude is an incredibly difficult one to adapt. For one, it's trendy. It goes in and out of style, just as most things do. Take the appeal of a focus on the natural world. The mass public beautification and leisure motif with conservationists and institution of national parks in the late 1800s through early 20th century, the rise of green politics and the environmental movement in the '60s, the 1990's Un and Ogoni people's focus on Southern America's rivers, rainforests, and habitat destruction, and more recently Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement all rose and fell within global attention. So how do we get people to take up an incumbent long-term perspective? Is it even necessary, or is it possible that only our leaders need to understand that approach? It is absolutely vital for every member of our society to continually comprehend the big-picture, and it is up to our leaders to get us there. How are you to win a battle if you don't know what it is you are fighting for? You can't. As a member of a society, it is our job to fathom the values of our society. So, how can we, both members and leaders, do that? By becoming a more thoughtful public. *Leadership involves a persuaded audience at its base (a group of people agreed on working towards mutual goals), but it should inspire a more thoughtful public that is capable of rising above itself.*

### Persuaded Audience Vs. a More Thoughtful Public

Earlier I mentioned an "attentive evolutionary society." That term encompasses a more thoughtful public but extends to a behavioral component for the public to take on: to be adaptive. Soder defines a thoughtful public as "careful, contemplative, aware of its rights and responsibilities, willing to think about matters with a view to the future [like we discussed] as well as the present," but also as a public "willing to consider issues and proposed actions in relation to other issues and actions [and] how those matters bear on the fundamental moral and political grounding of the whole [Sustaining a Free Society, Chapter One]." As a people, a thoughtful public is attentive— it is comprised of people who constantly reflect on their actions and determine whether those actions are in line with the values of the society they wish to cultivate.

Ralph Lerner spoke to the appeals of a more thoughtful public in his book *Revolutions Revisited*, focussing on the enlightenment qualities of revolutionary leaders and how they sought to liberate the bodies and minds of their assemblage. Abraham Lincoln is a powerful example, as he attempted to bridge the viewpoints on slavery by artfully addressing both sides of the conversation via reminding the people of the original values of the nation, as outlined by *The Declaration of Independence*.

"Think nothing of me - take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever— but come back to the truths that are in *The Declaration of Independence*. You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles [Lincoln]." His reference back to a document that was meant to be the core of their nation encouraged the public to reassess their actions to determine if they were congruent with the original values rather than merely harmonious with their current leader. He urged a more thoughtful public. However, a more thoughtful public means little without that agreement on a common goal. That's where a persuaded audience comes into play.

Soder defines a persuaded audience as a "passive recipient of messages of persuasion," which tends to "have little interaction with each other (and limited interaction with those who have called the audience together) [Sustaining a Free Society, Chapter One]." The audience isn't interactive; they're codependent. They rely on a leader to make all the decisions but aren't independent enough to confront the situation when the findings do not correspond to their original goals. A more thoughtful public tends to be somewhat independent, with a sense of investment in their community, but they don't have enough investment in their leader, and their leader may not have enough investment in them. In an ecosystem with an attentive evolutionary society, we are looking for a compromise of these two terms. We are looking for interdependence. Proper leadership needs an equilibrium, transparent communication, and a reciprocal exchange of need and support that stimulates both sides in a advantageous, not detrimental way.

*In a free political regime, assuming free and fair elections, we get the kind of leaders we deserve and we must consider how to behave in ways to deserve the kinds of leaders we say we want.* In a system, people's roles are viewed as passive. They don't play an active role. An ecosystem goes beyond that. Not only is a member of that environment active, but they are interactive. Meaning they fully understand the interconnected nature of their involvement in their environment and how it influences others. Active refers to an individual's approach, whereas interactive refers to acting *with* others, *e pluribus unum*. This distinction becomes germane because that passive, persuaded audience of a system will behave in a way that results in leaders conforming more to the ideals of a dictatorship. There is no network of checks and balances, so a people who behave as sheep will receive leaders who treat them as such, telling them what to do because there is no pushback or only doing a limited amount of things because they are simply looking to be re-elected. Whereas people who exhibit behaviors representative of investment in the political process and particular angles of that process (like a focus on school systems) will receive a leader who also cares about the political process and the specific focus of their citizens.

So how is an individual to act interactively in their society? They work at it. They take measures like localization, involvement, and investing in one's community, as well as through enhancing their exposure to experiences beyond their own (you can't teach what you don't know).

## **The manageable "bite-sized" pieces**

As I mentioned before, without the combination of an initial understanding of a long-term timeline and then the ability to break it up into manageable stages, the attainment of progression becomes buried by absolutes and deterrents. However, now that we have a clear insight into the objective of achieving an open-minded, interdependent, interactive approach, we can then address those steps that make the desired result of an ecosystem possible.

As we undertake the process of the "bite-sized" pieces, we start with the individual. Knowing that they must exist (or rather co-exist) interactively, we can begin to examine both the behaviors individuals might present *and* how that behavior will circulate in order to deserve the kinds of leaders they want.

### Presented Behaviors

Behavior is the manner in which one conducts themselves in a given environment—voting in elections, participating in school board hearings, getting a membership at the co-op, or donating time or money in any way function as behaviors that contribute to a person's community. Those behaviors represent an investment that shapes how incoming community members and leaders will feel the need to adhere. That being said, a community that is appropriately executing interactive behaviors conducive to an ecosystem must be a community that leaves room for understanding. They recognize that all members will be able to contribute in different ways to different degrees, for instance, with socioeconomic discrepancies. As Soder explained in *Sustaining a Free Society*, individuals with more means may be able to contribute more time or money. But people who are lower in economic standing may only be able to lead short discussions about civic duty in between work shifts with their kids. The extent of contribution from everyone doesn't matter, so much as the fact that everyone is contributing. John Adams described this behavioral dynamic best when he said, "We cannot ensure success, but we can deserve it." Furthermore, Ralph Lerner addressed this notion of deserving implying that to be a people who deserve a free society; we must behave so— we must *work* at it. We have responsibilities to ourselves, our neighbors, and our community to adapt these behaviors, like participating in the social and political process. These behaviors (identifying and supporting good leaders, being competent in knowledge of the past and present, and insisting on clear, non-manipulatable language) only work with the appreciation of interconnectedness. We need to work towards behaviors deserving of an ideal leader, but these behaviors should eventually reach a point of becoming second nature.

Take, for instance, the tale of Chuff and Petherick. The boys are seated adjacent to a lady and her baby on a packed train. At first, the infant becomes violently unwell. Petherick pretends to be reading a newspaper while Chuff takes out his single clean handkerchief and cleans up the ejecta from both the infant and the mother. The admirable characteristics stem from a sense of pride in upholding democracy's cornerstones: patience, tolerance, good fellowship, and the capacity to perceive things from another's perspective. Chuff represents a concern that is broader than the present

circumstances and response— broader than the self. These attitudes are indicative of a high standard of living.

We are tied to the capability and optimistic implementation of paying attention to others as we strive to maintain a free society. Essentially, we need to acknowledge and work toward interconnectedness, towards the understanding that we are nothing alone, that every creature contributes to the whole. So, we need to get to a point where we notice everyone around us without being told to do so.

Why? Because a world without consideration is a world with poor quality of life. For instance, in Dostoyevski's piece *Notes from the Underground*, he describes a clerk who is more than ignored, more than disregarded; he isn't even noticed in the first place. A clerk is pushed and then overlooked by a military officer at a pub. The officer noted that something was in the way and moved that thing out of the way, not even noticing that the item was, in fact, a person. The clerk spends years trying to exact vengeance on the officer and to be noticed-- to be *seen*. From a practical perspective, the clerk is wasting valuable time that he could be using to volunteer in his community, but that isn't the only manner in which behavior benefits a society. The point of the encounter is that it should never have happened in the first place. The clerk was treated as furniture, unnoticed, and dehumanized. The quality of life in Dostoyevski's *Notes from the Underground* is far less desirable than the kind world of Chuff.

Great, so we want to emulate Chuff, but how do we get everyone else to do that, too? We can't, not at first. This is where the patience of a big picture perspective remains vital. Those who behave in ways undeserving of a free society will seemingly perennially exist. They won't work for the sustenance of their ecosystem, but they will reap its benefits. Roger Soder dubs these people "free riders." They may not be able or willing to change, not at first, and not in more extensive ways with the rest of society. Yet, if their community perpetuates the growth behaviors discussed, the compassion and empathy necessary, then little by little, they will instill change in those free riders. Those small changes enable us to form the foundations of positive behavior, which we can build on.

I mentioned the necessity of compassion and empathy, and it is essential to distinguish the two. Empathy is the ability to understand or share the feelings with another, someone to whom you can relate. You may empathize with those who look similar to you or share similar cultural, societal, educational, religious, or economic backgrounds. However, compassion is a sympathetic concern for others beyond those to whom you can directly relate. The difference between the two is that empathy is conditional. Revisiting Chuff, if he were to share the same skin tone or recognize any similarity and have that be the reason for his assistance, he would be demonstrating empathy. However, Chuff helps the mother simply because she is a person in need, and he can see that. As the story stands, he portrays compassion. The line of practicality is often associated with empathy, which can work for a time. It is undoubtedly a critical aspect of understanding the holistic nature of existing in a free society, but it is limiting. It is only a stepping stone to the goal of compassion, of almost automatic deserving behaviors.

Like empathy, to get to that point of understanding of our interconnectedness, we start with Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of self-interest well understood. We're talking

about the switch from a functionality standpoint to a holistic one, and this is how we bridge that gap between the "free riders" and the interactive members. Self-interest well understood is the Enlightenment philosophy that people can act to serve the interests of others or their own community, all the while ultimately serving their own self-interest. For example, someone may lead a local beach cleanup because they don't like looking at or stepping on the trash as they walk their dog. The clean beach benefits the entire community, but the motivation is ultimately to serve the self. Like any method or system, this method is neither good nor bad all on its own. The people involved— the leaders and the followers— sway the morality of the situation. So, empathy in itself is fine. But someone can redirect that empathy to be toxic (like the utilizing of Sir Francis Galton's study of eugenics in the 20th century throughout Europe). Similarly, self-interest well understood is positive, but pure self-interest as the only source of motivation results in the same limitations as empathy and an enduring persuaded audience. Knowing the moral standards to hold these terms accountable is yet another behavior to balance as a body deserving of desirable leadership.

#### Circulation of Behavior

Human behavior is a combination between environment and heredity; however, the majority of behavior is learned. Yes, there are inherited, instinctive responses to scenarios (with a bit of leeway for personality). Still, primarily, behaviors are made up of learned and unlearned habits based on the responses they elicit. So, if we are to foster a society of specific behaviors, we must also figure out how the rest of society will learn them. Schools and leaders are the cardinal places to disseminate behavior. The phrases "children are the future" and "lead by example" exists for a reason.

Beginning with schools, it is crucial to recognize the limitations in resources for public schooling. In the U.S., roughly 9% of the required school funding is provided by the federal government. Unless that public school also happens to exist in a rich environment for high property tax, they won't receive the majority of the economic backing required. That means schools inherently exist with fewer books/ fewer up-to-date books, deficient teacher salaries resulting in ineffective high student-to-teacher ratio, and a multitude of other insufficient resources. But the school is the only controlled environment in which a nation is able to ensure the education of civic duty.

As we've learned with the G.O.P.'s bill targeting how race, slavery, and history are taught in Texas, the nation cannot accurately dictate what portions can and cannot be taught. By suggesting any type of limitation, be it directing teaching the Revolutionary War or specifying not to teach it because of its unnecessary hostility and challenge to the current leadership, one is censoring knowledge, censoring history. There's the aspect of censorship, and then there's the functional aspect that we simply cannot teach everything. So, how do we ensure that education of civic duty? If not by focussing on what we teach, we go through how we teach. We can teach the behaviors of compassion, of Chuff, and the long-term perspective. We can teach active readers and listeners who exhibit a healthy skepticism. We can even outline morality. The important distinction here is that we are not forcing any conclusions on the future of our society.



We are teaching them the methods and desired behaviors in a manner in which they can reach their own version of judgment. The point of investing in our society to sustain it isn't so much because we have the answers to everything, but because our evolution contributes to the answers to everything. We make advances in an effort to advance future generations. When someone is diagnosed with "incurable" cancer, typically, the doctor recommends they go through the existing treatment that may extend their life. From the get-go, this treatment does not exist to eliminate the cancer but to prolong the patient's life for another couple of months to years in the hopes that a better solution will then be invented. These steps towards evolution are with the understanding of fluctuation. What works for our generation may not work as well for five generations into the future, but it will act as a building block. A building block involves progress. If we are to do nothing to educate in a manner to sustain the values of our free society, there is nothing to build upon, and instead, you result in a sunk-cost fallacy of a society (a society that assumes because it is already heavily invested in the failing system, it might as well go down with the ship). Hence, we must attentively adapt our society along the way, generation by generation, epitomizing the values and goals of our free society through the tutelage and implementation of civic duty.

All that said, pedagogy does not only exist for the children, but it must also be reinforced in the homes and community. Why? A top-down order simply does not result in generative consequences in the long-term, but comprehensive community education does. Take the 60's movement of integration in schools. If a town did not adhere to the directive to desegregate, there were two main approaches: the national guard or community charrettes. The charrettes prompted widespread discourse and awareness of topics such as costs, textbooks, catch-up schooling for black children who were behind since they had been studying from outdated materials for years, school meals and transportation programs, and so on. Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis led the most well-known and well-documented of these in Durham County schools. However, the integration initiatives were met with different degrees of success. Top-down management succeeded somewhat, but it sometimes left more considerable disparities and discriminations than before, forcing the community to change over tens of years. Meanwhile, locally-led initiatives that involved broad debate and the elimination of generalizations through hard facts (such as limited resources and set salaries) proved to be more effective. Most importantly, the lasting effects of integration methods can still be seen years later. While still experiencing unaddressed income inequities, charrette communities list greater graduation rates that were more evenly distributed in racial terms. In Durham, there was an 87% graduation rate (By race: Asian students: 95%, White: 85%, Black: 84%, Multiracial: 83%, and Hispanic: 81%). Those graduation rates decades later don't even begin to reflect the systemic change that has yet to be undertaken; however, it does not clarify the foundation of that change. Durham displays graduation rates of black identifying students as 84%, years after their charrette. In contrast, Little Rock, Arkansas (the host of Eisenhower's federal troops following Brown V. Board of Education) reports a rate of 63% from their black identifying students. Those numbers highlight the importance of comprehensive community education to create the evolutionary building blocks for future generations to work with.

The second area to circulate behavior appears in our leaders. Yes, we members of a free society have to portray behaviors worthy of suitable leadership. Still, our leaders, which we elect along the way, must cohere to the best of those behaviors. That is not to say that our leaders are to evince convincing or strong personalities for us to vote.

Personalities are not behaviors. Behaviors, in this sense, are more reflective of sound accommodating policy. Now there are additional behaviors (like transparent communication, ethical persuasion methods, and trust and social capital) that ideal leaders should represent, but those are not the baseline of leading by a policy with compromise.

### **Shared Values**

"No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. [Winston Churchill]" No government or system is perfect. Even Tocqueville conceded that in his book *Democracy in America*. But he also acknowledged that democracy was just slightly better than the other options. Some forms of a system will do marginally better than others at any given time. It's a fact of life and one we have been ignoring. With that in mind, take, for instance, that sunk-cost fallacy society. In economics, a sunk cost is viewed as a cost that is already incurred and cannot be recovered. We tend to view systems in the same way. Once they are broken or damaged, they cannot be fixed. However, the fallacy exists in cornering ourselves into either "going down with the ship" or burning the ship all together and starting from scratch. Alexis de Tocqueville touched on this notion in *Democracy in America*, only he spoke of the slow damages to the system that would ultimately build up to such a cornering. For example, soft despotism. Tocqueville points out that the age of equality and education may provide a perfect podium for slowly infringing on human rights. How? The more level the wealth and power dynamic surrounding citizenry, the more likely dilution may temper the majorities, making them easier to control. Tocqueville is apprehensive over how equality will mold a society's members, making them less likely to exercise their free will and more susceptible to a ruling hand. It's about the soft despotism. That thing does not shatter men; instead, it corrupts them over time, enticing them into indoctrination. This isn't to argue that Tocqueville opposes the sovereignty of the people. As we discussed, he admits that a democratic society like this would be ideal. His main worries are directed at the person or body of people who would be trusted to represent such a government. On the other hand, the American Constitution authentically reflects the will of the people since it strikes a great balance between being neither too set nor too easily changeable. While the document is an appropriate response to corruption and public leaders who become oppressors, it also restricts people's individual powers. Tocqueville illustrates the contradictory nature of democracy's connection with tyranny in this way. According to him, the actual danger is in the "vices of those who govern, and the weakness of the governed [Democracy in America, page 695]." With this in mind, the people can either build a more free institution or return to a singular individual's sovereignty.



In France, following extremist terrorist acts in 2017, the parliament enacted a new set of "Antiterrorist Laws." In 2017, these laws meant greater ability to establish and monitor a perimeter around a potential target like a concert hall. Yet, today, as we head into March of 2022, the laws have been expanded to include monitoring of all electronics and online activity for surveillance of suspected or potential terrorists. However, the same "monitoring" system has been used to prosecute people of several and almost any other crime or even potential crime, resulting in a heavily disproportionate imprisonment for those in traditionally marginalized groups of society, all the while civil liberties were steadily stripped for all members in that society. The people agreed to relent initial freedoms but did not consent to the following despoil of their sovereignty. Yet, since they had already agreed to the loss of some, they lost the ability to maintain the rights of others. These slow scenarios of defiling freedoms are clear examples of soft despotism of which Tocqueville was afraid. We saw it in France, in the U.S.'s 1970s era of mass incarceration, the 2021 U.S. Capitol Attack, Bush's 2001 Arbitrary Justice via Military Tribunal, overextended power via the Patriot Act, Obama's 2009 protection of C.I.A. individuals against prosecution of potential war crimes, etc.

Like the sunk-cost fallacy, France's counterterrorism laws and Tocqueville's soft erosion of liberties are left with the same conundrum and forced to the same head: embrace the system or destroy it. The issue in such a one-dimensional approach is that there is no room left for compromise, and compromise is the birthplace of reconciliation and reconstitution.

*A more thoughtful public must not only be created and sustained, but, given that things inevitably fall apart, must be recovered and reconstituted.* An ecosystem espouses the idea of continuity in fluctuation. It endorses slowly evolving for the better while making mistakes along the way— it endorses compromise.

Roger Soder explores effective and ethical ways to reach these solutions when systems fall apart in his work *Leadership, Reconciliation, and Reconstitution*. To begin, he asks us to examine how we react when something goes wrong. We could do nothing (ignorance is bliss), try to ignore the situation (likely to lead to riots), justify and excuse the breakdowns ("many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request"), remove the people who are causing problems ("he who is absent is always in the wrong"), exact revenge ("a kind of wild justice"), acknowledge the situation but not give it any merit and instead force denial (Tito's 'Brotherhood and Unity' slogan), or flee (and watch things go wrong). While each of these solutions has its own set of circumstances and levels of efficacy in those instances, the most essential factor is to deal with the problem head-on— to find a solution. You can force a solution, like the top-down directives of Eisenhower's National Guard, or you can accomplish one (i.e. the charrette approach). For reconciliation and reconstruction, Soder suggests six proposals. We must regard the world as huge rather than tiny. We must be able to view ourselves clearly, without any deception from ourselves or others. We must insist on uncovering the truth about the past and establishing a procedure that allows all sides to participate in public debate. We must devote the time and resources required for thorough reconciliation. The link between reconciliation, reconstruction, and a free democratic society must be acknowledged. Finally, we must admit that aspects of reconciliation are more likely to be found under a free and open system than an authoritarian regime. Because the world was not formed correctly from the start, we must learn how to correct it as we go. We have to avoid that Tocqueville/ sunk-cost mindset. We can repair our societies. We just have to start with the long-term and the "bite-size."

An ecosystem occurs within the realm where things are allowed to go wrong, but just how they go wrong leaves room for how we can approach a solution. In nature, the Pecan tree doesn't produce nuts every year but sporadically. The nuts are so highly saturated with nutrients that it takes years to absorb and create the necessary concentration. Pecan trees live in groves, in communities quite literally connected by their roots (or rather a communication through mycorrhizal networks in their roots). When one tree produces nuts, they all do. Then, squirrels scavenge and store the abundance away for winter. Because the squirrels have better resources, they produce more offspring. The eagles and hawks gain more resources with more prey, and the life cycle is sustained, all from the Pecan Tree. But since the trees have used their stores of nutrients, they will not produce nuts for several years (a dry spell, if you will). The lack of sustenance for the squirrels results in less food for the hawks and the population of both decreases. But the Pecan trees? That community feedback allows them the response time to restore their nutrients and improve them so that the next time they produce, they can provide sustenance and expand their network by leaving more nuts on the ground to grow into trees, not just be eaten. The tree and the roots are the government and infrastructure we put in place, an outline for us to utilize and amend. Some years we succeed in holding a beneficial system for the entirety of our society, and we are able to provide those nutrients. Some years there aren't enough nutrients, and our society suffers. The point of this is to say there is nothing imminently wrong with the system. There are no diseases interfering or hawks taking control of the resources for the squirrels as a bargaining chip for a war with the eagles. The design of the Pecan tree is merely a cycle. Things die, things go wrong, it responds as a cohesive front, and things improve. That long-term "we are a piece of a whole" attitude reflects the perspective we need to undertake if we hope to create, sustain, and repair our free societies.

Furthermore, while I mentioned that the Pecan tree produces as a grove, I did not include that it only produces as a grove. There is no singularity to the process. When one tree masts, they *all* mast. The tribulations and ease of each individual tree have almost no bearing on the nutrients they produce once they mast fruit. If one tree is struggling or fighting beetle infestations that year of production, it still has the same amount of nutrients in its nut as the one with plenty of sunlight and water. How is that possible? Because the trees act as part of a whole. Using their communication network, they can exchange nutrients or send methyl jasmonate (a hormone produced by trees to stave off beetles) so that the grove can succeed as a whole. The key to this exchange and its significance as we examine how to sustain a free society (and especially how to fix one), is the trees utilize a shared goal and established methods of achieving that goal. They share values.

Every tree in the grove wants to produce effectively, just as every member of a society wishes to succeed in that society. However, when we watch our society outgrow itself, break, or diminish seemingly irreparably, we assume that's it; that's the end. Trees don't. Note how the pecan trees can communicate their needs and establish means of handling them as the cycle evolves. They execute a form of self-interest well understood. The tree that got plenty of water and sunlight doesn't refuse to share its nutrients or hold it ransom. It relies on trust. If it contributes to its community, the community will succeed. The tree will receive the profit of a year of expansion and growth and the advantage of knowing the community will do the same for it, should that time arise. This relies on a system of trust. Systems we often politicize and misconstrue as "I scratch your back, you scratch mine."

Adam Smith famously reckoned that the "propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another is common to all men," but more importantly, it is "to be found in no other race of animals." The difference between our Pecan tree's system of trust and the scratching of backs is that backscratching is conditional. I'll help you, but *only* if you help me. Then, we fall back into good 'ol Chuff and Petherance. A society that exists solely on the conditional and the instructional is a society that constrains its lifespan. The solution to moving beyond the need for conditional or self-interest well understood mediaries lies in reflection-- the ability to take accountability and *evol/ve*. Trees do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it, so let's all decide that when something is going wrong, it isn't the end all be all, but a perfect opportunity for reassessment. Reassessment leads to compromise; compromise leads to solutions that lead to behavioral changes that lead to education and circulation of beneficial behaviors, leading to leadership and shared values and inevitably things going wrong along the way and what do you know? We're right back to reassess. Almost like it's a cycle. That is an ecosystem.

"Aim for equality, but do it in the right way, so that once we get there, it is indisputable [Ruth Bader Ginsburg]." The notorious R.B.G. and then-attorney Ginsburg did not champion *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. It wasn't because of disapproval for the right to choose but because of the poorly structured argument. She found the landmark supreme court decision stood on a faulty foundation, with the case based on the idea that women had a right to privacy in their medical decisions. Ginsburg felt more compelling grounds would come from the notion that abortion restrictions impeded on gender equality. She believed "it would have been better to approach it under the Equal Protection Clause," a stipulation in the Constitution's 14th amendment stating that a governmental body may not deny people equal protection of its governing laws.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was client-oriented and brilliantly calculated. She veered from sweeping decisions without substantial backing that would be left vulnerable to attacks, such as *Roe v. Wade*. Instead, she focused on specific areas of discrimination and violation of women's rights and gender equality. Ginsburg represented male plaintiffs and the prejudices they faced, while simultaneously raising women's rights. In the cases of *Califano v. Goldfarb*, *Weinberger v. Wiesenfeld*, and *Kahn v. Shevin*, widowers were disfavored and prevented from collecting social security benefits and tax exemptions afforded to widows in the same scenario. While the direct issues may have been initially based on gender inequalities faced by males, Ginsburg's dissection of the laws collectively legitimized women's payments into the social security system and invalidated the archaic assumption of women's dependency. The supreme court's decisions had broad repercussions, elevating gender inequalities in the eyes of the law. In her early work, Justice Ginsburg fought less through controversial and forceful maneuvers, but rather through quiet activism, effecting lasting change. "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time [Ginsburg]."

We cannot hope to solve all of the issues all at once, but we can hope to structure positive, enduring change that can be built upon and evolved as generations continue. We do this by establishing not only a more thoughtful public but an interconnected one. In an ecosystem with an attentive evolutionary society, we are looking for interdependence, transparent communication, a reciprocal exchange of need, and support that advantageously stimulates both sides. We are looking to facilitate the understanding of context, education of what it is to be a free society and most especially why it matters, establishment of trust in our communities and investing in them, adoption of contributive behaviors to civic duty that are deserving of the leaders we want, and to generate the perspective of a cultivated ecosystem— a body that can respond, reflect, heal, and grow.

If we want a free society, we have to work for it. We have to take these steps. Ralph Lerner stressed the role of a fool, a person meant to broach sensitive topics in an indirect way so that the tough questions could be answered. We don't have all the answers. We don't even have all of the questions. However, in the words of one of today's acting fools, Kate Mckinnon, "We know dis." And what we don't know? We'll learn along the way.

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