

This is an electronic version of a book review published as: Krumrey, C. & Alexander, D. (2012). The agitator's library [Review of the books *Creative community organizing: A guide for rabble-rousers, activists, and quiet lovers of justice* by S. Kahn, *Collective visioning: How groups can work together for a just and sustainable future* by L. Stout, *Citizen you: Doing your part to change the world* by J. Tisch & K. Weber, and *The troublemaker's teaparty: A manual for effective citizen action* by C. Dobson]. *Alternatives Journal*, 38(3), 36-37.

Alternatives Journal is available online at: <http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/> and this article is available at: <http://www.alternativesjournal.ca/community/reviews/agitators-library>.

The Agitator's Library

Creative Community Organizing: A Guide for Rabble-Rousers, Activists, and Quiet Lovers of Justice, Si Kahn, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2010, 240 pages.

Collective Visioning: How Groups Can Work Together for a Just and Sustainable Future, Linda Stout, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2011, 240 pages.

Citizen You: Doing Your Part to Change the World, Jonathan Tisch with Karl Weber, New York: Crown Publishing, 2010, 288 pages.

A Troublemaker's Teaparty: A Manual for Effective Citizen Action, Charles Dobson, Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003 (reprinted in 2009), 224 pages.

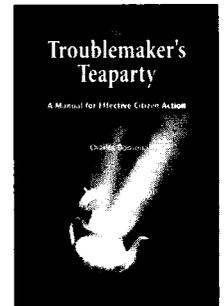
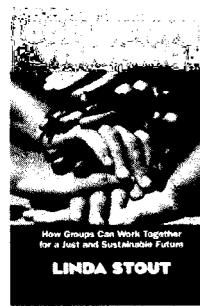
Reviewed by Christine Krumrey and Don Alexander

With the worldwide explosion of the Occupy movement, and related Indignado protests in Europe, renewed attention has focused on the possibility of a new high water mark in the push for social change. Each of these four books approaches issues of social change from different perspectives, all drawing from a similarly rich vein of wisdom and experience.

In *Creative Community Organizing*, Si Kahn provides a bridge from the past to the present. At 68, Kahn is a living link between key North American social movements of the past half-century and the work activists are still doing today to address social injustice. For nearly 50 years he has been a community organizer and activist songwriter, working in the civil rights, labour, and anti-private-prison movements. Kahn attempts to distill the lessons of his ongoing involvement by telling vivid stories of his experiences and reciting his topical song lyrics.

Kahn encapsulates these lessons in what he calls "Creative Community Organizing's Top 20." Some of this advice is familiar: Park your stereotypes at the door (and create conditions for others to do the same); have a vision of what you are *for*, not just what you are *against*; find the common interest that can unite people; use culture and storytelling to build common bonds; and imagine where you want to be and work backwards from there.

However, he also offers ideas that are more specific to his experience: Make sure people are fully aware of the risks they face



when they get involved in a campaign; find ways to play one opponent against another; and when you ask for people's support, make sure it's for something simple and straightforward. This is an insightful and entertaining book, but one has to wade through a lot of stories and side tangents to get to the meat of it.

Community organizer's Linda Stout's book, *Collective Visioning*, focuses almost exclusively on how to create a vision that can fire people up. Speaking from her rich experience working with people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, she talks about how to facilitate a visioning process and provides exercises for doing so. For Stout, such efforts bring together disparate groups to articulate mutual concerns and find common ground, creating *pre-conditions* for collaboration.

One particularly inspiring example involves high school students from a low-income black community in post-Katrina New Orleans. The students had to put up with substandard food, malfunctioning air conditioners, almost unusable washrooms, and a lack of textbooks and seats in their classrooms. Stout brought them together as a group called the Rethinkers and encouraged them to imagine what their schools could be like in 2026. As the students took their vision to the media, the new school superintendent and non-profit organizations, major changes began to occur as adults became both inspired and shamed into taking action.

Stout's work is deeply rooted in heart and soul. As she says, "We must work from a place of vision, a place of hope, a place of joy, and a place that is grounded in our hearts." By shifting the focus initially away from challenges and problems and onto visions and desires, Stout's approach seems effective for inspiring people to imagine that a better world is possible, and to find common ground across the divisions of race and class.

Jonathan Tisch and Karl Weber's very relevant book, *Citizen You*, invites the reader to engage in the new civic activism and use personal creativity, initiative and commitment to solve seemingly intractable local and global problems. They argue that old models of involvement, such as volunteerism, charity and lobbying, are transforming into community-based action, leadership in global citizenship and social entrepreneurship. This provides incredible opportunities for determined, creative individuals to inspire and change the world.

The authors introduce a growing number of citizens who take passionate ownership of global issues, including urban farming, clean drinking water for everyone and combating massive drug distribution. Their work is committed to improving conditions for people *and* environments in developing countries.

Citizen You outlines how to revitalize democracy, how modern technology can create new forms of civic engagement, and how to change careers in search of a deeper meaning of life. The authors remind us of our own dreams and visions, and illustrate with compelling and fascinating real-life stories, as well as an abundance of tips, how to take effective action and be part of creating this new world.

Charles Dobson's *The Troublemaker's Teaparty* presents itself as a strategic, straightforward field guide to establishing citizen action groups and keeping them healthy and effective. Organized into 10 easily accessible and insightful chapters that build on each other, each chapter can also be a useful standalone resource when specific challenges occur.

The first chapter introduces different ways to organize the community, explaining how to lead a meeting and keep people involved, share information and raise funds. The book elaborates on grassroots relationships, mediation and conflict

resolution, and explains how to prevent grassroots wilt. It educates well on how to design and run a project, and demonstrates how to use media as an effective tool to reach a broader community, rally troops, drive governments, help create distinctive messages, and build and support communication networks.

When the book was first published in 2003, Dobson was already well aware of the media's potential to facilitate communication between massive numbers of people in order to influence public trends and government decisions. This is more true today than ever. The book also advises on how to directly contact government bodies and elected politicians, and outlines the best approaches to choose when meeting with decision makers. Dobson concludes with "Confrontation 101," a list of Gandhi's eight methods for converting an opponent in order to strengthen civil society. This book is an indispensable guide for every serious activist.

With a whole new generation of youthful activists coming on the scene, it is important to maintain the continuity of experience while opening the doors for fresh ideas. These four books are a good place to start. 🌱

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