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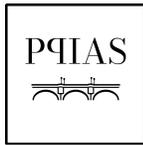
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Engaging about Engaging: Three Fundamental Rememberings from Three Months of Conversations about *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems*

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on key learnings from the author’s engagement with hundreds of people following the publication of his book, *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems*. The author spent three months, from April to July 2025, traveling and discussing the book's concepts through speeches, workshops, webinars, and podcasts. The paper synthesizes these interactions, highlighting three fundamental insights: that systems are constantly in flux and can be acted upon to be maintained or transformed; that system transformation often requires a combination of “forcing” and “collaborating” rather than relying solely on collaborating; and that effective collaboration across differences necessitates “radical engagement,” a deeper, more reciprocal approach than conventional methods.

Introduction

I spent the better part of two years, from June 2023 through March 2025, holed up, writing a book entitled *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement*, and immediately thereafter, going deeper into the habits, a second edition of *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don’t Agree with or Like or Trust*. Then both of these projects were finished and *Everyday Habits* was published and this period of seclusion suddenly ended.

I then spent three months, during April through July 2025, travelling and engaging with hundreds of people about *Everyday Habits* in in-person speeches and workshops (in South Africa and across Europe and Canada) and online webinars and podcasts (with participants from every continent). My reflective and slowly-gestated text was thrust into the cacophonous and quickly-changing context of the world of 2025.

This paper reports what I learned through these encounters between text and context. Some of these learnings underline points I and others had published before, and I cite them below as such. But most emerged during direct conversations—that’s always where I learn the most—and I paraphrase these from my quick contemporaneous notes, below in italics. I experienced this as a



process less of inventing that of remembering: of seeing connections between phenomena that I was aware of but had not put together. This exploration has enabled me to understand differently, in three fundamental areas, what my book is saying that seems to matter now.

1. Systems Are Constantly Changing and Can Be Maintained or Transformed

“A system,” I write in *Everyday Habits*, “is a set of elements (people, other beings, machines, institutions, rules, etc.) that is structured, intentionally or otherwise, so that it achieves a purpose or produces a characteristic pattern of behavior. We live in systems and we cocreate them. They enable some of us to feed, clothe, house, transport, heal, entertain, protect, and govern ourselves, and impede others of us from doing so. They work for some of us and against others of us.”ⁱ

Many people find the concept of systems and of the affordances and constraints they present to be abstract and unclear. But in 2025, the growing and accelerating changes we are seeing globally, for example, in energy and food systems driven by and driving climate change, and in trade and security systems driven by and driving political and social changes, make this concept more immediate and clear. The relevance of systems being transformed, whether or not we are happy with a particular transformation, is now obvious.

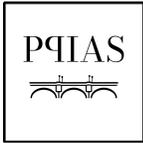
A system tends to keep producing the results it’s producing—that’s what it’s for—and the people who are benefiting from these results will act to maintain it. Because of this homeostatic tendency towards the status quo, people who are trying to transform a system so that it produces fundamentally different results often find progress difficult and slow. The book acknowledges this tendency in asserting that although systems often appear solid and stable, we can contribute to transforming them by paying attention to particular places in the system where things are breaking down or through. The metaphor the book offers for such opportunities is cracks in a rock face: a rock climber surmounts a rock face not by dynamiting it or by climbing the face as a whole, but by climbing the cracks that serve as footholds and handholds. The book argues that systems can be transformed through painstakingly discovering and working with such entry or leverage points, and offers practices to do so.

“Montreal’s transportation system has been transformed over the last few decades so that it now enables rather than prevents people from travelling by bicycle. It took a long time to effect the necessary changes in road infrastructure, traffic regulations, and civic culture.”

Most of the people I spoke with in early 2025 were worried, as I was, about the systemic developments that were dominating political and media discourse: polarisation, migration, recession, inequality, climate, oceans, authoritarianism, war, artificial intelligence, trade disputes, and so on. As I engaged with these people in person and face to face, I heard their fear, even terror.

“I know people who’ve been picked up on the street by masked federal agents and deported. I’m frightened for my friends and family and have trouble focusing on my work.”

“I haven’t slept for two weeks because I’ve been so worried that the Romanian election would produce a fascist president.”



“The global humanitarian system is being destroyed and this is putting millions of people’s lives in danger.”

“I don’t know what we can do: the Netherlands is a small country at the mercy of the US, Russia, and other large ones.”

“These days walls are being built and bridges broken—the opposite of 36 years ago here in Berlin.”

“How can we live through this era of darkness?”

The book’s implicit assumption of systemic stability, therefore, no longer seemed sound.

“The situation we are dealing with is not a solid rock face, but rather an avalanche, and so our challenge is not so much to discover cracks that we can work with to effect change but rather a stable footing to save what we can.”

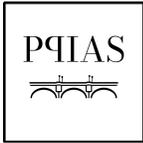
I now think that it is more useful foundational assumption is that systems are always in flux and changing as a result of a stream of breakdowns and breakthroughs. Even systems that appear stable are often kept that way by people who support the status quo taking actions to adapt to or cover over emerging cracks; as Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote, “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”ⁱⁱ A more general framing, then, is that we can contribute to either effecting or blocking system transformation in the same way: through paying attention to and working with what is changing.

During the time I was writing, secluded, reading the news, and interacting mostly within my bubble of like-minded colleagues, friends, and family, I fell into thinking that there was (with the wrenching exception of the Israel-Palestine war) a largely-shared understanding of what was changing in the world and what it meant. But when I ventured out and engaged with a broader range of people, I re-discovered that different people have radically different understandings that depend above all on their locations in, experiences of, and powers to influence those systems. These differences produce conflict about what needs to be done: some people benefit from current systems and want them to be defended and improved, while others have been, are being, or expect to be hurt by current systems and want them to be transformed fundamentally.

During one event, a long angry argument arose from such differences:

“Last week I attended a private meeting of European tech investors that was addressed by one of their US counterparts who is close to Trump. The speaker outlined a 12 year plan for world domination, including using tech to enhance human performance, removing themselves from ‘low intelligence, low quality’ people, and managing a reduction in the world’s population from 8 to 3 billion. The language from was from the Third Reich: pure evil.”

“I’m angry about being given this urgent news flash: being lectured condescendingly and coldly about violence that I and other people of colour experience every day.”



“We Europeans and Canadians who are feeling bullied by the US now know how people in the Global South have felt for generations, when we were bullying them.”

Meanwhile other people saw opportunities in the dramatic systemic changes.

“We’ve always known that certain UN agencies needed to be merged, but before this seemed impossible to do.”

“We may finally be able to shift the geopolitical order, away from US hegemony, as we have wanted to for a long time.”

“The international aid system has been overly controlled by the Global North and now we can restructure it fundamentally.”

“I can see the value of what DOGE is doing because I know how sclerotic the US government has become.”

“Even if we don’t like the US messenger, we need to pay attention to the message. Have the mechanisms that we’ve been employing in South Africa to include historically disadvantaged people into our economy actually produced inclusion?”

“The fact that more people are worried now is a good thing calling it means that they’re less complacent about matters that really need attention.”

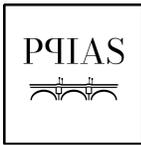
Overall, the emotions I heard expressed most frequently were of feeling overwhelmed, frightened, confused, reactive, and paralyzed. Halfway into my first in-person talk, I noticed an intensity in the audience and realized that they were all concerned about what was happening and wanted to do something about it, but didn’t know what to do. Everywhere I went, everyone was asking themselves what they could and should do, and this produced cohesion. At the same time, the differences in their responses to these questions produced conflict.

2. Systems Are Transformed through Forcing and Collaborating

I noticed a blind spot in how many of these people thought about what they could and should do. They bemoaned the fact that others aren’t getting behind the transformations they want to see, and yet they hesitated to assert vigorously—to stretch beyond their comfort zones—to push for these transformations.

I’m distressed that others won’t work to the actions to mitigate climate change that I think are absolutely necessary. I want these actions to happen but am not comfortable engaging with people who oppose and are blocking these actions.

Twenty years ago, I began to think and write the role of power in transforming when I read this passage from one of the final speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.:



Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change. . . . And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with the resignation of power, and power with the denial of love. . . . Now we’ve got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. . . . It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our time.ⁱⁱⁱ

The bemoaning and hesitating that I heard concerned me because I interpreted them as producing the “sentimental and anemic” love without power that King warned of. James Hillman expressed a similar warning when he referred to the characteristic approach of people in “the idealistic professions” (which includes me and most of the people I’ve been talking with):

Why are the conflicts about power so ruthless—less so in business and politics, where they are an everyday matter, than in the idealistic professions of clergy, medicine, the arts, teaching, and nursing? In business and politics, it seems, there is less idealism and more sense of shadow. Power is not repressed but lived with as a daily companion; moreover, it is not declared to be the enemy of love. So long as the notion of power is itself corrupted by a romantic opposition with love, power will indeed corrupt. The corruption begins not in power, but in the ignorance about it.^{iv}

Some people want to defend current systems and others want to transform them in one way or another. In most cases, therefore, people have differences and disagreements about what to do. In such conflictual contexts, which are often frightening and frustrating, we have two options as to how we can influence what is happening.^v

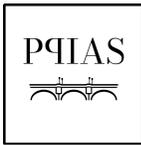
We can try to *force* things to be the way we want, regardless of what others want. We do this when we think that we, alone or together with our colleagues and friends, know best what needs to be done, and must and can impose this on others. We can do this imposing in many different ways: righteously or hesitantly; peacefully or violently; legally or illegally; openly or covertly; through elections, lawsuits, protests, campaigns, or armed struggle; by ambition, aggression, idealism, or indifference; using our ideas, skills, supporters, votes, authority, money, or weapons. Forcing is a common approach to effecting or blocking systems transformation, and has well-known benefits and dangers.

“We are now seeing more strongmen, not only in politics but also in business.”

“Othering is a strategy of both the powerful and the activist, but it’s problematic because it reproduces the oppositional dynamic.”

“Imposing often creates a ping pong of action and reaction.”

“Must we do what they’re doing?”



Alternatively, we can try to *collaborate* with others to do what we all want (or, at a minimum, what we will all go along with). We do this when we want to change the situation we're in and think that we can do so effectively only if we work with others: when we think that we can't alone know what needs to be done, or that, even if we can know, we can't alone succeed in getting it done. So we try to collaborate with others to change our situation.

"I need tools to stay in democratic dialogue with other who have different values from me, and to work with cracks in their now-mostly-solid system of beliefs."

"Systems can be transformed through violence or ennoblement... We don't need agreement: we need a workable spread of views... Our world of multiple poles is actually a world of multiple worldviews."

"The 1994 transition in South Africa was the result of a negotiated settlement, and so of course nobody got everything they wanted. I don't think the revolutionary transition would've been possible given the balance of forces at that time, and I'm not confident that it would have produced better results."

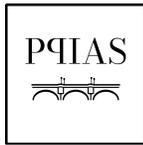
"These days my students don't have as much experience as we used to with compromising: they think it means eating pizza when you wanted pasta. Of course compromising can be a virtue or a vice—as was the case with Neville Chamberlain."

It's impossible to collaborate with everyone on everything and so in practice we collaborate with some people to do some things sometimes, and otherwise we force: we work around or against others. Sometimes we force because our attempts at collaborating have failed, and sometimes we collaborate with some people in order to be able to force others. The key point is that most efforts to change systems involve both forcing and collaborating.

The risky belief I noticed in some of these conversations, however, is that help by those people, repulsed by violent forcing (bullying and bombing) they see others using, who reject all forcing. This decision leaves them only one way to effect change: collaborating. Collaborating is a great option and I have written at length, especially in *Collaborating with the Enemy*, about what it takes to collaborate across differences. But collaborating isn't the only option, and acting as though it gives us too few options.

3. Collaborating Across Difference Requires Engaging Radically

Most of the one hundred and fifty pages of *Everyday Habits* deal with seven inter-related habits that anyone can employ to contribute to transforming systems: Acting Responsibly, Relating in Three Dimensions, Looking for What's Unseen, Working with Cracks, Experimenting a Way Forward, Collaborating with Unlike Others, and Persevering and Resting. These seven exhortations don't directly tell the reader what they can and should do in their particular context. Instead they offer a way for the reader to discover for themselves what they can and should do: why, when, where, with whom, and how to employ their power to, through both forcing (power over) and collaborating (power with).



The book spends only three pages, however, on the fundamental approach that underlies the seven habits, which I call radical engagement. I characterize this approach through the *Concise Oxford's* definitions: engaging means “taking part in; pledging oneself to; holding fast; entering into conflict with” and radical (from the Latin *radix* or root) means “going to the root(s); affecting the foundation; naturally inherent, essential, fundamental.”^{vi} Radical engagement is, I write, “the day in-day out practice of colliding, connecting, communicating, confronting, competing, and collaborating with people from different parts and levels of the system in order together with them to transform it.”^{vii}

I noticed that many of the people I presented the book to found the fundamental shift in orientation involved in engaging radically more interesting than the seven habits that enact this orientation. In the book I describe this shift as away from participating in a system “distractedly, resigned, knowing it all, hierarchically, at arm’s length, with arms crossed, superficially, impatiently, saying take it or leave it,” towards taking part in it “alertly, with hope and curiosity, horizontally, leaning forward, hands-on, digging deep, persisting, and above all reciprocally and relationally.”

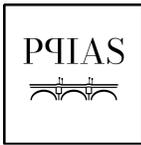
Although radical engagement enables both forcing and collaborating, it is possible to employ forcing or superficial collaboration (in *Collaborating with the Enemy* I call this “conventional collaboration”) without engaging radically. But collaboration across difference to transform systems (“stretch collaboration”) *requires* engaging radically. This is why people who are yearning for a peaceful way to contribute to transforming systems are so keen to understand and employ radical engagement.

I have described this shift in terms of the contrast between two ways of sitting next to and talking with another person. The first approach is to lean away from them with our arms crossed or jabbing our finger at them, trying to impose onto them the way we want them to think or act (“yelling, telling, or selling”). The second approach is to lean forward.

During the book conversations, other related metaphors emerged. One is confronting the reality of our situation, and the book quotes James Baldwin: “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”^{viii}

“We must recognize that our current situation there is the result of accumulation of recent developments—the pain of the pandemic, the recession, wars, inequality—and listen to the inexplicable evil that underlies these developments.”

Seeing reality clearly requires us to move closer. When we look at our context from far away, it can seem solid, unchangeable, and overwhelming. Pierre Wack once told me: “When we look at sand it looks like it’s all one colour, but from up close an ant sees white rocks and black rocks.”^{ix} The opportunities afforded by emerging cracks can often be seen only by moving closer—and this can be dangerous.



“What are you describing reminds me of the advice offered by the famous war photographer Robert Capa: ‘If your photographs aren't good enough, you're not close enough.’”

“Did you know that Capa died by stepping on a landmine?”

It's easier and more comfortable to engage only with our friends and colleagues: people we agree with and like and trust. But often this is inadequate to deal with our most important challenges. Radical engagement is a way to also engage with strangers and enemies.

“I thought I was good at collaborating with unlike others, but I've realized that I'm not: I really don't want to engage with my opponents.”

“People aren't able to hear one another: to be surprised, laugh, respond, and advance.”

“I encounter lots of smart people who can't work with paradox or ambiguity: who employ monological thinking.”

“We've spent years focusing on building our small arts cooperative and community here in rural Eastern Germany, but now realise that we're surrounded by people, including supporters of the right wing political parties, who don't like us, and we won't be safe if we only focus on ourselves: we also need to reach out to our neighbors. We had a gathering here to support our local volunteer fire department and I found myself sitting next to a neo-Nazi man, and we spoke about my and his gardens. Maybe if there's trouble in the future at least he won't attack me.”

Radical engagement involves living (cohabiting) with difference, disagreement, and discord—abandoning unrealistic dreams of harmony, control, agreement, alignment, and stability.

“The physical and social distancing of the COVID years has left us with lingering virtuality, isolation, and loneliness—the opposite of the community we need to have good lives and to be able to work together as a society.”

“I think that we can't rely only on objective expert, scientific models and frameworks, whether by economists, engineers, or ecologists. We also require inter-subjective social, political, and spiritual connections.”

“Engaging with a system means that we are part of it.”

This being part of rather than apart from evokes the intransitive sense of the word abide, which means “remain, continue, or dwell.” We discover what we can and must do by remaining together with our situation.



Conclusion

When *Everyday Habits* was published in April 2025, some six months after I had finalized the text, I wondered how it would stand up in the changed global context. My conclusion from the three months of conversations reported here is that it stands up well: in a context that many people are finding overwhelming, frightening, confusing, and paralyzing, *Everyday Habits* offers hope. It suggests a way that anyone, whatever their location or level in a given system, can contribute to transforming that system so that it produces better results for more people. This way doesn't specify what we can or must do: each of us, in our particular situation, needs to discover this for ourself. Nor, alas, does it guarantee that what we do will achieve the results we want. What it does do is remind us that we all have agency to shape the world around us, and to do this not—as many people worry is the case—only through authoritarian, aggressive, violent imposition, but also through democratic, dialogic, peaceful engagement.

That said, however, these conversations have enabled me to see that choosing wisely what to do requires remembering three fundamental axioms about transforming systems (“Holistic understanding,” the Dalai Lama said, “brings realistic action”^x). Systems may appear solid and stable but they are always cracking and changing, and these cracks present opportunities both to advance or resist transformation. Enacting such opportunities requires employing power both to force and to collaborate. And the most effective way to discover and enact such opportunities is through radical engagement. We can contribute best to addressing the challenges of our time not by positioning ourselves as apart from them but from recognizing our part in them.

Acknowledgments

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ⁱ Adam Kahane, *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2025), x.

ⁱⁱ Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (London: Vintage, 1957), 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?” in *The Essential Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 220–21. See also Adam Kahane, *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2010).

^{iv} James Hillman, *Kinds of Power: A Guide to Its Intelligent Uses* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 108.

^v Adam Kahane, *Collaborating with the Enemy: How to Work with People You Don’t Agree With or Like or Trust* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2017), 18-23.

^{vi} *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 7th ed. (1983), s.v. “engage,” “engagement,” and “radical.”

^{vii} Kahane, *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems*, 18.

^{viii} James Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1962, <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/01/14/archives/as-much-truth-as-one-can-bear-to-speak-out-about-the-world-as-it-is.html>.

^{ix} Wack often used visual metaphors to explain his approach to strategizing, See Art Kleiner, “The Man Who Saw the Future,” *strategy+business*, February 12, 2003, <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/8220>.

^x Evan Osnos, “The Next Incarnation,” *New Yorker*, October 4, 2010, 71.