

UNCOMMON

COURTESY

SCHOOL OF
COMPASSIONATE
SKILLS

by Stewart Brand

HAVE IN MIND AN EFFORT to make doing good do better. The means that comes to hand is a school, and within it a school of thought.

The school is an adult school, though possibly for adults of all ages. The school of thought is a body of people, probably widely scattered, who foster the idea through their discussion and activities. I'm calling the school UNCOMMON COURTESY and the school of thought PERIPHERAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (Field Research in Do-Good Technique).¹ Both arise from some premises. Overstated for clarity they are:

- Professional do-gooding these days is rife, smug, unrigorous, unoriginal, routinely ineffective, and often harmful.
- Most of the real good done is accomplished by amateurs in their spare time with their left hand.
- "Good" is commonly measured by the goodness of intention and degree of sacrifice in the doer. This is the opposite of *good*, which can only be measured by whether anything useful happened for the doer, and whether the usefulness perpetuates itself.
- Commonly the idea of good is wholly divorced from the idea of efficiency. If someone stops a war with a phone call or heads off a famine with an idea, their recognition is diminished by their efficiency. If however they sacrifice themselves lingeringly and fail, recognition rewards their elaborate debacle.
- Compassion is commonly treated as a rare virtue that requires encouragement. Compassion in fact is a given; it comes with having a life. What is lacking often is compassionate skill.

1. I wrote a romantic form of this notion in 1972 for our Point Foundation. It was reprinted in *The Seven Laws of Money*, pp. 128-136 (NWECC p. 308). The idea scared me at the time, and I didn't try it. Excerpt:

I have tentatively cataloged some elegance measures for evaluating missions and tactics. A good mission might be:

Regenerative – effects live on self-sustainingly

Expanding – cascading benefits, increasing sophistication

Adaptable – locally in time; exportable

Independent – not personality-bound or external-support-bound

Stable – self-correcting

Reality-based – e.g., in real self-interest of all involved

Locale-fitted – uses local resources, avoids local hazards, not threateningly exotic

Self-fitted – elements are mutually enhancing

Cheap/funky – satisfying rather than optimizing

Soft – or, if hard, then fast, or internal

Brilliant – unobvious solution

Original – our bit for state-of-the-art

Otherwise unlikely – If we don't lend a hand it probably won't happen (this eliminates many good ideas, which turn out to be happening anyway)

Successful – it worked

The author is founder and publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *CoEvolution Quarterly*, both of which were started without articles like this.

- Skills can be taught.
- Supposedly we despise the rich. In fact we emulate them faithfully. When they are good and interesting models, civilization flourishes. When not, not. At various times the British gentleman, the landed European knight, and the classical Athenian citizen have been worthy models. These days, for good or ill, well-off Americans are models for the world. So far our best are only medium good and medium interesting.²
- Institutions, especially self-satisfied low-feed-back do-good institutions, commonly grow until they are pathologically remote from their function. The only recourse then is back to the individual, and whenever in doubt back again to the individual. When hospitals cannot heal and police departments cannot protect, individuals still can.
- When any attempt to do good is automatically considered noble — i.e. sufficient — the process is dead and deadly. Intention is a fragment of an act, not a substitute for it or justification for it. Do-good attempts, to be alive, to inform themselves, to adapt, must be utterly self-skeptical. As art and science are.
- “Change is suffering.” Since change is inevitable, the only treatment is creativity, loving originality for its own sake. As art and science do.

And suchlike. A school of thought is a conversation. (So is a school. So is a magazine for that matter. A school and magazine might serve each other well.) For a conversation to go anywhere it has to explore. A crude set of injunctions for the PERIPHERAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY might go:

1. Do good.
2. Try stuff.
3. Follow through.

To keep from perishing of terminal loftiness, the notion had better fix on paying its way — its own way, directly from satisfied customers. That suggests a school — direct means of support, direct means of research, direct (face to face) means of amplification. Those who do, teach. That's life

anyway; might as well accommodate it. Besides, those who teach, learn.

I doubt if it's teaching in the usual college sense we're talking about. Suppose you wanted to put out subjects such as:

Home Care (Skillful nursing at home, by family.)

Real First Aid (Highly realistic preparation for the actual chaos of accidents and acute disease. Grass-roots para-medicine.)

Street Saint Skills (Training advanced martial artists to advance beyond defending themselves to defending the street.)³

Effective instruction in these subjects is likely to be different from “teaching,” which emphasizes equality of opportunity to learn. It's more apt to be training, the effort for equality of outcome: if you don't quit the course, you *will* know how to 1 _____, 2 _____, 3 _____ by the end of it. It is an intense, demanding, sometimes inspiring — sometimes too inspiring — way to learn. (If I sound like a former Army Basic Training officer, you're hearing correctly.)

Other courses suggest a more interactive mode:

Creative Philanthropy (How to be good and rich.)

Local Politics (At town and county level, how to serve as well as how to win.)

These suggest more of a seminar approach, with “students” already committed to the activity and “teachers” more than one or two at a time, and a more experience-exchanging and experimental format. Avoiding the temptations of New Age squishiness in such courses will take some ferocity of rigor and explicitness.⁴

The most basic course — Courtesy — I don't even know how to approach yet, perhaps because my generation threw out courtesy back when we were throwing out hypocrisy. It's clear that simple courtesy — and its secret ingredient, humor — is the main glue holding society together, especially where there's disagreement going on. Beyond that, it is courtesy that imbues every individual with the habit of thoughtfulness, of respect, which keeps all communication and the whole idea of good itself alive.

Basic. And hardly taught at all. Who taught Prince Charles how to be absolutely nice to absolutely every human he meets, by the hundreds,

2. Copy editor Joe Kane comments, “Personally, I think we emulate grace, which the rich are often — not always — more free to cultivate. Where does this fit in? Is the school especially for rich folks?”

No, except that it is especially for American folks, nearly all of whom are rich in world terms.

3. Terry Dobson, fourth-degree black-belt aikido instructor and coauthor of *Safe and Alive* (Spring '82 CQ), is interested in teaching such a course.

4. A fine example may be seen in *Getting to Yes* (Negotiating Agreement without Giving In) from the Harvard Negotiation Project, reviewed on p. 39.

all day long? How? What *are* the skills of kindness these days? Where does honesty come in after two decades of "human potential" theory and practice? Indeed therapy requires brutal honesty, but therapy is not appropriate to most interactions. Yet lying so rewards the liar and punishes the relationship that it has to be headed off by something. Now there's a tangle worthy of saints and conferences and magazines. Meanwhile I'd like to see a course:

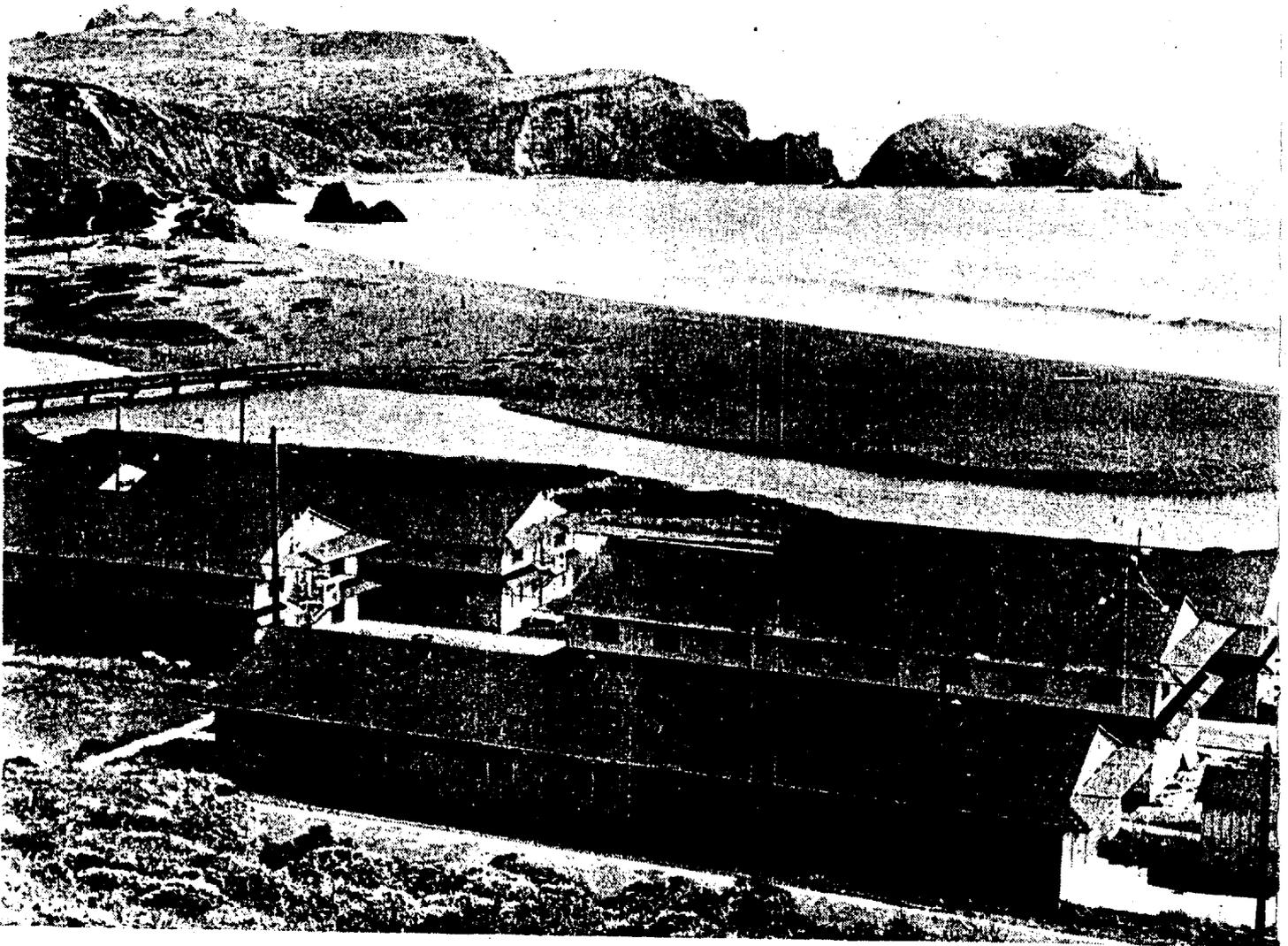
Courtesy

Maybe courtesy has to be reinvented. Maybe that's what a PERIPHERAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY should be largely about, the invention

of virtues.⁵ The considerable effectiveness of the Environmental Movement is mostly due to its redefining and promoting two virtues. One is irrelevant: don't litter. One is essential: always bear in mind the next couple larger systems from the one you're dealing with. (In that light not littering isn't really irrelevant; it's a way of con-

5. Which implies also inventing sins. One particularly vicious sin I would like to excoriate is the one where someone shams being hurt in order to rob or rape the person who approaches to help them. This is the sort of crime that Joanne Greenberg calls especially terrible because it makes the victim question the sanity of God. It makes people afraid of their own generosity.

STEWART BRAND



Both courses listed here will be given in these old military buildings on the beach at Fort Cronkhite, part of the National Park System's Golden Gate National Recreation Area, in a wild coastal valley just northwest of the Golden Gate Bridge (20 minutes from downtown San Francisco). We will be using the facilities of the Yosemite Institute and Golden Gate Energy Center.

stantly honoring in daily practice the Larger Systems virtue.)

Courtesy is news? Come on. Dale Carnegie has been selling that one since 1936. His *How to Win Friends and Influence People* has sold over 15 million copies with no signs of stopping, and Dale Carnegie courses are available in 56 countries. This new school doesn't look very uncommon yet. What, besides jazzy packaging, distinguishes "Real First Aid" from uncountable courses already available from the Red Cross and others in first aid, CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), and EMT (emergency medical training)? Not only is "Home Care" available as a video-cassettes-and-text

program,⁶ but that kind of instruction is offered at many of the more perceptive hospitals and proliferating hospice projects. So why bother?

Three reasons. One, this school should be uncommonly inventive, relishing the risk that goes with that. If it goes well we should be offering state-of-the-art material and very interesting mistakes. Two, as a "school of compassionate skills" we gain

6. "Going Home" (A Home Care Training Program), Ernest H. Rosenbaum, M.D., and Isadora Rosenbaum; 1980; 132 pp. and 11 video cassettes; \$1000 postpaid. Text alone, \$14.75; Individual cassettes \$75 to \$250. Information free. All from Bull Publishing, P.O. Box 208, Palo Alto, CA 94302.

Two Courses

CREATIVE PHILANTHROPY

Most private giving imitates government and corporate funding, which is the worst possible model. The opportunity and delight of private granting is the ability to be personal, original, and chancy. The creative philanthropist not only works with pioneers but becomes a pioneer.

The seminar leaders are: **ROBERT FULLER**, former president of Oberlin College and adviser to foundations such as MacArthur and The Doughnuts; **MICHAEL PHILLIPS**, former banker, financial manager of Glide Foundation, and author of *The Seven Laws of Money*; **PAUL HAWKEN**, humanist entrepreneur and lay economist; **STEWART BRAND**, founder of Point Foundation, which in its day gave away over a million eventful dollars.

Because we need to know quickly if the course is working, participation will be limited to persons who have the financial means (or access to the means) to try out soon what they learn.

DATES: August 20-22 (Friday evening to Sunday evening), 1982.

FEE: \$250 (includes all meals and lodging).



HOME CARE

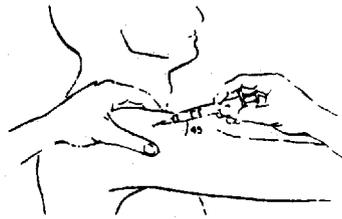
Extended hospital treatment is expensive, lonely, and sometimes not particularly healing. With a bit of skill, treatment at home can be the opposite. This intensive course provides the skill.

Expanding on the remarkable "Going Home" program of video tapes and manual developed at Mount Zion Hospital and Medical Center in San Francisco, the Home Care training course covers:

Aids and Activities for Daily Living,
Positioning and Moving a Patient,
Skin Care, Bathing and Mouth Care,
Pain Medication and Pain Control,
Massage,
Nutrition,

Recreation,
Bowel and Bladder Care,
Emergencies at Home,
and
Stress Reduction.

The instruction, led by **SUZANNE DEGEN**, includes participation by medical professionals with practical and teaching experience in nursing, physical therapy, social work, and hospice. **ERNEST ROSENBAUM, M.D.**, developer of the "Going Home" program, will introduce the course. Instruction will be tailored to meet the specific needs of the group. (Let us know when you apply how you intend to use what you learn.)



DATES: September 25-26 (Saturday-Sunday), 1982.

FEE: \$50 for two-day workshop (includes morning snack and lunch). For lodging and breakfast and dinner on site, add \$5 per meal, \$10 (room with one roommate), \$20 (private room) per night.

MAXIMUM ENROLLMENT: 25

To sign up or request information, write
Uncommon Courtesy
Box 428
Sausalito, CA 94966
or phone (415) 332-6106, Suzanne Degen,
Tuesday-Thursday, 10 am to 5 pm.

the advantages of combination. Courses may stimulate and inform each other, and the student can consider taking a mix or sequence of courses to become a multiple-threat do-gooder. Three, UNCOMMON COURTESY should bear active relation to other existing schools, directing people to the some that look good and away from the many that are not so hot,⁷ and collaborating like mad. We might schedule a "Home Care" course, for example, so that some of the customers could segue into a "Care of the Dying" course at a local hospice. With various groups we might share facilities, staff, publicity, and the revenue. (Fourth, of course, we might indeed compete destructively, split the liberal vote, and bring civilization to rack and ruin. If that happens we'll probably be grumpy with failure, and you'll have to remind us to apologize.)

There are some very fine do-good courses loose in the world that don't get the recognition or use (or income) they deserve. We have every obligation to help them, and — aha! — that's where having a magazine comes in handy. Reader, write. We need to know what's available and outstanding. Some we can cover as item reviews (\$15 for first suggesting, another \$15 for published review), some as articles (\$150 to \$300). Remember to distinguish between *self*-helping courses (such as the "Taking Care of Your Boat" class I'm attending this summer at the Wooden Boat School in Maine) and *other*-people-helping courses, which is what we're focusing on. They're rarer.

Now that you've come up, reader, how about contacting us if you want to bear any form of direct relation to UNCOMMON COURTESY — as course-catalog recipient, customer, instructor, advisor, financial contributor. We're at P.O. Box 428, Sausalito, CA 94966.

7. No implied venality here. Most of anything is not so hot.

Financial support. Our aim is to use it very well and not need it. From year one the school must pay its own way. Then if any further support turns up we can put it to immediate and gratifyingly conspicuous use for 1) careful growth, 2) scholarships, 3) plant ("The Lucy B. Stern Demonstration Home Care Hospital Bed," "The Sally Stanford Memorial Bedpan"), 4) risky ventures, 5) search, research, and profound theory. And if any major impending financial source suddenly dematerializes, as they so often do, we can blow it a cheery kiss.

It's customers, not funders, we're actively seeking. The possibility that you might do more good is the function of the school. Besides being fine-grain evaluators and supporters of the service, you become its researchers. That suggests serious "follow through" — contacting every student a few weeks, a few months, and a few years after a course to determine whether the instruction made any difference and if by any chance it was a useful difference, and what the former student would now advise to improve the course. In fact the longer courses might end on that note — how to make the course stronger, cleaner, and braver for the next bunch.

As for scale and schedule of school building, the prudent course is to begin local, small, cheap, and grow incrementally at the rate of use and capability rather than the rate of desire. So for starters there will be evening and Saturday morning classes in borrowed facilities such as the Planetree Health Resource Center in San Francisco, working up to weekend courses at rented facilities such as the Golden Gate Energy Center and Yosemite Institute on an ocean beach near Sausalito, culminating perhaps in week-long programs and ongoing courses in semipermanent leased facilities, with a national-scale catalog like Esalen Institute's.

Obviously the list of courses needs to grow and refine beyond the modest six offered in this article.

UNCOMMON DISCOURTESY	COMMON DISCOURTESY	COMMON COURTESY	UNCOMMON COURTESY
scum bag	sow's ear	silk purse	objet de bag art
shit head	doodoo brain	misguided	worthy opposition

Satirical comment from CQ bathroom wall. I've found myself studying it, not just for the humor but for the interesting questions it raises. That's a swear word there (there's another on the back cover). That's not nice, not courteous, but under the circumstances how else would you express the thought? Maybe courtesy sets standards; uncommon courtesy penetrates standards.

"Local Politics," for example, might reasonably divide into "Urban Local Politics" and "Rural Local Politics," though I would not want to see Running for Office separated from Serving in Office or from Lobbying Office Holders. Some subjects might work as micro-courses, such as a two-hour demonstration-intensive on the highly sophisticated consensus techniques developed by the Abalone Alliance and its antecedents. We should seize fortuitous opportunities such as collaborating with the Bread & Roses Festival on a week-long workshop, "Producing Benefit Concerts that Work." The Briarpatch Network in San Francisco has developed considerable experience in running small businesses as friendly, honest, and successful services, and there might be a course in that.

Have some more coffee? Probably the best way to improve the list is to look into your own thoughts for where you'd like to extend your usefulness and let us know what you find. If we develop a course around your idea, we'll thank you with a check, or give you the course free, or ask you to teach it.

As UNCOMMON COURTESY courses develop and the conversation thickens, they'll be reported in CoEvolution, including content from courses we do and courses we find already splendid elsewhere.

There, is that enough? More could be said. More had better be said, and if possible by you. But is that enough to start with? ■

The Tracker

Tom Brown, Jr., grew up in the desolate New Jersey Pine Barrens. He was schooled mercilessly but compassionately in woodlore and survival by his best-friend's father, a Navajo tracker named Stalking Wolf. With a consummate storyteller's skill (perhaps that of his coauthor) he entices the rest of us by telling how he exchanged his small-town-boy's self-centeredness for the cunning, observant care, and sheer goodheartedness of a tracker. The result is a masterpiece of lore about how to see and how to learn.

—Art Kleiner

[Suggested by Becca Harber]

The Tracker

Tom Brown, Jr., and William Jon Watkins
1978; 229 pp.

\$3.50 postpaid from:
Berkley Publishing Co.
Book Mailing Service
20 Addison Place
Valley Stream, NY 11580
or Whole Earth
Household Store



One winter after a moderate snow, I went out to get milk and found the track of a small gray bird called a Junco. I like the silhouette of the Junco; its head rounds so smoothly into its back that it looks like it ought to be made out of chrome. Birds are always mysteries. They leave their track in the air most of the time and I don't have the nose to follow it. Their tracks on the ground were irresistible. . . .

The movement from a hop to a better balanced stance said there had been danger. The way the toes went into the snow and curled under told me that more weight had been forward on the foot, as it would have been if the bird were ducking its head and then swiveling it to look up.

I had learned what track is made by that gesture the only way it can be learned, by watching a similar bird do a similar thing on the ground and then going over to see what the track looked like. By doing this time after time with bird after bird, animal after animal, person after person, I became a tracker.

It amazes me, when I look back, how little of all that Stalking Wolf taught me was done in words, and how deftly everything was done. He never gave me a direct answer, and when he had something to teach us, he arranged it so that it was something we suddenly needed desperately to know.

We practiced constantly, working to make ourselves as good as invisible even when we moved. A flowing motion is harder to observe against the background of the woods than an erratic or eccentric one. One of the things that attracts predators to the sick and injured is the way the motion of their bodies clashes with the flow of the motion around them. "Move as the wind moves," Stalking Wolf had taught us, and we made our motion flow like the movement of leaves on wind-bent branches. Even around the house we practiced, getting up and fitting our walk in behind someone who went past. Walking in their footprints as their feet moved out of the them, our legs almost touching theirs, we would glide invisibly behind our parents and our friends dropping off before they turned to see us and slipping into a shadow or into a chair as if we had been sitting in it all the time. We drove everyone crazy, including each other, popping out of nowhere, rising out of the shadow of a tree or a wall, appearing suddenly in the middle of a conversation to the surprise of whoever was standing there.

Of all the birds, Stalking Wolf respected the chickadee the most, even more than the hawk or the owl. Every animal had some characteristic to admire and emulate, and Stalking Wolf often used them as examples of what our own skills should be like. We learned to be patient observers like the owl. We learned cleverness from the crow, and courage from the jay, who will attack an owl ten times its size to drive it off its territory. But above all of them ranked the chickadee because of its indomitable spirit.

The exuberance of the chickadee made him our idol. In the coldest weather, when other birds have gone into the brush to wait behind a dome of driven snow for the weather to clear, the chickadee is always out, his *chicka-dee-dee-dee* ringing off the snow. When the fox has curled himself up under a small tree and let the snow drift him a blanket of insulation, the chickadee is out doing loop-the-loops over the seedless snow, calling louder than playing children that he is there and alive and happy about it!



MODERATELY TIRED MAN



TIRED MAN

**SPECIAL INAUGURAL REPRINT ISSUE: INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT TOOLS
AND IDEAS Whole Earth Review Dedicated to the Incoming Administration 20 January
1996 - Link Page**

[Previous](#) [Whole Earth Models & Systems, CEO \(Summer 1982\)](#)

[Next](#) [For More Punishment: Whole Earth Review Subscription Forms AND American Intelligence Journal Subscription](#)

[Return to Electronic Index Page](#)