

Introduction

IN THE 1780s, when pioneers first settled what was to become the state of Ohio, 96 percent of the territory was covered with massive hardwood trees. These forests were mostly vast expanses of mixed oak and hickory trees with American beeches and sugar maples in the northeast. The remaining 4 percent of the land was composed of prairie grasses and a large, black swamp in the northwest, upon which the city of Toledo now sits.

Ohio's trees were cleared to create trails and farmland, and to build log homes. Safe gun-firing zones, or "fields of fire," were established around settlements. Well into the late 1800s the settlers were still afraid of both the human and nonhuman native inhabitants of Ohio's woods. Incredibly, after the first 150 years of more "civilized stewardship" by the settlers, the total amount of forest cover had been reduced from 96 percent to just 12 percent. In a story typical of what has occurred in all of North America's heavily forested states east of the Mississippi River, increased settlement and more sophisticated tools finally "tamed" the wilderness and brought about the massive deforestation that has left so much of the United States denuded of trees.

No one in the nineteenth century seriously considered that there would be such an accumulative effect from individuals using a small amount of space and lumber to build their cabins and fence off their land. In those days, America seemed boundless and its resources unlimited. Nevertheless, forestry experts agree today that across these United States between the 1600s and year 2000 there was a net loss of over 50 percent of all of our native forest cover. In particular parts of the United States the loss was even greater. The virgin sequoia and redwood forests in California and the Pacific Northwest, with some of the largest and oldest trees in America, have been reduced by over 95 percent. The total effect has been a net loss of over 30 billion trees.

Given these figures, therefore, it is a demonstrable fact that every person has already made a cumulative difference in the loss of America's environmental resources. And a similar story to that of deforestation could be told about non-renewable resources during this period—such as coal, precious and industrial metals and oil and gas. We have been mining and plundering these resources recklessly throughout the history of the United States; and all this occurred during a time when the population of the United States has been relatively small in comparison with the surface area of the country.

In view of the undeniable fact that each person has already had a negative impact on the environment, it never ceases to amaze me when people say they cannot possibly make a positive difference to our environment. The fact is that, with our ever-dwindling resources being tapped by an ever-growing population, the impact of each individual is today more critical than ever before.

Growing America

The message of this book is that it is time for us to “Grow America.” It is my belief that the job of creating our country is not finished. In this effort, every individual will once again make a difference. My premise is that we have, for the most part, built the infrastructure of our country. We have built hundreds of thousands of miles of roads and highways and hundreds of thousands of schools, churches, retail stores and offices, parking lots, and over one hundred and fifteen mil-

lion residences. But we haven't finished the job. In both a social and an environmental sense, it is time for us to complete the work of creating an ideal America.

Over the last decade, I have spoken with many people from Europe. These Europeans believe we Americans are ridiculous when we complain that our communities are completely "built up." In Europe, where civilizations have lived for over two millennia, every square foot of land is used to maximum advantage. My European friends find it amusing that we are so proud of our new neighborhoods with \$300,000 homes that have virtually no trees around them. Where, they ask, are the hedgerows, the flower and vegetable gardens? Where are the fruit trees?

Over the last fifteen years, I have been attempting to teach students that "everywhere you see the sky there used to be a tree" (see Chapter Five). I have argued that we don't have to live in cities filled with roads, parking lots, houses, schools and businesses with only a few trees scattered among them. Rather, we can live in a vast forested area with roads and houses and buildings underneath. The projects that I have initiated, and which you will read about in this book, have given trees to hundreds of thousands of students and invited them to begin "regrowing" America in their own backyards. Our tree projects have empowered both young people and adults by tying them directly to the Earth through the planting of a tree.

I do not expect us to replace a majority of the trees that have been removed. However, we can certainly take a new and serious look at every twenty-foot square of unforested land in America and ask ourselves whether we can plant a tree there. We need to go back and re-examine the forgotten or polluted areas that exist around us and replant as many trees and bushes as possible. We need to look at empty lots and huge pieces of land that we are mowing and ask ourselves whether instead of cutting grass all day we can plant trees and let them work for us. We may find that most of our mowing is simply a bad habit we need to break.

It is not the government's job to plant trees on private property. To regrow America it will require a massive effort by private citizen

activists using private money to buy and plant trees on private land. This book illustrates how one such community project grew within five years to involve over one million private citizen forestry volunteers in a network of over 1,500 schools and civic groups. My “free tree” idea could be easily used by your community with the help of just one inspired volunteer. You may know just the right person for the job. You may be that person. This book will provide you with some ideas for helping the environment and starting your own organization, as well as suggestions for creating a successful campaign and avoiding the burnout that happens to so many activists.

Community Activism

The “free tree” project I initiated represents the environmental half of the equation for growing America. But community forestry is only one small aspect of the completion of our unfinished nation. We need to address the social problems of the homeless, the hungry and undernourished, the infirm, the mentally ill, the emotionally disturbed and the illiterate. We need to preserve our historic structures while building the nation with new structures that use the best environmental technology. We Americans are so proud of our own country while being quick to find fault with other cultures around the globe. Isn't it time we undertook a greater effort to fix our own social problems at home before condemning others for their inadequacies?

This book highlights how one person has made a difference through one community environmental project. It proposes more environmental actions and issues a call for new activists in large numbers to take part in their own projects. Each of these environmental projects can also serve as models for any number of other community action efforts in every segment of society.

Private volunteer activists are going to be needed in every field in increasing numbers. This will be especially true as those of us born between 1946 and 1964—known as the “baby boomers”—become senior citizens. What I hope to show in *Growing America* is that every person can truly make a positive difference and how you can work within the system to help change it. I hope all of you who read this

book will challenge yourselves to step forward and be the activist that is needed in your field of choice.

The word “activist” has been given an unfair label; it’s about as popular as the word “politician.” In my opinion, such a negative label has come about because the modern-day definition of activism is most associated by those in power with those who are perceived as being *against* something: whether it’s against government, taxes, logging, pollution or any large organization and the insensitivity that often accompanies it. Some activists, both on the right and the left, have taken their “anti-something” practices to such lengths that they have created a whole philosophy of being against social order. They believe we should burn down the entire country and return to an agrarian society with no government.

There is a place in life for those who are against things. Someone needs to be brave enough to cry out when a great wrong is being committed. There may even be a time and place for anarchism, such as when society shifts too far to one extreme and fails to protect the most basic rights of citizens. Nazi Germany could have used a strong anarchist movement.

But whether you resist or agree with the idea of “activism,” you should know that you already are an activist. If you are alive, you are an activist. If you do anything, you are an activist. If you do nothing but sit and breathe, you are still an activist. You were an activist before you took your first breath. Ask any mother and she will gladly tell you which of her children was the biggest activist while still in her womb!

I, for one, am not an anarchist. I don’t see myself as against anything; instead, I am *for* things. My method of social activism is to be *pro-active*, not *re-active*. I believe that we are each by nature proactive. A proactivist is one who performs actions through peaceful means within the existing system in order to change it. A proactivist is one who ultimately aspires to peace, harmony and social order. A proactivist is a builder of unity. Being a proactivist is easy. To be a reactivist one has to struggle and work really hard, going against the

grain. Proactivists empower others to grow and take on more responsibility; reactivists take power away from another.

This book aims to be an inspirational guide for all proactivists. Again, while it may appear to be about my specific community volunteer environmental projects, as well as some of the initiatives that I have supported or assisted in, the proactive ideas in *Growing America* will also serve as models for anyone in their community projects. My life to date has been mainly about fixing our environmental problems. Clearly, the same truths I have proactively applied to the environment could be applied to feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, educating the illiterate and caring for the infirm, the mentally ill and the emotionally disturbed. I hope that this book inspires you—whatever your age or whatever your issue—to pick your issue and pitch in.

Learning Young

During my childhood, with no particular effort on my part, I assimilated knowledge of our culture and its systems. I learned about poverty and riches, legal and illegal activities, responsibility and irresponsibility, maturity and immaturity in both the young and the old. Because I did not have many adults in my life who really cared for my opinion, I became a good listener.

While young, I practiced my methods of influencing those around me with mixed results. It was not until my three years in the military, two as a sergeant, that I had an opportunity to really practice and develop skills needed in the management of individuals and large institutions—in my case the United States Army. That experience stood me in good stead when I later on was hired to recruit and motivate a whole network of volunteers. It is surprising to me to observe how many of those military lessons learned when I was a young man have carried over to my civilian life. You will find throughout the book that my experiences in Viet Nam had an enormous influence on how I lived my life afterward.

When I returned to the U.S. after nineteen months in Viet Nam (about which you can read in Chapters Three and Nine), I was still

only twenty years old. But I came away from the military and the war with several life-changing beliefs:

- A resolve to live every aspect of my life without violence. This was to include my personal life, my work and even my diet.
- The belief that the most lasting changes could be accomplished in society without hatred and violence.
- The understanding that life is not simply black and white—it almost always comes in shades of gray. Therefore, nearly everything is negotiable.
- The conviction that I had only survived two tours in Viet Nam because I had made a distinct change in my life. In the face of my imminent death, I had made a commitment to God that if I died, I would die willingly. But if I lived, I would spend every moment for the rest of my life dedicated to the re-establishment of an original personal relationship with Him and, in turn, to sharing that knowledge with others.

The result of this deep commitment has been the lifelong dedication of my every action to God. As part of this, I have practiced Transcendental Meditation for over thirty years as a way of cleaning out all remaining inner negativity and habituating my mind to operate on its deepest and most inspired levels of thinking. TM is the subject of Chapter Eleven. I have lived as a vegetarian for over thirty years, and have worked toward the creation of joy and fun in my life and in the lives of those around me through the empowerment of both the young and the old. You can read about my vegetarianism in Chapter Six. I have undertaken decades of research to gain a deeper understanding of what keeps humankind suffering and bound in ignorance of our Higher Self. Through all of this, I have gained some insight into how to assist humankind to move beyond these boundaries and to recognize their own worth, their highest good. I continue to gain more insight each year. The practical result for me has been

that my most inspired ideas are also those that have been most successful.

Throughout my life, even though I have undergone what to others may seem like hardships, I feel I have been blessed. I have been blessed with the resilient joy of being alive and with a genuine lack of anger in almost every situation. I have also been blessed by being surrounded with countless friends who have willingly assisted me in my endeavors and have had fun with me in the process.

A Larger Accomplishment

On one level, *Growing America* is about some of my proactivist accomplishments. It details how to get things done without being negative or tearing down the system. It discusses how we can and need to “grow America” through the efforts of private individuals and groups. On a deeper level, however, my message is that every person without exception, young or old, has an opportunity to rise to a higher awareness and accomplishment. I believe that we all have the opportunity to break out of our boundaries, out of the mentally constructed boxes we are living in, and open ourselves to a greater sense of our own Being.

Twenty years ago, in *The Greening of America*, Charles Reich wrote that “Transcendence is America’s greatest need.” That truth remains valid today. I believe that it is the lack of direct human experience of transcendence that is the greatest epidemic on this planet. I believe that there is no lack of knowledge, power or possibilities once we have tapped into the transcendental level of Universal Intelligence. Once we are freed of our own ego-driven, self-imposed limitations and become more connected with the Universal Awareness within us, there is virtually nothing we cannot accomplish. Don’t worry if this sounds complicated or vague, or even a little intimidating or “New Age-y” at the moment; I will talk about the subject at length and on a practical level in Chapter Eleven. All you need to do is open to the possibility that the self is more than the everyday ego that worries about mundane problems. It has been my experience that there is a transcendent self that can place everything

in its proper perspective and provide us with a higher awareness—more wakefulness. In order for us to finish growing America, we will need tens of thousands of individuals with such higher awareness to mobilize and add their strength to those already leading the way in the nonprofit sector. If you understand this concept, you qualify for the job. We will need more volunteers, more skills, more time, more resources and more money.

When Social Security retirement was implemented in the United States, Americans were not living much past 65 or 75 years of age. Today, American men are living to an average of 75 years and women until they are 84. That means there are 13 to 22 years for retirement—and yet we are programmed to ignore our most sagacious years. What a waste of human brilliance! We need to rethink the whole idea of retiring; we need to pay back the system that has been so giving to us. A new worldview is needed that encourages every person to decide what they plan to work on in their retirement years as their avocation.

The government cannot regrow America for us. Beyond the initial creation and maintenance of our major infrastructure, our state and federal governments were never designed to help “complete” our society. Government was created to protect America from invasion and to protect individual rights. The completion of an ideal society has always been the responsibility of those private individuals who were awake enough to see our problems and needs and begin to fix them. We need to finish the growing of America to create an ideal society. For this we need your help—each and every one of you.

*David A. Kidd
Canton, Ohio
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