

A Discussion Guide for:

FEARLESS MINDS

by Vivek Pandit

The work that Vivek Pandit has done to organize social change movements in India is extraordinary. And, Unitarian Universalists can be proud of the partnership that exists between Vivek and the UU Holdeen India Program (UUHIP). Through that partnership the values of Unitarian Universalism are put into practice every day in collaboration with the poorest of the poor in India. Through his book American UU's will come to understand more about UUHIP.

But more importantly, Vivek's experiences can provide American UU's with concrete examples of how social change happens, and practical suggestions for engaging in social change in our own communities. This discussion guide will provide readers with a notable excerpt from each chapter of the book, along with questions that tease out the essential message that Vivek shares with us.

The Discussion Guide is suitable for large groups, small groups, and even for individual use. It could provide the basis of a congregational multi-session social justice study of social change strategies, or material for short and tightly-focused reflection periods at the beginning or end of social action committee meetings.

However you choose to make use of the discussion guide, I hope that it will provide a useful entry into the inspirational and transformative work of Vivek Pandit.

Rev. Eric M. Cherry
Director of International Resources, UUA

The Introduction:

Mind Without Fear

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up
into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and
action---*
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

from *Geetanjali*
Rabindranath Tagore

- What does Tagore mean by “Freedom”?
- Why has Vivek chosen Tagore’s meaning of Freedom as the subtext of his book?
- What is the difference between Vidhayak Sansad and Shramajeevi Sanghatana? Why were they formed?

Chapter 1:

Vivek writes, “*Wielding power is claiming superiority on the basis of something that you have. This something can be the caste-mark on the forehead, land, money, political connections, muscle power, weapons, religious or moral control and so on... We can assume that the powerful will not willingly give up their source of power. At best they will probably adjust only to the extent that there is not too much discomfort.* (p. 5)

- Are there corresponding power dynamics in your community?
- How do you relate to the 6 barriers that Vivek describes for oppressed people?

Chapter 2:

Vivek writes, “*After independence the Constitution became, among other things, the repository of the rights and duties of the citizens and the State. In fact, the greatest difference between the pre and post colonial days is the existence of a written Constitution that recognizes that even ordinary citizens have some inalienable rights that cannot be taken away without due process of law. In working for the rights of the marginalized it is first necessary to understand what those rights are, from where they are derived, how they are ensured, and how they are violated.*” (p. 14)

- What are the important changes created by the Indian Constitution?
- How does the Indian Constitution affect Vivek’s organizing strategies?

Chapter 3:

Vivek writes, “*Development projects beyond a certain limit make the government lazy. A welfare state like India has to provide basic services for the benefit of the people... When NGOs take over these programmes the government is absolved of its responsibility*” (p. 31)

- What is the difference between a Vision and an Issue? How are they related?
- What are the key elements involved in developing a strategy?
- What is your reaction to the dialogue that Vivek describes between himself and the rural organization?
- Why is it important to take “power” into account when developing a strategy?

Chapter 4:

*“You are not to be blamed for your situation
Wake up and demand your rights
Wake and realize that
Books were kept beyond your reach
O People! Your toil
Has made this world a wonder
And yet your children are made to
Herd cattle all day long
It is time you made the first demand for education
Wake up and get educated!”* (p. 38)

- How is “organizing” different than other “Methods of Addressing Problems”?
- What are “organizers” like and what do they do?

Chapter 5

Vivek writes, *“An army officer, while addressing our organizers, had said, ‘The more you sweat in peace the less you bleed in war.’ An army polishes and practices its weaponry irrespective of whether there is a threat of war or not. Organizing is just the same. The organization has to prepare for opposition whether there is immediate threat or not... Facing the moment of risk requires anger against injustice, courage, presence of mind, resilience and optimism. Not only should the organizer possess these qualities, they should have the quality of communicating these to others.”* (p. 47-8)

- Why are the risks of a violent response against an organizer so high?
- How can an organizer respond constructively to violence?

Chapter 6

Vivek writes, “*Organizing is nothing but working on issues. In the process we are able to build the confidence of the people, identify and groom community leadership. Leadership is identified, confirmed and polished only in the struggle while working on issues. Finally only through working on issues and careful strategizing can we expose our opponents and the unjust system. Thus, it is important to discuss the various aspects of working on issues.*” (p. 52)

- Why is trust important for an organizer?
- What is your reaction to the dialogue between Vivek and the people from Shimpala? And the dialogue with the bonded laborer?
- What does Vivek mean by “Stating the Opposite?”
- Why the released bonded laborers collect donations for the struggle against apartheid in S. Africa?

Chapter 7

Vivek writes, “*One of the greatest contributions by Gandhiji, not only to the freedom struggle, but also to the field of political activism, is the concept of Satyagraha – of non-violent confrontation with an opponent. Gandhiji did not deny conflict, or struggle but redefined the very nature of the confrontation by adhering to principles of non-violence*” (p. 68)

- What did Gandhi mean when he wrote, “We cease to play the part of the ruled...”?
- Have you come across the “instruments of non-violent campaigns” that Vivek describes in other contexts?

Chapter 8

Vivek writes, “*Strategy is the broad planning for the solution of an issue at hand. The strategy is based on the vision of an organization. Strategic planning is needed so that you can win with minimum resources and suffering minimum losses.*” (p.79)

- What is a “SLOT” analysis?
- How does “Issue Framing” work?
- What is “positioning”?

Chapter 9

*“Our Struggle is for Justice;
Our struggle is to live like human beings.
This independence is incomplete
The people are still starving.
Those who work will eat.
Those who loot will go.
A new age will come.”* (p. 100)

- When have Slogans and Songs been important aspects of social justice movements in the United States?
- Are tactics like “Confusing the Enemy,” “Using the opponents resources,” and “Enforcing the opponents book of rules” applicable for social change in the United States? Can you recall moments in our history when they have been successfully employed?

Chapter 10

Vivek writes, “*Negotiations come at the end of a campaign or at the end of a phase of a campaign. The very purpose of a campaign is to bring the opponent on the bargaining table. This is the most important part of a struggle for rights. If we lose in the negotiations then our entire effort has been defeated... Therefore, we must prepare for the negotiations*” (p. 111)

- How do you decide whether a point is negotiable or non-negotiable?
- How can the power of the media be leveraged to support a negotiation?
- Can threats be effective? What makes them effective?

Chapter 11

Vivek writes, *“Knowing and working with the various democratic systems is extremely important in organizing. This does not mean that the systems are flawless. Far from it, more often the systems are themselves the instruments of oppression. However, unless we try to work with the systems we will never know what is wrong with it.* (p. 119)

- Do you agree with Vivek that working through a democratic system is more effective than trying to tear it down?
- Can you outline the systems in the US that are parallel to those Vivek describes in India?

Chapter 12

Vivek writes, *“We have accepted a democratic form of government, which entails governance for the people, by the people and of the people. Thus participation of the people in their own governance for their own well being is at the core of democracy”* (p. 125)

- How well do Americans understand their Federal, State and Local legislative process? Can your congregation provide information in a way that is as constructive as Vivek’s description of the Indian legislative process?
- Are the suggestions for “Working with Legislature” helpful in the American context?

Chapter 13

Vivek writes, *“The bureaucracy is an iron framework. It is inflexible and static. It is important to know the structure, the functions and the dynamics of the bureaucracy. The function is the prescribed role and the dynamics is how the system actually moves. Bureaucrats are qualified people on the post and are bound to act within the limits of rules, regulations and the due process of law. Apart from this the bureaucrat may act within his discretion to implement the law in its true spirit... The discretionary powers of the bureaucrat are great and the bureaucrat is protected for all actions taken in good faith.”* (p. 138)

- How many “types of bureaucrats” have you encountered?
- What did Gandhi mean when he wrote, “Cooperate where you can and resist where you must.”?
- Which of the tactics for “working with bureaucrats” are most helpful to you?

Chapter 14

Vivek writes, *“In a democracy, there are some rights that the citizen holds against the State. These are the fundamental rights of the citizen which cannot be taken away without the due process of law and which the State must guarantee to each and every citizen. The judiciary is the custodian of the fundamental rights. In fact, the right to constitutional remedy i.e. the right to approach the courts of law in case of violation of fundamental rights by the State is itself one of the fundamental rights of the citizens.”* (p. 145)

- How is the Indian judicial system similar to the American judicial system? How is it different?
- Can the US judicial system be used to “hold an unresponsive executive accountable”? How?

Chapter 15

Vivek writes, “As organizers we are required to push forward our issue, highlight an issue, and create pressure on the decision-makers. Therefore, it is impossible for an organizer who wants to make a strong impact and win a campaign to ignore the media.” (p. 155)

- What are the most effective media sources in your community?
- Does your congregation have a relationship with local or regional media editors?
- Are there examples of ways that your congregation or an action group in your community has used media effectively? What did they do?

Chapter 16

Vivek writes, “Leadership does not come from being an office bearer. It comes only when the people accept you as a leader. Without the acceptance there cannot be a leadership but merely designation. People always observe the leader. One who takes risks on behalf of his people, who puts the cause before his family or even his own life is accepted as the leader. Crisis is also a touchstone of leadership. One who talks of struggle but disappears when the actual struggle begins cannot become a leader. (p. 167)

- What is your reaction to the qualities of authentic leadership that Vivek outlines? And the blemishes?
- What opportunities for leadership training exist in your community?

Chapter 17

Vivek writes, *“Any organization requires an accountability hierarchy to be able to plan and implement strategies. The difference between a mass organization and the government bureaucracy or the corporate sector is the flexibility and the democratic functioning. Thus, in the organization the member is the most important person and the organization is accountable to the members first and foremost”* (p. 179-80)

- How does the structure of a People’s Organization in India correspond to similar organizations in the US?
- What does Vivek mean by “accountability”?
- Are Vivek’s descriptions of “passing on leadership to others” helpful in your context?

Chapter 18

Vivek writes, *“An organization should grow otherwise it will stagnate and die. A People’s Organization should flow like a river and not stagnate like a pond. Growth means new issues, new people, and new areas of work, new geographical areas, and new forms of action. An organization that moves forward to accept new challenges has lesser chances of splintering than those that reach a standstill”* (p. 191)

- Which of the causes of organizational breakdown that Vivek describes are familiar to you?
- What is “Projectization”?

Chapter 19

Vivek writes, *“a people’s organization is based on solidarity against injustice, which is conceptually the opposite of a self-help group or the locality development organization. It is an understanding that goes beyond the narrow confines of selfhood towards a larger and shared experience.”* (p. 202)

- What is the difference between an NGO and a “People’s Organization”?
- How can they work together?
- Why is this an important distinction for US UU’s to understand?

The Appendix I – Human Rights

- How important are intergovernmental statements about Human Rights?
- Which of the conventions that Vivek lists is the US a party to?

Appendix II - V

- Discuss your reactions to the case studies.
- What were key elements in their successes?

About the Author

(from *Fearless Minds*)

Mr. Vivek Pandit has organized for the release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers, against brutalities committed on the vulnerable sections, for primary education of child labourers and rights of workers in the unorganized sector.

He is involved in campaigns for police reforms in India and establishment of State Human Rights Commission in Maharashtra. He has helped organizations in Nepal to release bonded labourers.

He is the founder of several institutions like Shramajeevi Sanghatana, a People's Organisation, Centre for Budget Studies for analysis of government budget and policy documents, Vidhayak Sansad which works for rural development, Campaign for Human Rights a coalition of membership-based organizations, National Centre for Advocacy Studies for training of grassroots activists in advocacy skills, Samarthan, a state-level advocacy organization. He is closely involved in the work of all these organizations.

He is presently member of Maharashtra State Task Force on Primary Education, and government committees on Bonded Labour, and Child Labour.

He was awarded the fellowship of Ashoka Innovators for the Public in 1983 and of the Advocacy Institute Washington D.C. in 1990. He and his wife Vidyullata were jointly awarded the Anti-Slavery Award 1999 by the Anti-Slavery International, U.K. He has been recently awarded the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship to study budgetary process, legislative committees and police accountability systems in the USA.

He is a widely acclaimed resource person for organizing and advocacy programmes in India and abroad.



The Faith Without Borders program is designed to assist congregations in creating and sustaining effective international engagement ministries through resources, consultation and celebration.

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