

A Tale of Two Idealists

By **Michael Strong**, CEO & Chief Visionary Officer, FLOW

Consider Julian, Activist A: Angered by social injustice and environmentally unsustainable commerce, and inspired by earlier generations of activists, Julian graduated from college determined to make a difference in the world. He got a job as a canvasser for a social justice organization at below minimum wage (indeed, the organization pleaded with the government for an exemption to pay its employees below minimum wage). After eighteen months at this job he obtained a better job, working for a non-profit, as a community organizer in a poor Hispanic community.

This was a far more satisfying job than going door-to-door; the women of the community often brought him burritos for lunch and he felt valued by the community as he fought city hall to ensure that they got their fair share of parks and recreations dollars and quality water and sewage services. He was still paid just slightly more than minimum wage, but the satisfactions of the job made it all worthwhile. After five frustrating years in this position, constantly battling the government, Julian fell in love with a woman he met at a protest march, and they married and decided to raise a family.

He went back to school for a couple more years to get a teaching credential while still working as a community organizer, then went into public school teaching, finally earning a modest but comfortable salary. He started out idealistically as a young teacher, and was supported by his principal as he tried out innovative methods that developed critical and creative thinking and emotional intelligence in his students. That principal was then transferred, and his new principal, concerned with the low test score gains at the school, required all faculty to be trained in a form of direct instruction, in which the teacher's entire day was scripted. Instead of teaching creatively, Julian was now forced to read out loud from an instruction book, which told him what to say and specified how the students were to respond.

His autonomy as an educator was non-existent. He quickly came to hate his job but conscientiously tried not to expose his frustrations to his students. He looked into taking a job at a nearby private Montessori school where he could teach in a way that had integrity and rewarded his creative intelligence, but it would have required a 40% pay cut and the loss of his retirement. By this time he and his wife had a child and a mortgage, and he couldn't afford to leave the public schools.

Julian vacillated between rage and depression day after day, year after year. In his quietest, most honest moments, he wondered if he had wasted his life: although he and his wife contributed \$50 they couldn't afford to Greenpeace each month, and they only bought ecologically conscious products, he knew he just wasn't making much of a difference in the world. But he also knew that he couldn't stomach selling out to corporate America even if it meant that he could give more money to activist causes. Was there no alternative between dying a slow death of the spirit and selling out?

Consider Patrice, Activist B: Patrice, who was a freshman the year Julian graduated, was likewise angered by social injustice and environmentally unsustainable commerce. For a time, she attended the same activist meetings as Julian and went to the same protest marches. Then one day she attended a FLOW speech on campus that mostly just confused her. The speakers seemed to have an honest commitment to making the world a better place, and introduced her to many new concepts she had never heard before, but they also were unabashedly enthusiastic about free markets. It was weird stuff, but she couldn't quite reject it out of hand.

For the next several months she read FLOW materials and argued with members of the campus FLOW group about free markets and sustainability and innovation and entrepreneurship and advertising and consumer sovereignty and personal responsibility and personal growth and just about everything else it seemed like. Gradually, as the FLOW world-view came into focus and she came to understand the potential for global change provided by FLOW, she became excited. She saw how she could have an enormous positive impact on the world, be a much happier person, and, indeed, have a blast and live a prosperous life, while making the world a better place. Although Julian and her other activist friends mostly cut her off in anger when she quit attending their meetings (she had gotten to the point at which she found the anger and righteousness at those meetings tedious), she didn't care anymore. She was busy making things happen.

Patrice became a leader in the FLOW movement. She organized a FLOW Happiness and Well-being chapter that supervised internships at various local new private and charter schools that were creating happier, better places for kids to learn. Although occasionally a placement or a school didn't work out, for the most part she constantly heard stories of how happy the schools were to have extra help, how meaningful the interns found the experiences, and most of all how young people's lives were being changed. The students who worked at these schools became school choice activists, working vigorously on behalf of educational vouchers, tax credits, and more liberated charter schools. She later found that many of the interns she set up went on to create their own chains of schools based on the new educational approaches learned in these cool laboratory schools.

She also organized FLOW Open World groups that coordinated campus entrepreneur clubs with do-gooders eager to address social, economic, and environmental issues in developing communities throughout the world. There were already several dozen bright, ambitious young men who were busy creating web-based businesses in their dorm rooms. In her old life she would have despised these geeky guys for not joining her at anti-globalization protests. But now she was organizing many of her former protester friends to create on-line education and training for people around the world. Through Open World they were working with teen-agers in Sri Lanka, micro-entrepreneurs in Bolivia, and a tech park in Kyrgyzstan, to develop a wide range of skills and establish positive relationships beyond their local communities. Her goal was to develop the teenagers' skills to the point at which the campus geeks would hire them to work on their web businesses.

She encountered significant challenges in addressing cross-cultural communication issues, and sometimes it seemed as if her team had to learn how to explain the entire modern world to people in other countries so that they could be effective employees and collaborators. But when the first

poor people in Sri Lanka, Bolivia, and Kyrgyzstan received their first \$5 PayPal payments invariably they would send her Open World team the most effusively grateful thank yous.

More impressively, a remarkable number of them, once they started earning \$50 per month or so, began donating money back to the project. They felt both grateful and rich, and wanted to give back.

Both the geek entrepreneurs and the former anti-globalization protestors were so overwhelmed by this display of generosity, by those so much poorer than themselves, that they began holding a weekly “Upwing” party at which each person was required to bring someone of the opposite political persuasion as a date. Each “Right-Left” couple paid \$20 to get into the party, \$10 of which went directly to scholarships for students at private schools in the developing world (where a year’s private school tuition was \$20-40 per year). These parties, and this movement, began spreading to campuses across the U.S., and within a few years were producing millions of dollars for scholarships around the world.

Initially the campus environmentalists were hostile to the Open World project because they thought that it just meant more economic growth that would be destructive to the environment. A low point was when one of the Upwing parties was disrupted by a protest with signs proclaiming “Don’t Sleep with the Enemy,” “Beware: Capitalism is a communicable disease,” and far more vulgar slogans. This became awkward after Oxfam officially supported the Open World project, but there were still very negative attitudes towards Open World among some of the environmental groups.

Patrice realized that she needed to do some outreach, so she held FLOW sustainability workshops and one-by-one twisted the arms of key players in the campus environmental movement to attend. The workshops first clarified the distinction between those resources, which were in serious danger of depletion due to tragedy of the commons problems, and those, which were not due to the fact that they were owned. They then presented ways to address tragedy of the commons problems and how to persuade business people that property rights solutions to such problems were good business.

They had panel discussions between FLOW leaders, environmentalists, economists and business people that revealed openness to practical environmental solutions on the part of all parties. Patrice then created a campus sustainability chapter that supported property rights solutions, a green tax shift, and environmental entrepreneurship without the rage and exaggeration that too often undermined the credibility of some of the traditional campus environmental groups. Patrick Moore, the founder of Greenpeace who had quite publicly given up the destructive approach many years ago, became a campus hero among the FLOW Sustainability group. Greenspirit, Moore’s newer, more positive organization grew rapidly, and students joined Moore in supporting a growing forest products industry to reduce atmospheric carbon.

One of the implications of the FLOW sustainability approach was price rationing to ensure that resources were not depleted. Although price rationing did eliminate sustainability fears, it created a new concern: The poor would not be able to afford basic resources. Patrice adroitly led those new recruits who were most concerned about this issue to create the Affordability

Group. This group worked on creating a campaign to reduce unnecessary building and zoning regulation that caused housing to be so unaffordable. Once the members of this group understood that they had an effective strategy for reducing housing costs for the poor by 50% or more, and that housing took up 60% or more of the housing budgets for poor people, they were more willing to support price rationing policies that could result in higher gasoline prices, higher energy prices, and higher water prices.

Their big victory was to re-write the housing regulations for New Orleans and then to get Wal-Mart to partner with a manufactured housing firm and several innovative architects. The day Wal-Mart signed the contract to purchase 500,000 elegant modular homes to retail for \$4999 each the entire Affordability movement around the country celebrated. The next day the world was dumbfounded when Wal-Mart announced that they would give away the first 50,000 units to New Orleans families who wanted to return if the Affordability group could legalize affordable housing in ten other urban areas. Remarkably, with efforts going on in fifty cities, within six weeks ten new cities had legalized affordable housing and by the end of the year thirty-five of the fifty cities had legalized such housing – and Wal-Mart stock went up 10%.

Patrice had previously thought of graduate school after graduation, but by the time she graduated she found herself on the board of directors of eleven organizations, six non-profits and five for-profits. She had received significant shares of stock from each of the for-profits. She also found herself to be in high demand as a speaker and consultant and found that she could earn a good living showing other groups how to apply FLOW principles. A couple of years later one of the Open World for-profit companies went public and she found herself a multi-millionaire before she was thirty. But she was far too busy to even notice.

When she married a fellow FLOW entrepreneur they raised their children in both the U.S. and Tanzania, where she was setting up an Open World project to save the chimpanzees. One of her best FLOW friends, whom she had placed at a school as an intern, had become one of the greatest educators on earth, leading a chain of fifty for-profit schools that were havens of creativity and well-being. When Patrice was not traveling she would simply go and spend time at her daughter's school because it was such a beautiful environment. And, logically enough, she helped her friend to open up a franchise of the school at the Open World zone in Tanzania. She was gently envious at her daughter's opportunities to learn a local Tanzanian dialect while learning to speak to the chimpanzees as well.

Life was such a spectacular experience she usually forgot her role in transforming the world for the better – until she happened to have lunch with her old friend Julian.

Of course, Julian quit his public school job the next day. But that is another story.