

# BOOK PROPOSAL

## Becoming Aware of Water

*Changing Political Culture, Not Just Political Control*

by Ken White

**“FISH ARE NOT AWARE OF WATER”**

— *CHINESE PROVERB*

**“WHY ARE THERE NO YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE ROOM?”**

— *POLITICAL ACTIVIST’S LAMENT*

Hoping against hope, more than 100 million Americans will vote in November. Tens of millions of us will also take some sort of political action: forwarding a viral video, posting a campaign sign on the lawn, chatting about candidates with friends. Yet for all our talk of change, and changing the political system, we appear doomed to create (and recreate) a future that will be “like the present, only more so.” How can so many passionate, smart, committed people feel—and be—so ineffectual?

What are we missing? Our impotence may be linked to our failure to understand just how much we take for granted, and how much of what we assume is no longer useful. Like the proverbial fish, we are literally unaware of the cultural and political “water” in which we swim: oblivious to how thoroughly it influences what we choose to do, how we take action, and whether we succeed. By pulling back from our accustomed fish-eye view—by *Becoming Aware of Water*—we can find new, actionable possibilities for creating a healthier, more sustainable future through political activism.

*Becoming Aware of Water: Changing Political Culture, Not Just Political Control* offers an unconventional way to build political progress: by acknowledging, understanding, and leveraging the changing “us,” rather than trying (with increasing desperation) to change “it.” Based on frontline experience, research, and theory, *Becoming Aware of Water* employs three themes—our political “mental models,” the changing generational lineup, and our potential for meaningful growth—to propose promising ways of creating and sustaining political change. *Becoming Aware of Water* poses three key questions:

- What kind of “mental models” or shorthand representations of the way politics works (such as “the pendulum swings both ways” or “what goes around comes around”) do we routinely use and misuse, and could new mental models help us more effectively create change?
- What will bring out the unexpected best—both individually and collectively—in the four generations (Silent, Baby Boom, Gen X, and Millennial) currently active in politics?
- What can politically active people do differently to support durable, positive transformation in an increasingly complex and interdependent world?

*Becoming Aware of Water* makes plain the impact of deep, powerful, yet rarely discussed currents running through our political waters, helping us navigate them and even harness their power. Written in plain language for regular people, with examples from actual work, *Becoming Aware of Water* offers practical advice, grounded in real-world experiences.

*Becoming Aware of Water* points to a basic truth we experience, but rarely acknowledge: a different political future *will not* emerge by realigning political parties, following new leaders, rewriting public policies, changing the media, or any of 101 other “jiggle-the-handle” fixes. These efforts will continue to be very important, but they cannot address the underlying causes of our frustration and “stymiedness.” They cannot help us understand, alter, or swim more efficiently through the “water” in which we live. Similarly, we cannot to achieve success by simply working harder or “smarter.” Traditional approaches to political action have proven not just ineffective — they have become in some ways counterproductive. Both we *and* our cultural and political waters need to change—in complementary ways—to support the more-evolved political values so urgently needed.

*Becoming Aware of Water* provides a systemic perspective on catalyzing and sustaining political change. It argues that we *can* create a changed future through greater awareness of our political culture: what it looks and feels like, how it affects us, how we affect it, and how much it shapes our assumptions and actions. *Becoming Aware of Water* points to a new way of building political progress: by acknowledging and understanding the changing “us,” and not just trying to change “it” By stepping outside of our viewpoint as fish swimming against the current, we can see pragmatic new options for creating the healthier, more sustainable future we seek.

### **About the Author**

Ken White has more than two decades of experience in political and cultural change. A graduate of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government's mid-career program, Ken is both a frontline leader (he helped lead a successful statewide ballot campaign, and then assemble a legal team to win a landmark Constitutional lawsuit, while building effective coalitions across partisan divisions), and a reflective practitioner (he helps political and cultural advocacy groups adjust to the changing environment, and authored “Politics in a New Key” (for *Integral Review*) based on his experience with intergenerational organizing).

Currently on the staff of Post Carbon Institute, a leading-edge think tank at the intersection of energy, environment, economy, and equity issues, Ken was previously the Managing Director of the Chaordic Commons, an organization founded by VISA Founder and *Birth of the Chaordic Age* author Dee Hock. Ken was executive director of Common Cause Massachusetts, a citizen-led organization working for truly representative government. Prior to that, he directed communications for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the Coalition of Essential Schools, and held similar posts with Oxfam America and the Institute for Defense & Disarmament Studies. Ken has also been a consultant to numerous nonprofits, and was a journalist not so long ago.

An experienced writer for newspapers and magazines, Ken has also made hundreds of appearances on television, radio, and web-based shows. He gives talks and leads discussions on a variety of topics. Ken has expertise in human development, generational demographics, democracy, organizational evolution, civic life, faith and politics, advocacy, management, and communications.

### **About the Audience**

*Becoming Aware of Water* will appeal to politically and socially active Americans concerned about the future not only of our politics, but also of our nation. Although not written from a partisan or ideological stance, *Becoming Aware of Water* will speak most strongly to those who want progress, not simply a reversion to an imaginary America of the 1950s (or 1850s!). It will appeal particularly to Americans who have plunged into the political floodwaters time and again, eager to rescue what is best about our country, only to emerge more disillusioned by how much has been swept away.

*Becoming Aware of Water* will not exist simply as a text, but will be tied to author talks, workshops, and deep engagement with frontline advocates through their organizations and extended networks. Through his extensive networks and, ideally, in conjunction with a major think tank/foundation, the author will offer participants opportunities to experience how their unacknowledged mental models and limited generational perspectives inhibit their effectiveness, and then learn how an expanded perspective can help expand their base, build stronger coalitions, and advance their agendas.

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