

Author Interview: Debra Trione, author of A Perfect World

A PERFECT WORLD has taken five years to put together. What gave you the initial idea to put together such a unique collection of interviews with prominent officials - - along with their original artwork?

I started the perfect-world project in 1997, when I was living in Washington, DC, where I used to say the concentration of movers and shakers is so heavy you trip over them on the street. Actually, I did run into a few of the leaders featured in this book on the street, or in one case on the subway I saw James Carville sitting there, so I went straight up to him and asked for an interview. He tried to shrug me off, but I got off on his subway stop and shadowed him down the street telling him about my book and the interview, until he agreed to it. The other big catalyst for the perfect-world project was that in 1996 I saw a news photo in Time magazine of a self-portrait that some reporter had gotten then-president Clinton to sketch of himself. It was a totally unremarkable drawing, but it occurred to me that if a reporter can ask the president to draw, why not ask other public figures to draw or paint something that really matters--their vision of an ideal world. After all, that's what really counts. Never before this book has there been any public record of the visual images that powerful people associate with their goals and ideals and priorities for the world. And yet those images are important.

But a lot of the paintings in this book are very childlike. In what sense are they important?

The pictures are very childlike. One of the more humorous lessons of the book seems to be that this country is currently being run by some really bad artists. But there's also a substantive and more serious reason to ask these powerful people to paint their ideal world. Every motivational trainer knows that the visual images that a person associates with their goals and ideals can have a powerful motivational effect on them. So the mental images that influential people associate with their goals and ideals are very powerful – but until now,

totally stealth-like – forces. There ought to be some public record of the images that might be guiding the very people who in turn are guiding this nation of ours.

You cover such a broad spectrum of ideologies, getting input from people in leadership positions with the White House, NASA, NYSE, NOW, NAACP, PETA and others. Were you ever intimidated with discussing worldly visions with such high-caliber people?

No, not at all. I'm a high-caliber person myself.

You managed to get past a façade and find spontaneous, unpacked thoughts and genuine feelings. How were you able to get these high-ranking individuals away from their handlers and spin-meisters, to let their guard down and break through the walls they normally stand behind publicly?

I asked them questions that they didn't have pre-packaged answers for. Step back, look at the forest for the trees, and tell me about the best of all possible worlds. "Name two things you hope will be true about the world in 50 years." That is not the kind of question they normally hear from reporters. Also, and much more extremely, no one I interviewed expected me to bring actual paints into the interview. In my letter requesting an interview, I had said something very cryptic like: "There will be a graphic component to this interview." So when I pulled out the box of art supplies right there in their office, there was always a moment of awkward silence in which the person I was interviewing sat for a moment in a kind of stunned, broad-faced disbelief. Much to their credit though--and I really do think it took a lot of courage--all the people in this book rose to the challenge, broke through their hesitation, and actually did paint an image.

How difficult was it to get all these leaders from all these different fields to talk with you, and participate with so much candor?

I used an interview technique opposite the one used by very confrontational interviewers like Chris Mathews. In these interviews, I didn't break down any doors or twist any arms, but I did have a good time, and tried to make sure that the people I was interviewing also had a good time. Actually, it's fascinating to notice that while these leaders were painting, most of them adopted a very playful tone, and a very different, more child-like, personality than the one they had been projecting during the purely verbal part of the interview. Once they started painting, they said some very fresh, very funny things.

What are the common themes that are apparent in the visions expressed by these powerful people?

Education was far and away the most important value that almost everyone--doctors, lawyers, politicians, CEOs, military generals, activists, economists--said they wanted to see our society spend more resources on. More surprising, I thought was the large number of the leaders interviewed for this book who were very concerned about the growing size of the human population. A perfect world was a world that was not threatened by too many people. Many of people seemed to feel that population was actually the watershed issue that would determine the future livability of the planet. As the former Sen. Alan Simpson said in his very funny interview: "All the rest is applesauce." Also, many of the leaders I interviewed for this book seemed to have a foresight that some major terrorist event was about to take place. I did all the interviews in this book--except one--before the attacks of 9/11/01, and yet many of the leaders had a strong premonition that America was about to be targeted in some ominous way. Related to that, I guess, was the surprisingly common sentiment among many against religion. Several of these leaders described religion as one of the greatest sources of destruction in the world. That surprised me.

If all but one interview in the book was conducted before September 11, 2001, tell us why we should be interested in the vision leaders had for the world before that defining moment in history?

I've given this a lot of thought, and I believe that if I tried to do these interviews now, in the post-9/11 era, the first attribute of a perfect world that nearly everyone would mention, would be national security. I think the descriptions and the paintings would be much more uniform. Right now, almost every American thinks that national security trumps all other values, or at least that it's the pre-condition that has to be met before any other priority can even be addressed. The truth is that many of the most important big-picture values are invisible, until they become a problem. We're focused right now on shoring up our national security, because we had a big problem with that very recently. Sometime in the future, we may be more concerned about our access to clean water, for instance, when that becomes scarce. But before it becomes a crisis, most of us will hardly even think to mention it as being part of our perfect world. Also, the sense of crisis that began on 9/11 has masked a lot of variation among national leaders concerning issues that may be just as important as national security, but less of an emergency right now. Most of these interviews in this book were done in a time of extraordinary prosperity and peace, when people had the leisure to think deeply, step back and see the big picture. That big-picture perspective is one that I think everyone should keep in mind especially in the current crisis.

What were some of the other surprising answers--either spoken or painted--that you got?

Several of the leaders featured in the book surprised me by asserting some point of view that was nearly opposite the one you'd expect them to promote given who they were and what they had done in the world. So for instance, when I asked Gen. Schwarzkopf to name one thing he hoped would be true about the world in 50 years, he leaned back in his chair and boomed "No More War!" I was

equally surprised when Arun Gandhi, the grandson of the great spiritual leader Mahatmas Gandhi and the founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence, started saying that anger was a very positive force in the world. He also pointed out that one of the worst things that can happen to a poor person is for a richer person to give them charity. It surprised me also when Neil DeGrasse Tyson, the well-known astrophysicist, turned every pop-psychology theory on its head by claiming that the best thing for mankind would be for everyone to recognize how totally insignificant they are in the larger scheme of things. I could go on and on. There are lots of real surprises in this book.

Who were some of the best artists? Is it true the Smithsonian is displaying the original artwork?

Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic Whip of the U.S. House of Rep., painted a very nice scene. Craig Venter, the scientist who was first to sequence the human genome, painted a very colorful, energetic picture, and Michael Dombeck, recent Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, made an beautiful landscape painting. Actually, I had tried not to interview anyone I knew was an accomplished artist, because I didn't want them to be able to manipulate the image with artful grace. Their inexperience with the medium was one reason I wanted them to paint. A lot of the paintings in the book look childish, and they're valuable for some of the same reasons that children's art is valuable—for its freshness and candor and spontaneity. That's what I was looking for, and I think that's what I got. Yes, the Smithsonian Associates program is sponsoring a panel discussion among four of the leaders featured in *A PERFECT WORLD* about what a perfect world might be like. That event is scheduled for sometime in the first week in December. I'm going to be there moderating. The actual paintings will be on display at George Washington University in the heart of DC, for the whole month of November.

A lot of the visions shared were positive wishes: end to racism, sexism, poverty; environmental health, world peace, good education for everyone... But virtually none of them offered any type of specific solution. Do you wish they would've talked more about exactly how to solve our problems?

No, I specifically wanted them to talk about ends, not means. Defining what your goals are, or what your vision is, is of course always the first step in finding a satisfactory solution to any dispute or disagreement. But I was particularly interested in the early, goal-setting step because of an experience I had had in 1994 and '95 when I worked on a few of the Task Forces related to the President's Council on Sustainable Development. That council was a group of federal government officials, CEOs, and high-level advocacy leaders, who all had their own—quite distinct—agendas. When they all sat down to discuss writing policy recommendations by consensus, it looked to most of us in the room like they would never agree. But the first thing they did was try to define some very broad, big-picture goals. And it was remarkable to me to watch how easy it was for them to come to consensus among this very diverse group of leaders, on where they all wanted the nation to be in 25 or 30 years. In many ways, that experience on the President's Council on Sustainable Development seeded this book. In fact, I thought the same thing would happen. I thought that all the leaders I asked to describe and paint their perfect world would describe and paint similar things. If they had, the book would have been a nice, warm-hearted demonstration of just how much we all have in common.

A PERFECT WORLD includes politicians, Fortune 500 CEOs, Pulitzer-prize journalists, Nobel Laureates of science, presidents of large non-profits, best-selling authors, and prestigious professors from some of the finest universities. If they could all come together to produce this wonderful compendium of utopian visions, is this a good sign we could be getting closer to uniting leaders of all backgrounds and perspectives to convert their visions into a functioning, vibrant reality?

The leaders featured in A PERFECT WORLD certainly did not all agree on exactly what the priorities should be for the country or the world. But yes, I think the process of trying to see the big picture and explain their priorities in relation to the whole was a positive exercise for them. I think people are often focused on one little corner of the world. Maybe they're trying to solve one specialized problem. But they may lose sight of the fact that by solving that one problem, they could be creating two or three other problems that will need to be solved, too. I don't think this book, A PERFECT WORLD, documents much agreement among these leaders over what a perfect world would be like. In fact, I find these descriptions, and these paintings to be very diverse. There are some common themes, but I was more impressed by the very wide range of ways they found to think about a perfect world. For instance, some of the leaders I interviewed wanted to talk about the best of all possible futures. Others remembered a simpler, more Arcadian, past. Some described and drew from their personal experience, others painted more global or abstract themes. For some, a single image sprang to mind. Sometimes that picture was of a particular place and time, a single moment that embodied perfection in a jewel-like way. Still others pictured a landscape of favorite things, an eclectically assembled perfect-world pastiche. Many conceived of an ideal world remarkably like the very world we live in now, absent just one or two problems – a world with more A, less B. Others scribbled the trajectory of desirable changes they wanted to see occur. The diversity of this material is baffling, but it also makes the book a truly fascinating mix of perspectives.

What is your vision for the ideal world and what would your painting look like?

I would have had a harder time answering that question five years ago, before I had had the privilege of listening to the wisdom of the leaders in A PERFECT WORLD. First, I am one of those people who thinks that any vision of a perfect world has to include the biosphere, not just human society. I am concerned about

the fate of other animals and plants as well as the fate and well-being of humankind. My painting might have looked a little like a jungle. With respect to human society, though, a few things that Bernadine Healy said ring particularly true to me. She said that the rules of the society in which you live – the governmental and medical and economic laws that apply, the human rights and employment rights and civil rights laws that apply – all the laws and customs of a society will determine how closely any single person might come to realizing their personal vision of a perfect world. I think that's very true.

Debra, you shared the paintings with several experts. What were their conclusions or analysis?

Yes, after I had collected about half of these perfect world paintings and descriptions, I took them to several experts in the hope that they could give me some guidance on how to interpret or make some sense of this confusing collection. I consulted for instance with Steven Pinker, the well-known author and cognitive scientist at MIT, with linguist Deborah Tannen, with Stephen Kosslyn, a psychology professor at Harvard who has studied mental imagery for decades, and with Gerald Zaltman at Harvard Business School, whose specialty is the study of how imagery affects motivation. Their analysis of these paintings is probably too complex to go into here, but the whole second half of the introduction to the book *A PERFECT WORLD* is written as if it were a real-time dialog between these language and image experts talking among themselves about the paintings and the descriptions in this book. In actual fact, the experts I consulted never talked to each other about this material, but all of them did talk to me. Prof. Kosslyn, the psychology professor at Harvard was so fascinated by this material, that he designed two psychology experiments, which are still ongoing, using 12 of the perfect-world images in this book. I personally think their commentary, which appears in the introduction, is a vital part of the book.

What would you say to cynical people who just do not care about improving the world and only seek to chase private gains at the expense of others?

Of course the capitalist model of free enterprise suggests that by chasing private gains in incremental ways, we all make the world a better place, even without intending to. That's the theory. The corollary to that is that historically, some of the worst crimes against humanity have been committed by people who have tried to artificially create their own version of a perfect world: Hitler and Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung, for instance. On the other hand, people who don't care about improving the world, people who only care about their own private gains, probably should not be the ones running the country, or the largest, most complex corporations, or the big institutions. As recent corporate scandals have shown, if you push free enterprise to an extreme, without adhering to a sense of social responsibility, everybody gets hurt.

You received an interesting response from the publisher of The New York Times, Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr., when you asked him to participate. Tell us about it.

I think his response was the all-time wittiest one that I heard from anyone, even though he actually wrote just to decline the interview. The letter he wrote read something like: I'm afraid the idea of a perfect world is disturbing to me. For one, I'm not sure I'd have a place in a perfect world, and besides, what would the role of newspapers be if everything were going swimmingly? Then he typed out a little headline that read EVERYBODY WINS LOTTO, AGAIN! – I don't think so. Signed Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr. I framed that letter, and have it on my wall.