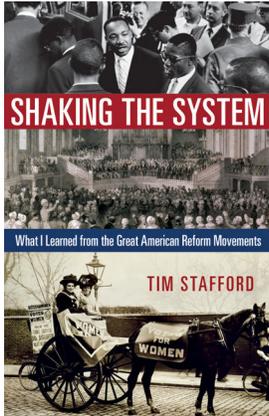


# Q&A

## AUTHOR INTERVIEW



An interview with  
Tim Stafford about  
*Shaking the  
System*

**Book Info:**  
*Shaking the System*,  
October 2007 Release,  
192 pages, cloth, \$17,  
978-0-8308-3436-5

**Q: What inspired you to write *Shaking the System*?**

**Tim Stafford:** I see a lot of (mostly) younger people today who want to make a difference—whether it's in politics, or ecology, or global hunger, or injustice. They're activists, or at least would-be activists. And in many ways they remind me of the people I read about in researching my River of Freedom historical novels. Abolitionists, suffragists, prohibitionists, civil rights protestors—American history is full of people who are passionate about shaking the system. I think those activists of the past, and their experiences, have a lot of lessons for our time. I wanted to bring the groups together.

**Q: How does *Shaking the System* speak to American culture today?**

**Tim:** I hope it's both an inspiration—because activism really has made a powerful difference in America—and a warning. Or let's just say that it includes warnings. For example, you see that activist movements usually spring from some truth that lodges in the soul of a committed minority. Take "slavery is sin," which revolutionized the discussion of slavery in nineteenth-century America. It's inspiring to learn how such a great and fundamental truth went to work on American society. But it also contains a warning, because while abolitionist activists took in that truth so that it changed their lives, the rest of American society was powerfully resistant, and that resistance caused the abolitionists great discouragement, even despair.

**Q: In what ways is activism today succeeding? Failing?**

**Tim:** From what I've learned reading history, I think it's extremely important for activists to base their work on truth, and learn how to state that truth persuasively and simply. Otherwise activism is in danger of being just activity—a lot of sound and fury, well meaning but without staying power.

You can see some contemporary activist movements that lack coherence based on truth. Much of the campaign against globalized business strikes me that way—a mishmash of special pleading, economic nationalism, concern for the poor and fear of change. What's the simple truth about globalism? If somebody has stated that clearly, I haven't heard it. Until I do, I'll doubt that the movement to oppose globalism will do anything effective.

On the other hand, I'll offer a counterintuitive example of success. Anti-abortion campaigners have had no success in America, if by success you mean restricting abortion by political means. But they have succeeded pretty well in communicating a simple message: that's a baby you want to kill. And even though this has not led to political success, I think it has greatly contributed to the decreased popularity of abortion among young women. The truth has penetrated, and the long-term results are unpredictable.

  
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Page 2



**Q: The subtitle is simply *What I Learned from the Great American Reform Movements*. What are two or three key points that you learned from the great reform movements?**

**Tim:** One key point is that significant change rarely happens in a day, or a year, or even a decade. Activists need to have staying power, because what they are hoping to accomplish may take many years. Activist movements need to be much more intentional about creating an environment that sustains people, spiritually and physically. The saddest part of the great reform movements is the number of wonderful, idealistic people who drop out and break down in the process. It happened then, and it happens today.

Another key point is the real temptation of violence. Most American reform movements start out committed to nonviolent means, and I doubt it even crosses their minds in the beginning that any of them might be drawn into violence. Anti-slavery is a potent example. They started out absolutely committed to persuading and pleading with slaveholders to repent. They ended up supporting (or ignoring) John Brown's murderous campaigns, and buying rifles for Kansas settlers who were ready to fight. A similar process happened in the civil rights movement. Violence creeps in, as it has in the anti-abortion movement, the animal rights movement and the ecology movement.

**Q: What do you hope readers take away from *Shaking the System*?**

**Tim:** Most of all I hope they remember the great stories of people who have given their lives to bring about change. American activism has not been dull! It's full of fascinating characters and events—real people who are like us. I've tried to pass on some of the most interesting and worthwhile tales that I gleaned from my reading.