

Don Shaffer interviewed Van Jones on Sunday, December 10, 2006, for Investors' Circle.

Q&A:

1. **Don:** What's your passion, your core motivation?

Van: I feel like I got a lot of good breaks and opportunities growing up, so I want to make sure others get the same. I was born in 1968; it was a tumultuous year. Much effort on the part of my family got me through school and beyond. I want to pay that forward.

2. **Don:** Who has influenced you the most? Who do you look up to?

Van: I admire freedom fighters. Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King, Amilcar Cabral (who my son is named after), Ella Baker, of course. I always try to ask myself, "What would Mandela do?" I also admire bridge-builders, those leaders who honor the humanity of all people involved in a particular struggle.

3. **Don:** Please talk about the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, your founding vision and current projects.

Van: We work for justice, opportunity, and peace in urban America. That's our guiding vision. More specifically, we work to support urban youth. They need to be disentangled from the incarceration economy and invited in to the green economy. We're focused on creating alternatives to incarceration through job creation.

4. **Don:** How does your legal training affect how you see the world and your work?

Van: It's very clear to me that the [U.S.] Supreme Court is never going to execute an order to release us from the environmental and social challenges we now face. I recognize the limits of the law to solve our problems. The solutions are beyond litigation. I want to be effective in the court of public opinion.

There are injuries that will not be redressed for urban America, things that cannot be solved by court order. We need purposeful and organized cooperation across a broad set of forces: business, labor, communities of faith, local and state governments, etc.

5. **Don:** How have your social change tactics evolved over the past ten years, if at all?

Van: Initially, I had a narrow agenda and correspondingly narrow tactics. It was based on saying no. No bad laws. No bad actions. My tactics were confrontational and protest-based.

Now we're saying yes to opportunity, yes to all the good, high-leverage efforts currently underway to make progress in addressing the environmental and health challenges, the challenges in our urban communities. It's a much more complex set of tactics now.

6. **Don:** As an extremely busy social entrepreneur, what are your most successful time-management practices? How do you conserve energy and rejuvenate yourself?

Van: I don't have a successful time management strategy. [Laughs.] Regarding how I conserve energy, I try to focus on activities and relationships that will bear big fruit over time. I don't say yes to every speaking invitation. Right now, I am trying to balance staying rooted locally while addressing the big questions nationally. I don't have it figured out yet. [Laughs again.]

I will say that I'm better than when I was younger. I do have certain tools and insights and understandings from when I was focused more on meditation, counseling, and other activities. So I developed a baseline for staying grounded and centered.

Most years, I'll do a leadership program or use a coach or do a six-week workshop. I am always trying to better understand myself. This year has been particularly challenging. We're getting ready to hire an executive director for the Ella Baker Center, so I can focus [as full-time president of the organization] on strategic issues and fundraising more.

Now people are better prepared to hear what we have to say. When we started talking about "Green Jobs, Not Jails" six years ago, we were way ahead of the curve. So the universe of people who would return my calls, let alone give me the microphone, was small, let me tell you. [Laughs.]

We were pioneering some of these connections between restorative economics and restorative justice. People are ready to hear it now and we're trying hard to manage the opportunity.

7. **Don:** Can you talk about one of your projects at the Ella Baker Center in more detail?

Van: Let's look at "Reclaim the Future." In this program, we're advocating for job creation in the green economy for those in urban areas who have been left out of previous economic expansions. We're advocating for citywide strategies that line up training, workforce development, business creation, and business development in ways that have not been considered to date.

Our view is that government should be on the side of the problem solvers, not the problem makers. The solvers are the entrepreneurs and investors who are really trying to transform the economy. The problem makers are the polluters, incarcerators, warmongers, clear-cutters, and others who are still getting in the way. Yet historically, government gives much more support to problem makers, not solvers.

Through “Reclaim the Future,” we’re saying to the green business community, “Wake up!!” There’s money available from city, county, and state governments that can be used to build the businesses IC is investing in. You can take a libertarian or strictly laissez-faire approach. That’s a healthy impulse. But realize that you shouldn’t limit the impact you have, and the next step on this road is more complex. We need to get the business models right, but we also need to combine that effort with economic development strategies and educational programs - community colleges, training, workforce development, etc. - so that eco-entrepreneurs can really get what they need.

Simply put, we’re advocating that government help the green economy, not hinder it. We’re giving people a way to get involved in the green economy - workers, voters, government officials - not just companies and consumers.

The only businesses I know that are not demanding action from government in a sophisticated way are the green entrepreneurs. The bad guys are constantly in front of government, as we all know.

8. **Don:** What are the main obstacles for you in your work at the Ella Baker Center?

Van: Ignorance. We have so much to learn about workforce development and economic development in urban communities. At the Ella Baker Center, we’ve placed ourselves at the intersection of multiple disciplines. Hope is at the crossroads. We’re setting a table at the crossroads where we’ll be able to multiply the positive impact. Up until now, you’ve had many good people sitting separately from each other. We can translate. We need different languages to reach different groups. We have to work together to map the different communities of people, the different professions that need to be engaged. Who has the most capacity? Who has most leverage? To work through all these questions is incredibly challenging.

Also, when you’re an innovator, you need people to invest in you for the long term. I often feel an immense pressure to over-promise. The reality: It’s going to take a while. There will be failure. There will be experimentation. We’ve got to find patient capital on the for-profit and non-profit side, people who will support you for the long term.

9. **Don:** How do you think about financial capital in your work to develop healthy communities? Is there anything particularly innovative or promising that you are familiar with?

Van: Right now, everything is promising because in historical terms we're really just beginning. We hope that we can show and prove that the green economy can create jobs for those that would otherwise not be employed.

In a country as racially segregated as ours, equitable distribution cannot be taken for granted. Not everybody can be an eco-entrepreneur. Not everybody can get a job as a solar panel technician. We can't assume that the capital markets will automatically embrace the people who most need these jobs. We need to make sure the green wave lifts all boats, make sure we build a green economy that's strong enough to lift people out of poverty.

We're thinking about the green economy from a very different angle than most entrepreneurs and investors. We're looking at an appropriate role for government, a role for labor, a place for urban youth, a place for formerly incarcerated people. In order for a U-turn to happen, we need to look at all these people and groups. We need to look at policy that will support our goals.

10. **Don:** Speaking of policy, many people commented at the IC Fall Conference on your powerful keynote address and call to action - saying it was extremely motivating, moving, and timely. Political office for Van Jones? Have you thought about it or are you thinking about it?

Van: I don't have a clear answer. I believe the best role I can play is to connect those in office with those who are creating new jobs and those who are living in communities that have historically not been served by economic opportunities. I'm the Lego guy - I'm trying to connect. It's hard to do that if you're looking over your shoulder thinking about your next campaign. I think I'm better off doing it this way.

11. **Don:** What else would you like to say to the investment community? How can the investment community help you move your vision forward?

Van: In the [San Francisco] Bay Area, we have seen some positive developments recently, including the creation of a "sustainable" community bank that I know some IC members were involved with. In Oakland, I'd like to see a "Green Oakland" fund that would function as a pool of investment capital, but also as a brain trust to help me figure out all the different connections that need to happen.

If we look at the Manhattan Project, on the one hand it was difficult; on the other hand it was easy. You were dealing only with the physical sciences in a secret government lab. Our challenge on the front end of this new century is dealing with all the complexity of the transparent social arena, not just technology.

We need to have investors and business leaders who take their responsibility beyond the next technological breakthrough. No one should whine that they need to make a little bit less profit. Business leaders and others are going to need to go far beyond their core job descriptions in the decades to come. Climate change, the end of cheap oil, overall ecosystem degradation, taken all together will give us challenges bigger than anything the 20th century threw at us.

We're still leading up to the real environmental and social challenges. So it's time to quit whining and start reaching out to each other now so we can work hard together to solve the problems.

The worst of the U.S. business community got us into many of these issues; the best of the U.S. business community will need to get us out.