

Book Review

His Failures Have Served Us Well:

*A Review of **Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement** (Kahane, 2025)*

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Adam Kahane has long been the go-to guy for leading teams attempting transformations of very thorny complex problems. He didn't invent collaborative multistakeholder engagement, but he and his colleagues have taken it deep with great success.

If we've heard of Adam's work, we're familiar with the account of his remarkable accomplishments. We know that at the age of 30 he served as the chief facilitator at the first post-apartheid sit down of White and Black political leaders in South Africa in 1990 which miraculously managed to avert widely predicted bloodshed. We've read on the back covers of his best-selling books that he followed that up with decades of impressive efforts in 50 countries, working with "executives, politicians, generals and guerillas, civil servants, community activists, trade unionists, and artists" (Kahane, 2017, back cover).

So, clearly, Adam's got C-suite cred *and* street cred. All of which is why I was more than a little shocked when he said to me a couple of months back in his most deadpan, reflective manner: "I've come to view all of my work as failures" (A. Kahane, personal communication, February 2025).

After recovering from the shock at this assessment I quickly assumed it was hyperbole or false modesty. Surely there has been benefit in this body of work, as evidenced by the vast array of fans among high level leaders across the globe.

But it wasn't hyperbole or false modesty. In this moment Adam was acknowledging the reality that complex systems, particularly those made up of human beings, are fickle and not easily coaxed out of their bad habits and harmful impacts. Also, the reality that complex systems are constantly changing, so what might have "transformed" them at one moment wouldn't necessarily head off future problems.

It is in Adam's response to these realities that we encounter the foundational qualities for his successful engagements *and* for this new book *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement* (Kahane, 2025). These qualities begin with a perspective that joins enduring curiosity with a near total lack of territoriality. In pursuing his efforts to help, he is relentlessly listening, assessing and re-assessing past failures and successes, then synthesizing new approaches to discover more effective action for the next moment's challenge.

Curiosity, openness, the natural ability to listen deeply, and a wicked, wry sense of humor. These were the qualities that stood out to me when I first met Adam in the early years of the Authentic Leadership in Action Institute (nee Shambhala Institute) conferences held annually in Halifax, Nova Scotia beginning in 2001. ALIA was the brainstorm of the brilliant Michael Chender and a group of friends who were investigating the intersection of leadership and contemplative practices. They were reading Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990) and got the idea of hosting a conference to more deeply explore these themes. Peter graciously agreed not only to speak at the first several conferences but to bring along some of his colleagues, including Adam, Meg Wheatley, Art Kleiner, Otto Scharmer, Wendy Palmer, Juanita Brown, and many important others. The "secret sauce" was the cross-pollination of systems change experts with teachers of mindfulness meditation, the contemplative arts, and the creative processes. Imagine Woodstock for systems change, but with meditation cushions instead of tie-dyed tee shirts.

Luckily for me, Adam became curious about the *Art of War* work I'd been doing for some decades (Sun Tzu, 2001). Sun Tzu's 5th century BC best-selling leadership classic is widely misconstrued as a book about deception and ruthless winning at all costs. It is in fact a profound handbook on systems transformation, rich with transformative guidance on working with conflict by "taking whole." The central theme of *know oneself* and *know the other* confirmed a contemplative bent and relationship-based change making, with learnable habits for dealing with the type of hard things that Adam specializes in. This tied the room

together for Adam and me to explore our different approaches which has served as part of our ongoing conversation these past 25 years.

So, I am not surprised to see that curiosity, openness, and the natural ability to listen deeply are also the qualities that now bring us Adam's latest book, *Everyday Habits*. But here, these qualities serve in a different way than with Adam's previous works. In this book they are not underlying the lessons gleaned from his own projects, though he mines those rich stories to illustrate each habit. When Adam discovered that there were things about systems transformations that he didn't know, he turned to the people who work on them every day all over the world.

Everyday Habits is the result of Adam's inquiry. It's meta-data—crowd sourced wisdom synthesized from those dedicated to systems change through hundreds of interviews and engaging hundreds of practitioners in real time co-creation. From that starting point follows the rest of the quintessential Kahane process. He reviewed the data, relentlessly assessed and summarized, then shared it with contributors to make sure he got it right, and refined the result. And then he did that all over again.

As a result of these efforts, *Everyday Habits* distills all this received wisdom and experience into 7 ways of being and acting that Adam tells us can shift and maybe even transform the systems we are part of. The promise of this volume is that if we manage to adopt these practices—starting with any one of them—and they become habits, then we will be engaging in ways of being, relating, and acting that better enable us to help make the world a better place.

Everyday Habits gives each of these 7 ways its own chapter, with titles sending clear and often familiar messages of the pathway forward: *Acting Responsibly*, *Relating in Three Dimensions*, *Looking for What's Unseen*, *Working with Cracks*, *Experimenting a Way Forward*, *Collaborating with Unlike Others*, and *Persevering and Resting*. The chapters are artfully designed to be both progressive and independent. Each chapter builds on the learning that came before, and each can be read on its own with great reward. All chapters are richly illustrated with stories from Adam's own big world projects and end by giving the reader a short practice to learn how to try it out, though these practice sections may be the least robust part of this book.

For a more intimate and engaged exploration of these 7 habits, I invited accomplished systems change professional Gabrielle Donnelly to share her reflections on one. This is her story.

“Systems change work will break your heart,” a dear friend and colleague, Tuesday Rivera, often remarks. In *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems*, Adam Kahane offers a field guide for walking through the inevitable challenges, disappointments, and heartbreaks, drawing on insights from leaders invested in the long arc of change.

When Jim Gimian invited me to reflect on one of Kahane's seven habits for this review, many resonated. In this season of my life and work, though, Habit 7—Persevering and Resting—stands out. It is both the most unassuming and perhaps the most radical of the invitations in this book.

I first encountered Adam in my early twenties, when I was idealistic and inexperienced. Adam was teaching at ALIA (Authentic Leadership in Action), a week-long institute in Halifax, Nova Scotia/Mi'kma'ki, where systems change met mindfulness and the arts. I was one of many young people at the edges of those circles, absorbing it all. Many of us later launched consulting agencies together, fumbling our way. Collaboration felt like an answer, and I was eager to try these methods in the real world.

Within a few years, my work carried me into consulting roles both locally and internationally. I joined initiatives across sectors—from climate and education to healthcare and municipal renewal. Later, I worked with teams reimagining child and family services in a major U.S. city and humanitarian relief efforts in conflict and disaster zones around the globe. The urgency was undeniable, and I poured myself into the work.

For the first fifteen years of my career, I persevered—driven by urgency, buoyed by possibility. And then, slowly, I unraveled. Burnout crept in quietly until it hollowed me out, culminating in a hard-to-diagnose autoimmune condition that left me unable to walk steadily through my own life. For over three years, I lived in that collapse, forced by necessity to step away from my work as a professor and systems change practitioner—work I loved. What had once fueled me was no longer life-giving. It had worn my body down completely.

This is why Habit 7 rings with such clarity for me, carrying the reminder that, as Kahane (2023) writes, “A healthy movement towards healthy futures requires healthy people” (p. 36). Health is not a fixed state but a direction we can nurture in ourselves and our communities. Movements only endure when the people within them are sustained. Perseverance without rest extracts not only from the planet and our communities, but from ourselves. Rest is the rhythm that allows us to return, renewed.

Through both my personal experience and my role as a professor, I see how quickly young people can burn out. The desire to make change often collides with systemic resistance, leaving them caught between exhaustion and protective apathy. From those who have labored at this work for decades, we can learn the quieter rhythm between perseverance and rest—the discernment of what is needed, and when. It is the leadership of knowing when to persevere, and when the counter-cultural act of pausing or resting is the deeper contribution.

For me, rest was not optional. Being forced to step back fully, tending to the most basic rhythms of my body—and through it, a revelation of root causes—was what allowed me to recover. That deep retreat was an important part of what gave me back my vitality, and with it, the capacity to return to the work I love. But I return differently now. I return with a fierce commitment not to sacrifice myself in the same way again or ask others to do the same. I return with a renewed ability to touch into joy—the straightforward enjoyment of being alive and in relationship—in the midst of work.

The 7 habits, while the star of the show, are importantly supported throughout the book by the connective tissue of Adam’s underlying view from which these practices can arise. Chief among this is what he calls “radical engagement,” the deeply relational orientation that conveys the central role that the interconnectedness of things, or “all my relations,” has to this work. Adam’s contribution on this point alone is worth far more than the price of the book. Another equally important theme is that each of us have the seeds of these practices already within us, thereby undercutting the dualistic struggle, as if we were trying to annex foreign territory and integrate it into our dominant culture.

Contemplating the 7 habits and how they become new ways of being surfaced questions and “wonderings” for me. It’s like when a cabinet maker passes their fingertips along the surface of a nearly finished piece to see if there are burrs or splinters that require more sanding. I’ll share a few of my burrs here, not as definitive assessments of this work but as encouragement to the reader to engage and deeply contemplate the considerable wisdom this book offers.

One such burr arose for me with some of the names and descriptions of the 7 habits. They range from simple to more complicated. For example, *Looking for What’s Unseen* is self-evident from the title and leads to inspired action all on its own. *Relating in Three Dimensions*, though instructive, feels at times too complicated to easily employ. It’s as if it may have forgotten that complex systems are most successfully engaged through simple rules. If you think of *Everyday Habits* as instructions to the cook, when reading this chapter I lost the sense of how the dish was supposed to taste by the time I got through reading the recipe.

Clearly systems transformation is hard work in the easiest of times, and especially tough in extreme times like ours, when stress and aggression diminish our ability to thoughtfully respond rather than react. Even the best leadership manuals, if they aren’t simple and self-evident enough to digest and embody, can take on the quality of a “strategy” or a “plan” and can fall apart when we don’t have time to consult the handbook. As the boxing champion Mike Tyson famously simplified a very old leadership maxim: “Everybody’s got a plan until they get punched in the face.”

Looking for What’s Unseen is evocative, like a poetic and pithy slogan, and it’s an example of the many places where *Everyday Habits* sings. Good slogans

unlock the energy of emotion, wonder, and aspiration in the mind and in the body. They help us “keep it simple” by recalling a world of understanding in an instant and then inspiring us to discover new actions.

Mostly, after finishing this book, I was left wondering about habit change. We know it’s possible, and we know it’s not easy; we can’t just decide to have new habits. We know there are science-based apps to help us. But still I wonder, which pathway best supports habit change? Even more critically, how does it happen in the enduring way necessary for us to meet the challenges of generative systems transformation in what seems a particularly degenerative time? Where do we find and engage in a genuine effort?

Obviously, it’s helpful to start with a list of ways of acting that will, in fact, give rise to the change we want to see in the world—in this case, generative systems transformation. Here, Adam and his colleagues have provided us with the most helpful foundation. Even with early stage “fake it till you make it,” a long-established path of learning, embodying these 7 habits goes far beyond “do no harm.”

Further, Adam tells us that habit change involves shifting to a new way of being. So the question arises: how does engaging in even the best ways of acting bring us to a different way of being—a way that deeply impacts the systems we’re in?

One way of looking at this is to consider the difference between imitating and emulating. Imitating is following outward behaviors, working from the outside in. If you want to learn new habits, imitating is an important first step. Emulating, on the other hand, works from the inside out. It requires embodying the mindset that gives rise to the desired behaviors as natural gestures. You no longer have to think about which dance step comes next. The kind of habit change that empowers generative systems transformation in difficult times emerges when idealized ways of acting are joined with some kind of contemplative discipline that supports a mindset shift. Here I am using the term “contemplative” in its broader, original meaning of carving out space for seeing clearly. This includes whatever practices help integrate a *gap* in our routine, creating space to see clearly beyond our assumptions and projections and thereby find effective action.

Many in the community of systems transformation work have incorporated disciplines of integrating a gap into their processes. But the brain is a tricky thing and we’re working with millions of years of the brain’s evolution. Just when we think we’re getting out of clinging to limiting frameworks, the brain pulls us back in. Even the most seasoned veterans of the generative systems transformation work, for example, can sometimes be extolling the virtues of deep listening while still assuming that every question in the discussion is meant for them solely to give the definitive answer. These tough times call for tough approaches to habit change, so we can create the space to see things that don’t confirm the deeply held bias our brains can’t help generating, including the biases we develop in favor of our system-change systems.

Finally, we are living in another “historic” era, a time of significant transformation of our social and political systems. It’s occurring worldwide, rapidly, and will result in fundamental changes that may be hard to shift back from. And it’s happening in a manner that many readers drawn to this book would not describe as generative. I wonder about the best way that these seven habits can serve us in such a time.

What habits would work best for those already engaged in this work and employing these habits yet feel exhausted, powerless, and disheartened. And especially when others in the systems they’re trying to transform aren’t only playing by different rules but are playing in different universes? Why does autocratic, top-down systems change seem so easy and generative systems transformation feel so hard?

Times like these require a fundamental shift in how we view things and what we consider appropriate action. The 7 everyday habits presented here are important ways for changemakers to be and transform the systems we’re part of. Their additional benefit may be how they establish the ground enabling us to take the extraordinary actions required for transformation in these times.

Notwithstanding these “wonderings,” my prevailing conviction is that *Everyday Habits* fills an important place in the literature, and will benefit those who study it closely. It’s not that these habits will necessarily be new to readers, as Adam admits to us at the outset, since they describe the ways in which many readers are already working. But one important gift of *Everyday Habits* is that both those habits we recognize as our own and those new to us are synthesized into one seamless whole, a way of being that is neither foreign nor external but is already known to us.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the many contributors who shared their hard-earned skills and wisdom that fill out the muscle mass of this book. Adam has shown in his own work the ability to learn from failure to embody these skills and gives us these 7 habits he has distilled to show us doorways into that way of being. In that way, Adam has earned all those bona fides. With *Everyday Habits*, we see the ways his failures have served him—and the readers of this book—very well.

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