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The Road Not Taken

A poem by Robert Frost

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The Road to Critical Thinking

The first and most basic skill involved in being a critical thinker is to come in with your own ideas and not let others tell you what to think about, and what not to think about. That makes all the difference.

But U.S. culture presents a big obstacle to critical thinking that is summed up nicely by the quote from political scientist Bernard Cohen that I mentioned in the previous Nygaard Notes: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”

And, as I explained, while Cohen was talking about “the Press,” the dynamic of steering our attention toward some

things and away from other things is even more pronounced in the 21st Century, as we now live in The Attention Economy, where huge megacorporations spend all their time figuring out how to direct our attention toward targets of their choosing, for the ultimate purpose of increasing their profit.

I promised in the last Nygaard Notes to offer “a simple technique that we can use to direct our attention to the things we think are really important.” It’s simple. But not easy.

How simple, or easy, it will be up for you to decide, after you read this issue of Nygaard Notes. ♦

Think Like a Historian

I talk a lot in these pages about “Thought Systems.” A Thought System is a socially-created set of rules that operates unconsciously in our minds to shape the way we think. Every society has a Dominant Thought System, certainly including the U.S. of A.

I reviewed our Thought System last September, in a piece called “George Floyd and the Dominant Thought System,” so I won’t go into it here. All I will do is remind you that I try to use a different system when I go about thinking about something, a system I call →→→

Greetings,

This is an extra-long issue of Nygaard Notes, and it took me an extra-long time to produce it. I had to think about it more rigorously than I expected. That's how Nygaard Notes is, though: I never really know where it's going to lead us.

This issue was envisioned as Part 2 of a series I was calling *The Attention Economy*. And, in fact, one could think of it that way, as it gives some practical steps you can take to direct your attention in ways that reflect your values.

But, as it turns out, there's a lot more to it than I originally imagined. And, despite the length of the issue in front of you, there was much more for which I couldn't find room.

I hope this is useful. Please let me know what you think. I love hearing from you!

Nygaard

Historian *from page 1*

Systalectics. For purposes of this discussion, I want you to keep in mind the first “rule” of Systalectics, which says that understanding is only possible by viewing the whole, by backing up and looking at “The Big Picture.” This is in marked contrast to the rule in the Dominant Thought System, which tells us that we understand things by getting up close and examining the details. You'll see in a moment why I want you to keep this particular rule in mind.

Here in the early part of the 21st Century, as I discussed in the previous issue of Nygaard Notes, we have a tsunami of information coming at us. It's overwhelming, simply due to the quantity, but also because it is constantly giving us the message that everything is in crisis. The climate, the rise of The Right, our racial reckoning, massive inequality, the pandemic and the economic crisis it has brought... it's easy to feel overwhelmed and confused.

In the face of all this information—and I didn't even mention the misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda that is mixed in with the “real” news—how in the world do we decide where to direct our attention? When our speakers scream “Now Hear This!” and our screens cry out “Look Over Here!”, how do we know where to look, what to listen to, what to think about?

Looking Back on Today

I suggest that we try a little thought exercise, an exercise that I call Think Like a Historian. And not just any historian, but a historian of the future, a historian who is trying to answer the question: What was going on in the United States in the early part of the 21st Century? I actually suggested this idea about three years ago in these pages, but now I want to develop the idea into a method. A method that we can use to help us to ground ourselves in these confusing times.

Start by imagining that we are living 100 years from now, and that we are looking back on today, trying to write a book about what was going on. That's a good way to keep us focused on The Big Picture! The first thing to do is to come up with a title. And the title I've come up with for MY book is this: “The Big Crisis of the 21st Century”

I wrote about this book idea back in 2018, then last year I wrote a series about the seven “chapters” of which my book would be composed. Maybe you remember my chapters, but just in case, here they are.

Nygaard's Seven Chapters

Chapter One: The Crisis of Climate Disruption. This deserves a chapter for the simple reason that the earth's capacity to support human life itself is threatened.

Chapter Two: The Crisis of Inequality and Resource Allocation—Who Gets What, and How Much. This crisis is destabilizing democratic structures and economic systems around the world as the have-nots increasingly demand to be heard.

Chapter Three: The Crisis of Othering and Belonging. This is the process by which full membership in society is decided and enforced. Here's where we look at social oppression—which is expressed in racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hate, and more—and ask if we are moving towards a truly inclusive future or away from that vision.

Chapter Four: The Crisis of a Declining U.S. Empire. American wealth depends on the ability of the U.S. to dominate global trade and finance, as well as supply chains, capital flows, information, technical expertise, and other power-enhancing structures and institutions. The 20th Century has been called The American Century. What now, in the 21st?

Chapter Five: The Crisis of U.S. Democracy exposes the

systems of privilege and domination that have, up to now, reserved a disproportionate share of political power in this country for white men of property.

Chapter Six: The Crisis of Capitalism is one that is rarely discussed in the media, but increasing numbers of people are beginning to consider that maybe, just maybe, capitalism is not what they thought it was. Could we be laying the groundwork for a new global order based on sustainable cooperation rather than greed and competition?

Chapter Seven: The Crisis of Social Health. If we look at the entire society, and think of it like a large body, then we have to ask: How healthy is it? This chapter is for everyone who agrees with the populist slogan “Everybody does better when everybody does better.” As the 21st Century unfolds, we must ask: How is everybody doing?

There will have to be a chapter discussing how all of these crises are connected. That is, can we discuss Inequality without discussing Capitalism? And the state of our Democracy is totally about Othering and Belonging, as a society in crisis tends to narrow the criteria for full membership. And if Climate Disruption threatens to drown our coastal communities and burn our inland communities—as it surely does—what does that say about the Social Health of our nation?

This list, these chapters, are all arbitrary; the list of chapters in YOUR book will no doubt be different. And that’s what I want you to consider as you think about this thought exercise: If you were a historian in the year 2121, what would YOU say was going on 100 years earlier?

The whole point of this Historian of the Future exercise is to get us to think in terms of the Big Picture. What matters? And what does not?

By the way, I’m not talking about entertainment here. You don’t need to be a critical thinker to enjoy talking about Kim Kardashian or to follow your favorite football team.

But if you want your “book” to include information that will help you to make a positive difference in the world, then try to follow the things that will help your 2121 friends to understand “what was going on” with those people who were lucky enough to be living in the early part of the 21st Century. Sure, there was plenty of pain and suffering. But I hope your picture is big enough that you can see the joy, love, and solidarity that is always present, that always offers hope.

So your choice of Chapters will help you to decide what to think about. But it’s also useful to consider HOW to think about it, which is the subject of the next essay. ♦

Social Change in Three Parts

Once you have your book title and your chapters selected, you have a pretty good idea of what you want to think about. But there’s SO MUCH information coming at you, how do you even know when you’re taking in something that is really helpful? And, perhaps more importantly, how do you know what to ignore? Who among us has not spent far too much time clicking on those fascinating links that we saw jumping around on our screens as we were trying to... what was it we were trying to do, anyway? Stop distracting me!

It’s time to look at the Big Picture again, just for a moment. How about this for a Big Picture view: What makes a society what it is? That’s what your book is trying to illuminate, right?

Is that too “Big Picture” to deal with? I don’t think so; I offer here a fairly simple way to look at it.

We can imagine three facets, or levels, of sociopolitical organization in a society: Policies; Systems; and Consciousness.

POLICIES are the rules, laws, traditions, expectations, and so forth that shape our daily lives.

SYSTEMS are the larger structures and institutions, patterns and power structures, architectures and infrastructures that give rise to, and are reflected in, policies.

CONSCIOUSNESS is the understanding of, or beliefs about, how the world works and how it SHOULD work. A broad agreement on this level is what binds a society together, what gives institutions legitimacy, what makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.

Continued on page 4

Change *from page 3*

(I stole that last phrase from Abraham Lincoln, who said in 1858 that “In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who molds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”)

Recall here that Systalectics (the Thought System that I’ve been advocating) tells us that we are constantly shaping our environment, and our environment is constantly shaping us, which is sometimes referred to as the “mutuality of interaction.” And recall also that we are not looking for what “caused” things to be as they are. Rather, we are trying to understand the conditions that make it more likely that things will turn out in a certain way rather than another way.

What this means, in practical terms, is that an intervention AT ANY POINT in the system affects the system. So a change in policy means that existing systems have to do things differently, if they can. And a change in systems will often give rise to changes in

policies. And the consciousness (public sentiment) about the changes will mean that things move quickly or slowly, provoke resistance or support, increase stability or make things change.

So if you want social change, you can start anywhere: Engage in activities that change consciousness. Create, or abolish, institutions. Or advocate for policies. Whatever you do, it will change everything, a little or a lot. Some of the changes will be invisible, some will be obvious, some will have little effect beyond paving the way for future changes. But it’s important to remember that nothing you do, or fail to do, is meaningless. You have a hand in shaping the future, like it or not.

The important thing, for those of us who want to make positive change, is that we understand what is going on in the areas that concern us (our Chapters!) And that we take action to help create the conditions that will make change happen.

Just to make things even more concrete, the next essay contains a list of the seven chapters in my book *The Big Crisis of the 21st Century*. For each one I list a few examples of changes in Policies, Systems, and Consciousness. ♦

Policies, Systems, and Consciousness

As a Historian of the Future, I am asking this question: Back in the “old days” of 2021, to what degree and in what ways did we respond to each of the crises that make up the seven chapters of my book *The Big Crisis of the 21st Century*?

In this essay I will look at the subjects of each of my chapters as if I were a time-traveler, sent from the future to gather information that will help me assess what was going on in 2021. I’ll be looking at each crisis in terms of my three facets of sociopolitical organization: Policy, Systems, and Consciousness. My lists include a combination of what seems to be happening and what I would LIKE to see happening. It’s an ambitious project, but I think it’s worth a try.

And, remember, these are *my* chapters, in *my* book. Your chapters will naturally be different, but I hope that my opening of a window on my process might be helpful to you as you direct your attention to the things YOU care about.

Chapter One: The Crisis of Climate Disruption.

In the realm of POLICY, I’m noticing that we have seen a number of Climate-related bills introduced at the federal level, such as The CLEAN Future Act, introduced in March, that “would achieve net zero greenhouse gas pollution no later than 2050, with an interim target of reducing pollution by 50 percent from 2005 levels no later than 2030.” Before that, in January, Rep. Barbara Lee introduced the Women and Climate Change Act of 2021, which would, among other things, coordinate the policies and activities of various federal agencies relating to combating the effects of climate change on women. Let’s see if these bills go anywhere.

The 10-year climate mobilization known as The Green New Deal, introduced as a non-binding resolution in 2019, has been re-introduced in 2021, and the push is on to create policies that would implement the plan, which public opinion polls indicate now has majority support.



→→ President Biden’s \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, called the American Jobs Plan, has a strong emphasis on climate policy. The New York Times reports that “Mr. Biden’s pledge to tackle climate change is embedded throughout the plan.” And the Wall Street Journal refers to the Biden bill as “The Green New Deal, in Disguise.” The proposal, inadequate though it is, has nonetheless been influenced by grassroots environmental organizing, and its fate will tell us a lot about the potential for system change in regard to climate.

Speaking of SYSTEMS, I’m anxious to see if we have come to better understand the difference between systems that can help to slow or stop warming and systems that are aimed at adapting to it. I’m watching to see if systems of mass transit grow or shrink. Is existing infrastructure beginning to be re-designed? Is new infrastructure being created that will reduce our carbon footprint? I notice that we are beginning to hear more people talking about system change. And I’m watching for the day when major newspapers have a “Climate Section,” to go with the standard Sports and Business Sections.

In the realm of CONSCIOUSNESS I’m looking for evidence that evaluations of existing public policy, and assessments of proposed policy, are beginning to include—as a matter of course—a look at their impacts on the environment. That is, is an environmental consciousness entering the mainstream, or not? My hope is that the long-standing cultural embrace of Anthropocentrism—the belief that value is human-centered and that all other beings are means to human ends—is openly and frequently challenged. Any evidence of that?

Chapter Two: The Crisis of Inequality and Resource Allocation

In terms of POLICY, I’m watching for attacks on, and defenses of, antipoverty programs of all kinds, from Minimum Wage legislation to the Earned Income Tax Credit to Social Security and many more. What’s happening with proposals to make higher education free for all? Any progress on a Guaranteed Annual Income at any level? Is tax policy getting more progressive, or less?

SYSTEMS... With the exception of property taxes, there are few systems for taxing wealth in this country. I’m watching to see if current proposals go anywhere. What are the barriers to the wealth-generating practice of home ownership and what are the systems that construct and maintain those barriers? Is there universal access to high-

speed Internet at this point? If not, what is wrong with the systems that could make it possible, but don’t? How are systems of ownership supporting or impeding equitable distribution of wealth? Could we, or should we, be talking about nationalizing certain industries?

We’ll know that CONSCIOUSNESS is changing when the concept of the Commons becomes, well, common, and even more so when the primacy of private property gives way to the primacy of the Commons. And when property rights come to be seen as secondary to human rights and the rights of nature, then we’ll know we are quickly evolving. I’ll cite here the well-known quote of Martin Luther King, who said “We must rapidly begin the shift from a ‘thing-oriented’ society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

Chapter Three: The Crisis of Othering and Belonging

POLICY... In general, any expansion of programs with universal access—access to education, health care, housing, family support, long-term care—would be progress, as their very nature says “You belong!” Immigration policy is all about Othering and Belonging, and must be understood with this in mind. Voting rights. Anti-discrimination/anti-hate laws. Criminal justice reform. Policies in all of these areas work together to tell some people that they are full members of society, and to tell others that they are not.

SYSTEMS... The criminal “justice” system delivers justice in accord with deeply-entrenched racist patterns and beliefs. Housing patterns reflect racist systems of residential segregation and unequal access to credit that express themselves in segregated housing patterns and disparities in wealth accumulation. Racist othering has shaped virtually every system in American life, from employment to housing to health care, politics and education. All of these systems work together to create a society that sends strong messages about who is “us” and who is “them.” With deadly consequences for the groups designated as “them.”

CONSCIOUSNESS... We will have evolved when white people replace their fear of an ever-more-diverse population with a celebration of our ever-more inclusive rainbow of humanity. Can our traditional “out-groups” be humanized and brought from the margins into full standing in U.S. society? When hate *To page 6* →→

From page 5 →→ speech stops being seen as “free speech” and instead is understood to be evidence of moral deviance, othering gives way to belonging. Consciousness is raised when diversity is seen as a strength, not a threat.

Chapter Four: The Crisis of the Declining US Empire

POLICY... Any evidence of attempts to reduce the outrageously-huge military budget? Can we stop waging wars, or threatening to wage wars, on foreign soil? Do we see increased support for strong multilateral international institutions?

SYSTEMS... Can we create a more democratic United Nations? The system that results in hundreds of U.S. military bases around the world must be reduced or eliminated. Any evidence of efforts to reduce the power of the Imperial Presidency? Supposedly Congress has the sole power to declare war. Let’s try to identify and replace the international bodies tainted by colonial ideology, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

CONSCIOUSNESS... U.S. global dominance is no longer accepted, and we begin to embrace the idea of a multi-polar world. The term “superpower” becomes a relic of history, and a vision of global solidarity becomes widely accepted and aspired to.

Chapter Five: The Crisis of US Democracy

POLICY... Limit the Length of Campaigns. Ban Paid Political Advertising. Enact Ranked Choice Voting. An end to Gerrymandering. Pass the *For the People Act* and the *John Lewis Voting Rights Act*. Resist new legislation that would criminalize political protest.

SYSTEM... A new system of financing political campaigns. Establish new and widely available systems of education about and practice in the skills and arts of democracy, including Collaboration, Critical Thinking, Research, and Participation. Develop and fund “Democracy-Building” institutions. Build a grassroots-governed cabinet-level “Department of Democratic Participation” with a mission to create ever-more democratic systems in our democracy.

CONSCIOUSNESS... Our undemocratic economic system comes to be seen as a barrier to our nominally-democratic political system. A vision of a multi-racial, multi-cultural democracy gains great currency. Group-

based barriers to inclusion are widely recognized and condemned

Chapter Six: The Crisis of Capitalism

POLICY ... Social Security is preserved and strengthened. We adopt Universal Health Care on the national level. Unemployment is addressed by having the federal government provide jobs for all who need them, doing all that needs to be done.

SYSTEM... Maintenance of and investment in needed infrastructure is taken out of the market and managed as a public good. Key industries are nationalized. Non-labor income is taxed. Wealth is taxed. In the netherworld between Policy and Systems, we have President Biden’s “American Jobs Plan,” which prompts the ultra-establishment newspaper *The Hill* to say “White House Moves to Reshape Role of US Capitalism.” Progressives say it’s “a bill that falls well-short of being a transformational reimagining of capitalism.”

CONSCIOUSNESS... Increased status for labor, decreased status for capital. Public discussions take place about how much we value the Commons. Great wealth begins to be seen as illegitimate. The role of competition in meeting human needs begins to be questioned.

Chapter Seven: The Crisis of Social Health

POLICY... This idea is so far out of the public discussion that there are few examples of policy to report. Perhaps it could start with widespread data collection *and reporting* on a wide range of social indicators including: infant mortality, child abuse, child poverty, teenage suicide, teenage drug abuse, high school dropouts, unemployment, weekly wages, health insurance coverage, poverty among the elderly, out-of-pocket health-care costs among the elderly, homicides, alcohol-related traffic fatalities, food insecurity, affordable housing, and income inequality. Make your own list!

SYSTEM... Everyone is familiar with the Dow Jones index, which offers daily insight into the nation’s financial workings. What if we had a similar number—call it the “Doug Jones Index”—that would allow us to report every day on the social welfare of the nation? Imagine publicly-accountable organizations coming into being that allow us to monitor and address agreed-upon areas of need. There arises a system for collecting, reporting, analyzing, and interrelating social data, which is used to produce a “social portrait” ↗↗

→→ of the nation that has an impact on the public dialogue. A cabinet-level “Council of Social Advisors” is created to produce a National Social Report.

CONSCIOUSNESS... The question “How are we doing *as a society?*” is widely asked and answered. Our social performance comes to be reported as conscientiously as our economic performance. Public discussion of “rights” begins to include “social rights” as well as individual rights. Social assessment becomes a basic expectation of leadership.

That’s my seven chapters. So, what’s on YOUR list? Are you working to shape Policy, to create or abolish Systems, or to spark new thinking that raises Consciousness, thinking that makes change more likely?

Whatever you’re doing, there are some questions you might want to ask yourself. I suggest a few such questions in the next, and final, essay in this issue of Nygaard Notes. ◆

Questions About Change. And About Myself

I said in my introduction to this issue of The Notes that my Think Like a Historian technique was “simple, but not easy.” What did I mean by that?

Pretending that you are living in an imagined place in the future and looking back at the happenings of today is a useful, and simple, trick to help us remember to look at the Big Picture, which is so important for one wishing to understand the world using the dialectical, systems approach that I call a Systalectic Orientation.

But before we try to think like this futuristic historian, there are a few questions that we would do well to ask ourselves, because we live, after all, in The Attention Economy, which is based on an information system that socializes us to think about certain things and to not think about others. Without at least making an attempt to answer some of the following questions, we risk slipping into the grasp of the Dominant Thought System.

Here are the questions I have in mind:

How does change happen?
 What’s the nature of the change I see and of the change I want?
 What is my role in the changes?
 What are the obstacles to positive change, and what is my role in overcoming these obstacles?
 Am I an obstacle?

This is the part that is not easy: These questions are uncomfortable, the answers are not obvious, and the things that we discover in the process of attempting to answer them may require us to change the way we think, the way we understand the world. This is not an easy road to travel! Finding answers to some of these

questions may take a lifetime of work. And it’s possible that they’ll never really be “answered.” But the ongoing work of asking them will make us better historians. Better people. Better agents of change.

Questioning the Questions

Each of my questions deserves a lot of explanation, but for now I’ll offer only a thought or two about each one, just to get you started. Let’s begin with this question:
How does change happen?

I’m talking here about *social* change. That is, changes in the structure of society, in the values and social norms which bind the people of a society together and help to maintain social order. For example, if you decide to go to college, that is a personal change. If a college education were to become free and equally available to everyone, that is a social change. If our economic system went from a largely capitalist system to a largely socialist system, that would be a social change.

But, if we want to help make social change happen, shouldn’t we think about HOW it happens? I think in terms of systems. The scholar V.K. Maheshwari says it better than I can (although I try to say it all the time!): “A society’s pattern of living is a dynamic system of inter-related parts. Therefore, change in one of these parts usually reacts on others and those on additional ones until they bring a change in the whole mode of life of many people. As a matter of fact, social change is the consequence of a number of factors. A special factor may trigger a change but it is always associated with other factors that make the triggering possible. The reason is that social phenomena are mutually interdependent. None stand out as *To page 8* →→

From page 7 →→ isolated forces that bring about change of themselves. Rather each is an element in a system.

Dialectics tells us that change is an ever-present phenomenon, a law of nature. So we need to ask: **What's the nature of the change I see happening? What is the nature of the change I WANT to see happening?** Here I refer back to the chapters in the book: Is the climate changing in life-enhancing ways, or in ways that threaten life? Are we seeing greater economic inequality, or less? Is our culture more inclusive, or less? Is the United States a Superpower, or is it an equal member in the community of nations? Is society getting more democratic, or less? Do we believe, as Ronald Reagan once said, that “The great thing about America is that anyone can be a millionaire”? Or would society be better off if nobody WANTED to be a millionaire? Does everyone do better when everyone does better? Or is it “everyone for themselves”?

What is my role in the changes? If it is true that an action anywhere helps create the conditions for change everywhere, then what actions can I take that will help produce the changes that I want to see?

What are the obstacles to positive change? Every day, in every moment, we encounter resistance to or pushback against the positive changes that are happening, or that we are working to make happen. If we don't attend to them, we won't be likely to overcome them.

What is my role in overcoming these obstacles? If we don't know how they might be overcome, how do we find out? A related question: What gives us hope?

The last question I encourage you to ask yourself is a

question that makes many people uncomfortable: **Am I an obstacle?**

Notice that the question is NOT “Am I a bad person?” This question simply asks us to come to a more clear understanding of our social location. That is, we would do well to understand the combination of factors including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual identity, and geographic location that make us who we are, that shape our understanding of the world and that bestow upon us both certain privileges and also certain experiences of oppression.

The higher one sits in the social hierarchy, the more important it is to work on this. And that's because people, in general, tend to be most aware of the people above them in the hierarchy, since they pose a greater threat than those below. This is partly why so many white people are so oblivious; in a white supremacist culture, white people are given the message that they don't need to empathize, they don't need to struggle, they don't need to do anything at all in order to protect themselves. The System, after all, works in their favor. And it is this very lack of empathy, this obliviousness, this narcissistic dwelling in an emotional and cognitive shelter not of their making but operating to their benefit, that in the end dehumanizes those at the top of our caste system just as surely—if not as obviously—as the system dehumanizes those whom it was designed to dehumanize.

Wittingly or unwittingly, each of us sometimes behaves in ways that make positive change less likely. At these times we ARE an obstacle. But we also have the capacity to do our part to make positive change MORE likely. That's what these questions, indeed this whole issue of Nygaard Notes, is intended to do: Make it just a little easier for us to be a force for good. To be the people we want to be. ♦

Nygaard Notes

P.O. Box 6103

Minneapolis, MN 55406

E-mail: nygaard@nygaardnotes.org

Web: www.nygaardnotes.org