



Thoughts from Linda:

**Citizens**  
*Why the Key to Everything is All of Us*

Jon Alexander with Ariane Conrad  
2022

Just as I began to write this review, I received an email from an old business colleague who I had not spoken with in over 25 years. My friend sent me a personal note inviting me to join him and his wife in a 'get out the vote' initiative that is an entirely citizen-driven, organically organized effort. As I read his note, I realized he is exhibiting exactly the early-stage behaviors that Jon Alexander so precisely describes in his new book, *Citizens*.

Here's part of the message he sent: "*Renee (His wife's name) and I are very concerned about the direction our country is going, and so we are doing what we can to ensure a positive outcome in the upcoming midterm elections on November 8th. **We can all do something to make a difference in the future health of our country and the world.** I had a big insight in the last election that woke me up to my/our individual responsibility to do what we can for the health of our country and our democracy. If you're interested in that epiphany, please read the 2-page piece I wrote about what I call "Small a Activism"....*" I have not included that 'small a activism' article, but it is all about citizenship in our modern era.

Like you, I receive many of these kinds of messages, but this one was different. It was personal and reflected a level of self-authorization of citizenship I have not seen before. I am already involved in our home state and am writing letters for candidates, so trying to fulfill my duty of citizenship in that manner. But I realized that this email invitation is one microcosm example of the spirit of this book. And while I might look at that as a mark of citizenship on the planet, the message of this book is much more dramatic and calls to action a whole new framework.

As Confucius is credited for saying, "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names." Jon Alexander's contribution to a new vision for the planet may be precisely what he has accomplished in this book.

Jon Alexander has many years of experience in marketing and was an award-winning brand manager for over a decade. In 2014 he co-founded the New Citizenship Project with Irenie Ekkeshis, whose mission was to figure out how to use their skills not just to sell stuff to consumers but to involve people in the decisions that affect their lives as citizens. He has used those skills to clearly voice a vision of a concept, along with a taxonomy of terms and frameworks that paint the picture of this vision realized. This book thoroughly discusses three models: subject, consumer, and citizen.

"The Citizen Story" model is about empowering all of us to co-invent and develop our own futures. It goes far beyond my earlier example of voting, but it maintains the same spirit of shared responsibility for all of us. This story he describes refers to a "state of engagement, more verb than noun," as described in the *Forward*, written by the futurist Brian Eno, the founder of the Long Now Foundation. That foundation is best known for the Clock of the Long Now (a 10,000-year clock) and the Rosetta project (which has a mission to preserve a record of all languages likely to go extinct over the next 100 years.) Eno says, "...there is hope for us all today because something is happening. There is a coalescence. A (new) story is rising and ripening. It is a story of who we are as humans, what we are capable of, and how we might work together to reimagine and rebuild our world." That is what this book is all about.

Jon Alexander frames the Citizen Story model as the logical extension that takes humanity into a new era from its predecessor model, the Consumer Story model, which was itself preceded by the Subject Story model. He shows us how to use this lens to view our world and reflect on our current state. He suggests it is much like informing fish that they are swimming in water as they have known no other existence. For them, water is just a part of their lives. Alexander suggests that most of the world today is engulfed in the water of a consumer society. The Consumer Story model encouraged and driven by almost all institutions, is an all-encompassing system that has helped to create a big mess on the planet. He suggests, however, that this is not an inevitable future, noting that it has only been our 'way of being' for the past 80 years following WWII.

Using this filter, he describes the role of government in each of the three models to illustrate the distinctions. In the Subject Story model, he notes that governments represent the God-given elite who can and should tell us what to do because they

know best. In the Consumer Story, government becomes just another service provider. In the Citizen Story, the purpose of government is to provide the space and the means for us to come together to meet our collective needs, be they urgent and immediate or ongoing and sustained—but stopping well short of doing it for us. The purpose of government in the Citizen Story is to enable people to make our society better, not to do it for us or to us."

He offers many examples of current situations that reflect this kind of Citizen Story future in action today. One example is in Paris, where the city has just approved the creation of a standing Citizens' Assembly that guides policy and has also committed to distributing more than US \$110 million per year through participatory budgeting, a high-involvement citizen activity.

A second example is Mexico City, where they have crowdsourced a constitution for its nine million people. Additionally, Chile is in the middle of a citizen-driven convention to develop a new constitution for the nation, while Iceland is experimenting with a participatory democracy platform that has brought hundreds of people into the operation of the city of Reykjavik. One of the best examples he offers is that of Taiwan, which could have easily slipped into the Subject Story with the advent of Covid. But instead, they showed the world a way through the pandemic, using three key innovative principles: Fast, Fun, and Fair. Based on their approach, the Taiwanese government opened up its big data and ran challenges for apps to track things like facemask availability. They used the concept of 'participatory self-surveillance,' where they trusted citizens to do the right thing and created a hotline for any citizen to use with ideas for what more could be done. The result was one of the lowest case-fatality rates in the world, without imposing a lockdown.

He examined Patagonia, its origin story, and its mission in an interesting and illustrative chapter. Alexander takes on Patagonia as a progressive consumer organization with so much promise but urges them to go further. As he notes, Patagonia was born when founder Yvon Chouinard realized that his gear was damaging the rock faces it was his passion to climb. He began to search for and ultimately manufacture nature-friendly alternative products. Alexander illustrates the many steps and moves that Patagonia took to be an outstanding citizen among companies today. And yet, he notes, that the CEO's comment that 'the single best thing we can do for the planet is to keep our stuff in use longer' is the epitome of and, as he says, the "hidden in plain sight" – Consumer Story at work. As Alexander describes it, the Consumer Story at work at Patagonia is essentially "let's keep humans from harming the planet. Do as little harm as possible. In this story, the best we can do is to not (mess) up things even more."

In an interesting challenge, he asks, "what would it look like for Patagonia to step into the Citizen Story?" He describes it this way: "First and most fundamentally, the mission would have to change, the savior complex thrown off. No company is going to save the planet; the planet does not even need saving. What if Patagonia instead saw its mission as to equip humanity to be nature? How might a company enable and support us to experience ourselves as an inextricable part of the biosphere, and as such, empowered and capable and responsible in a much deeper way? How might Patagonia involve us, beyond just selling us less damaging stuff?"

Intriguingly, in September of this year, Patagonia made a big announcement about Yvon Chouinard, his wife, and their two adult children transferring their ownership of Patagonia, valued at US \$3 billion, to a specially designed trust and a non-profit organization. These were created to preserve the company's independence and ensure that all of its profits, about US \$100 million a year, are used to combat climate change and protect undeveloped land around the globe.

I don't know if these two conversations were connected. Still, clearly, things are happening among forward-facing leaders and organizations that show evidence of movement in the direction advocated by Jon Alexander. Perhaps Patagonia will take on his challenge and continue to lead the way on the planet as the ultimate Citizen.

The book takes you through his "Three P's" –which are principles that are required for any organization to adopt if stepping into the Citizen Story. These are purpose, platforms, and prototyping.

He also lays out Seven Modes for Everyday Participation, which include:

- Tell Stories
- Gather Data
- Share Connections
- Contribute Ideas
- Give Time
- Learn Skills
- Crowdfund

The book is both interesting and important. Alexander is a remarkable visionary and has additional gifts as a communicator, which put these concepts clearly into language showing evidence where needed and expressing the entire storyline with ethos,

pathos, and logos, just as the ancient Greeks would encourage. It is a message that deserves traction and, I think, will take us into the future.

In closing, here is a short message from Jon. I hope you read this book.

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### **"I'm Jon**

I spent the first decade of my career working in the advertising industry, selling some of the world's biggest brands, and even winning a few awards along the way. Then I realized I was caught up in a story I didn't believe in: the Consumer Story.

Then in 2020, with Britain in lockdown, I saw the ideas we were working with come alive in front of my eyes. As Citizens, we were getting involved, helping one another through unprecedented challenges. A whole new society became possible in that time. But our leaders couldn't see it, because they were blinded by the Consumer Story.

That's why I wrote CITIZENS: so that we can see what is possible.

Working with Ariane Conrad, a best-selling writer who has built a career turning big ideas into books that change the world, I've drawn on all my experience with NCP, studied the best of what's going on all over the world, and interrogated three Masters degrees-worth of knowledge to pull this together. I truly believe that we humans are collaborative, creative, caring Citizens by nature - and if we give ourselves and each other the chance, we can fix this."