

What is our role in creating change?

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Proceed until apprehended!

Diana Vander Woude

Several years ago, I read of a Buddhist teacher who encouraged people filled with despair over the state of the world. His advice was simple and wise: "It's our turn to help the world." I love this statement because it reminds us of other times and other people who stepped forward to help create the changes that were necessary. We do live in an era that is unique in at least two ways. For the first time, humans have altered the earth's ecology and created consequences that are just beginning to materialize in frightening ways. And we are aware immediately of tragedies and horrors everywhere in the world, no matter where they occur.

But for all of human existence, no matter how terrible the time, there always have been people willing to step forward to do whatever they could to create positive change. Some succeeded, some did not. As we struggle with our own time, it's good to remember that we are standing on very strong shoulders that stretch far back in history.

In working with many people in very different cultures, I've learned to define leadership differently than most. *A leader is anyone willing to help, anyone who*

sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation. It might be a parent who intervenes in her child's school; or a rural village that works to get clean water; or a worker who refuses to allow mistreatment of others in his workplace; or a citizen who rallies her neighbors to stop local polluters. Everywhere in the world, no matter the economic or social circumstances, people step forward to try and make a small difference.

Because a leader is anyone willing to help, we can celebrate the fact that the world is abundantly rich in leaders. Some people ask, "Where have all the leaders gone?" But if we worry that there's a shortage of leaders, we're just looking in the wrong place, usually at the top of some hierarchy. Instead, we need to look around us, to look locally. And we need to look at ourselves. When have we moved into action for an issue or concern that we cared about? When have we stepped forward to help and thereby become a leader?

The process that creates change in the world is quite straightforward. We notice something that needs to be changed. We keep noticing it. The problem keeps getting our attention, even though most people don't notice that there's even a problem. We start to act, we try something. If that doesn't work, we try a different approach. We learn as we go. We become very engaged with the issue, spending more and more time on it. We become exhausted by our efforts, but still we keep going. The issue keeps calling to us. Any time we succeed, no matter how small the success, we gain new energy and resolve. We become smarter as we learn more about the issue and understand it better. We become more skillful at tactics and strategies. As we persevere, and if we are successful, more people join us. Sometimes we remain as just a small group, sometimes we give birth to a movement that involves tens of thousands, perhaps millions, of people.

This is how the world always changes. Even great and famous change initiatives begin this way, with the actions of just a few people, when “some friends and I started talking.” Including those efforts that win the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 2004, Wangari Maatai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in organizing The Greenbelt Movement which had planted over thirty million trees in Kenya and east Africa. Wangari was a biology professor at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. In a meeting with other Kenyan women, she learned that the fertile and forested land of her youth had been devastated. All the trees had been cut down for coffee and tea plantations. Local women now had to walk miles for firewood, and the water had become polluted with chemicals and run-offs from the plantations.

She knew that the solution to the plight of these women was to plant trees, to reforest the land. So she and a few women decided to begin immediately. They went to a large park in Nairobi and planted seven trees. However, five of these trees died. (The two that survived are still there today.) Their initial success rate was 28.5%, discouraging by anybody’s standards. But they didn’t give up. They learned from that experience and the women carried their learnings back to their villages. Gradually, they became skilled at planting trees. Other villages saw what they were doing and, over time, a large network of villages became engaged in tree planting. In less than 30 years, thirty million trees were flourishing in 600 communities, in 20 nations. Villages now have clean water, shade and local firewood, improved health and community vitality.

What if they had given up when the first five trees died? What if they had walked away and left it to the government or the U.N. to plant trees?

And yet, how is it possible to go from two trees to 30 million trees in just 27 years? Or, to go from a mere dozen men to 9 million people acting as one unified body in just a few weeks, as happened with the Polish Solidarity

Movement? This exponential growth is one gift of living in a network of relationships. If the issue is meaningful, people pay attention, see its value, and begin to talk to others. Such passion moves like wildfire through our networks and communities. Suddenly, we've reached millions of people and created large-scale change. And it's always true that these large powerful changes begin with only a few people who decide to help.

We can rely on this change process. If we have an idea, or experience a tragedy, or want to resolve an injustice, we can step forward to help. Instead of being overwhelmed and withdrawing, we can act. We don't need to spend much time planning or getting senior leaders involved; we don't have to wait for official support. We just need to get started. When we fail, which of course we will, we don't become discouraged. Instead, we learn from our mistakes. We look for openings and opportunities that present themselves, even if they're different than what we thought we needed. We follow the energy of "Yes!" rather than accepting defeat or getting stuck in a plan.

And we never know at the beginning where we'll end up. And it doesn't matter. Wangari Maathai calls herself an "accidental activist," stepping forward to plant those first few trees because it felt like the right thing to do. She didn't know that she would end up in jail, or have her reputation deliberately destroyed by her government. She didn't know she'd win the Nobel Peace Prize. All she did was take that first step, and then the next, and then the next.

This is how the world changes. And this is why we need to step forward for what we care about. Little by little, step by step we can resolve the frightening issues of this time and restore hope to the future.

After all, it's just our turn to help the world.

Choose Life

only that and always,

and at whatever risk.

To let life leak out, to let it wear away by

the mere passage of time, to withhold

giving it and spreading it

is to choose nothing.

Sister Helen Kelley

MARGARET WHEATLEY, Ed.D.

Margaret Wheatley is a well-respected writer, speaker, and teacher for how we can accomplish our work, sustain our relationships, and willingly step forward to serve in this troubling time. She has written five books: *Perseverance* (2010); *Leadership and the New Science* (18 languages and third edition); *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* (7 languages and second edition); *A Simpler Way* (with Myron Rogers); and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (3 languages). An organizational consultant since 1973, a global citizen since her youth, and a professor in two graduate business programs, she has been awarded several honorary degrees and distinctions. You may read her complete bio at <http://margaretwheatley.com/bio.html>, and may download any of her many articles (free) at <http://margaretwheatley.com/writing.html>.