

Change the World Without Losing Yourself

by Dan Pallotta

SEPTEMBER 27, 2012

A hundred years ago, people didn't talk about changing the world – not in the way we speak of it today. In 1912, there weren't movements for the eradication of poverty or disease, or even an understanding of their scale. Then came Woodrow Wilson's dream of the League of Nations, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the formation of the United Nations. From there, Gandhi, the civil rights movement, and speeches by President and Robert Kennedy that declared, "We need men who dream of things that never were," and that spoke of "a new world society." There was Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, delivered at the age of 34, and Neil Armstrong walking on the surface of the moon at the age of 38. Their youth brought a feeling of youthfulness to humanity itself, and gave people the sense that nothing is impossible.

This moment in the long arc of history launched a change-the-world movement that never existed before, including change-the-world vocations on a major scale – from the Peace Corps to an explosion in the growth of opportunities in the nonprofit sector, which employs more than 10 million people today. And in the last decade or so, the genre has become even more refined: social enterprise, social entrepreneurship, L3C low-profit corporations, B corporations, the charitable endurance event industry, and more. New infrastructures have arisen to support it, from the Stanford Social Innovation Review, TED and Good, to the Social Enterprise Program at Harvard. Most major universities now have nonprofit management programs that didn't exist ten years ago. And courses on philanthropy are now even taught at the undergraduate level at Tufts, Brown, Indiana University, and many other colleges.

With the growth of these structures and opportunities has come an emphasis on *doing*, often to the exclusion of *being*. The competition to be the one who changes the world can be as cut-throat, if not more, than the competition among fast-food chains, or cosmetics companies, or movie

studios. Witness the recent war between the Susan G. Komen Foundation and Planned Parenthood. Or Komen's efforts to protect its brand by discouraging others from using the phrase "for the Cure," or AIDS activists' assaults on the AIDS Rides. Lost in this new era is the notion that one can still make a difference in business, even absent any corporate social responsibility program. How would the charities trying to change the world operate without the manufacturers that make the equipment for their medical clinics, or without General Electric providing them with light bulbs? How would a "social enterprise" like PlanetTran, the hybrid car service, operate without Toyota, who makes the Prius, which constitutes their fleet? And in the absence of industrial farmers and national grocery chains, we would find ourselves in need of a great deal more charity, and a lot further away from the goal of changing the world, to boot.

Paradoxically, this new era of limitlessness often serves to limit the imaginations of the young people it attracts. It can obscure their real and natural passions. If you want to change the world, you have to go into the change-the-world sector, the times say. And so a young girl, whose calling – and whose value to the world – may really be to dance, or to build an industry, is hypnotized into becoming the fundraising director for an NGO. Imagine if someone had held up Gandhi to a young Frank Lloyd Wright, as Gandhi is held up to our young people today, and the incredible architect decided to go run a nonprofit soup kitchen as a result. What a tragedy. And what a setback that would have been for architecture and design.

Individual economic futures are at risk, as well. While we may envision a new world, the donating public and nonprofit sector are still stuck philosophically in Puritan times, demanding that nonprofit employees work for sacrificial wages, as a sign that their hearts are in the right place. And in another paradox, they ask the people who would dream a new dream for the world to abandon the economic dreams they have for themselves.

These are complicated times for making a true difference. Perhaps much more than they were for Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, and Henry Ford. So, what difference does *being* (as opposed to *doing*) make? Presence? Listening? What difference does passion make? Peace of mind? A slow pace? Excellence? What difference does industry make, when it creates new products and jobs that make life better for others? All of these things exist independent of the change-the-world sector. And, the change-the-world industry itself cannot possibly change the world if forced to play by a set of Puritan economic rules than fundamentally work against it – low wages, no charity stock market, disdain for advertising and marketing, and the expectation of immediate results.

I get e-mails all the time from people who are grappling with these issues – many from students wondering whether they should go into the for-profit sector or the nonprofit sector, or asking how they can reconcile their dreams of a better world with the economic dreams they have for themselves. Others are from corporate executives feeling a dearth of purpose, and asking for career advice. Still others are from nonprofit leaders frustrated by a system that works against the dreams that brought them into the sector in the first place. People are suffering from a crisis of meaning, and not in small part because the definitions of meaning have been re-engineered by a culture confused about it itself. The feedback I get has inspired me to delve more deeply into these issues as part of the work that my company does with a specific curriculum called Change Course, which explores the intersection of money and meaning.

Somehow the dream of changing the world ended up changing the quality of our dreams. It's not natural. When this era of profound human potential combines with authentic human passions, unlimited by artificial categories and boxes, then the world can really change, into something including – but far more profound than – the world without human suffering we have begun to imagine.

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