

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Peter Schwartzman

Hopelessly One? No Way. Get involved

Do the world's problems seem insurmountable to you? Do you sometimes feel like you are helpless to respond to them? Are you eager to do something to help but feel like your contribution won't matter? Do you struggle with the idea of what to do? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions then, rest assured, you have lots of company. Since the problems are of such importance and because history proves that small contributions do matter, now is not the time to grovel in despair. Rather, it is the time to get involved. Doing so will not only make the world a better place but it will almost assuredly make you feel better about yourself, improve your connection with the planet and other humans, and enhance your outlook on the future.

A willingness to get involved is an important start. It requires a grain of activism and a smidgen of optimism. Once you have the will, then it is a matter of deciding what to do. This takes a bit more thought and preparation. Where should you start? How do you prioritize among problems or actions? Should the focus be on you, your community, your country, or something else? My advice is to pick something to start. Almost anything will do. Take a plastic bag outside and pick up trash or debris. Write a letter "to the editor" expressing how important something is to you. Reduce consumption of something (don't eat that cake today, save it for tomorrow). Go plant a seed of something yummy. These may seem like frivolous acts but they aren't. Imagine if all 300+ million of us in the U.S. were to write one letter this week! The mail system might have to shut down but what an inspiring act it would be. It would definitely wake up so many people who feel that "no one cares" or that "my actions don't matter." Wouldn't it? (If it sounds too unrealistic to think that hundreds of millions of people would decide to do something similar on a particularly day/week, just imagine how many of us contacted our moms this past weekend!)

Now, assuming that your first "seed" doesn't spawn a revolution, you must consider where you go next. At this point, there are so many possibilities, and it can be somewhat paralyzing to contemplate them all. Once again, I recommend doing something, rather than sitting idly waiting for the perfect opportunity. Here, I strongly suggest finding a group of local people to



work with. There are so many such groups around, it just takes a morsel of initiative to find one. Locally, The Center <www.thecenteringalesburg.org>, Western Illinois Nature Group <www.blackthornhill.org>, the Boys and Girls Club of Knox County (phone: 309/342.0158), and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Knox County <www.hoibbbs.org>, are just a few organizations doing things to better our community and world. (If you are reading this and you regret that I didn't mention your wonderful organization, please email me and I'll see to it that I mention it in a future essay.) Don't delay. There isn't a day to lose.

Joining existing groups is wonderful but designing your own might be your calling. If so, don't hesitate to circulate your passion and plan with others you know (or to recognized leaders of the community). You might be surprised by the support that you receive. The Center, which I cofounded in 2008, got its start in this exact way. I firmly believe that there are tons of people that want to help but are just waiting for someone else to take the lead. This "leader" can be you. Don't let your idealism and creativity be stifled or suppressed. Unveil your vision and let your spirit soar.

If you are a bit too introverted or apprehensive to join others, this shouldn't prevent you from acting. So much of what needs to be done is for each of us to carefully introspect, i.e., look inside oneself, and find ways to improve our relationship with others and with the planet. This mode of thought might lead us to change our ways significantly. My diet, purchasing habits, transportation mode, and philanthropy have changed considerably in the past seven years. Ten years ago, I would have never expected to alter my life in these ways. I am very pleased that I made these changes and I look forward to future modifications. The entire process has been very empowering as well. You don't know what you can accomplish until you try.

The slogan, "change starts with one," speaks volumes for the potential for humanity to recover from its current predicament and practices. Every one of us matters. Every one of us will decide the future. Which direction will you steer this ship? It is your choice. Make it.