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 not only makes 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 “my thoughts 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. It can be somewhat paralyzing to contemplate them all. Once again, I recommend doing something, rather than sitting idly waiting for the perfect opportunity. 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: 309/432.0158), and Big Brothers Big Sisters (www.bbbig.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 2002, 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 predication and practices. Every one of us matters. Every one of us will decide the future. Which direction will you steer this ship? Is it your choice. Make it.

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ENOUGH IS ENOUGH
Peter Schwartzman

THE OLD SCOUT
Garrison Keillor

One out of five Americans is willing to describe himself or herself as a Republican these days, and frankly I am tempted to become one of them. For the variety, and because they need me and because when I heard former Vice President Cheney talk about the meaning of Republicanism the other day — "We are what we are," he said — I felt drawn to the simplicity and dignity of that. And I have never been a Republican, just as I’ve never been to South America, and that makes it tempting.

I look at pictures of Machu Picchu and think, "Why don’t I get on a plane and go?" And I look at Dicks and think, "This man needs friends." I voted for Obama, and will vote for him again in 2012, Lord willing, but in the meantime, it’s a free country. And it is just a whole lot more satisfying to be part of a militant righteous minority than to be in the anxiety-ridden confused majority — to be a night rider and ambusher rather than one of the people in the long wagon train — to be free to joke around and say wild stuff and know that it doesn’t make a damn’s worth of difference.

I went to a party the other day and heard the word “torture” and said that I didn’t think we should prosecute the Bush lawyers who authorized torture memos, and people jumped all over me like I was an escaped Nazi, as long as I was persona non grata, I said. I said someone said that America needed to be a better country if we took the vote away from people over 65 because they are selfish and greedy and the future of America is its young. People were dropping off their drinks. And then I said that cat ownership is a sign of emotional immaturity and a good predictor of a tendency toward violent crime. I saw lifelong friends turn away in disgust. And you know something? I Don’t Care. I felt good.

Liquor wasn’t the cause. Crackiness was. And crackiness is the birthright of Republicans.

As Mr. Cheney said, “We are what we are.” We’re Republicans. We have certain things we believe in. And maintaining our loyalty and commitment to those principles is vital to our success.” A good thing to say, and many a president of the Elks, the Odd Fellows, the Moose, the Knights of Pythias, and the Ancient and Mystic Order of Hoot Owls has said something similar. We will not bend our principles so as to please people we didn’t like in the first place.

As Proust said in his "Fond Recollections of Times Past" — or, in French, "A la recherche du temps perdu," his memoir of doing research, or "recherche," as a young man and of the mysterious Madeleine, who was one of the things he remembered, but don’t let me give away the whole book, you should read it for yourselves — "Nous sommes qui nous sommes." We are what we are, and that is the heart and soul of Republicanism today.

It is like one of those old men’s choirs who get together one Friday night a month to sing “On the Road to Mandalay” and “Stout Hearted Men” and “Finlandia” and “Kathleen Mavourneen” and “The harp that once through Tara’s hall.” The song of music and song. "Now hangs as mute on Tara’s walls, If that soul were not frail." Other choirs are ambitious to venture into African idioms and Gjioljy slicing and Hungarian nose flute music, but these old men gather in their own old blue blazers and sing “Juanita” and, doggone it, I really, really love “Juanita,” and it’s about time I admitted this.

The old men’s choirs were established by immigrants who had left their homeland, their families, their language, and come to live on a strange flat place called Minnesota, and they felt a great loneliness that could only be assuaged by standing shoulder to shoulder with other baritones and singing “Juanita.” We are what we are.

And that’s the Republican Party. Once a bulwark of All We Hold Dear, it’s now a statistical subgroup. Somewhere in an Elks club, men gather at a banquet at which the speaker rips into those who would tear down the greatest health-care system in the world and introduce socialism to the land of the free. And then they all sing “This Is My Country” just like in my childhood days. I might go, if I have that night free.

(Garrison Keillor is the author of the Lake Wobegon novel, "Liberty: Vikings." © 2009 by Garrison Keillor. All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Media Services, INC.)