

\*Eric Larsen

## What Can I Do?

Read the newspaper on any day and the world seems to be on the edge of doom. War, violence, poverty and strife dominate the headlines. Those responsible for these events are usually remote, sometimes faceless, always untouchable. We look to our leaders for solutions and are often disappointed. It's easy to feel small and powerless. The forces of darkness appear to be taking over. What will happen next? What can I do?

History offers many examples of great men and women who challenged the dark forces in their lives: Mahatma Gandhi (Gandhi, 2010), Mother Teresa (The Nobel Prize in Peace, 1979), Aung San Suu Kyi (The Nobel Prize in Peace, 1991), Nelson Mandela (The Nobel Prize in Peace, 1989), Dalai Lama (The Nobel Prize in Peace, 1993), Thich Nhat Hanh (Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, 1964), to name a few. Their examples comprise a deep well of inspiration for us all. Not everyone can achieve that level of greatness, perhaps, but their achievements show us what is possible.

The world is also full of lesser-known heroes; people who make a difference but on a smaller scale. Few would recognize the name Phan Thi Kim Phuc, for instance, but many would recognize her picture. Nick Ut received the Pulitzer Prize for his 1972 photo of Kim,

then a young Vietnamese girl running from her village, naked, her clothes burned away in a napalm attack (Kim, 2005). Her image became a symbol of the horrors of war but she remains anonymous to most of us. Kim's life work is anything but small. As a result of her own experiences, she established the KIM Foundation International, which helps children traumatized by war to heal and provides medical and social services to support their recovery (Liskey, n. d.).

Greg Mortenson is hardly a household name but he founded the Central Asia Institute which has successfully established 130 schools in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. His book "Three Cups of Tea" describes his rescue by villagers in remote Pakistan when he became lost after a failed attempt to climb the formidable K2 mountain. Greg's international foundation started as a simple effort to repay his rescuers by helping them establish a small school for their children (Mortenson & Oliver, 2009). Today, his schools have educated over 51,000 students who would have received little, if any, formal education without his organization's help (*Peace and Hope Begin With Education: One Child At A Time.*).

Although he has twice been nominated for the Nobel Prize, few readers

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outside of Thailand would know the name Sompop Jantraka (Horn, 2006). Even most Thai's are unaware that since 1988 Sompop has saved thousands of young Thai girls and boys from the sex trade by providing them a home and ensuring they get an education. Despite constant threats from pimps, brothel owners and politically-connected thugs, Sompop defies both his enemies and his own rough upbringing to help children avoid sexual exploitation (DEPDC, 2008).

These ordinary men and women turned their own unfortunate circumstances towards making a difference in the world. In doing so, they became extraordinary. Certainly service to others is noble, but most of us have responsibilities, obligations, the normal distractions of everyday life. We want to do something but we can't save the world right now. While inspirational, these examples still leave the question open; what can I do?

We affect those around us. Like it or not, we have that power. Each one of us must choose whether to use that power for better or worse. You don't have to be Gandhi, or Sompop - you just have to do the right thing. Be kind to a stranger, be patient with your children, be loving to your spouse. The effects of love and kindness can ripple far beyond you.

Even mortal enemies can be influenced. In my own experience as the officer in charge of a detention compound for insurgents in Iraq, I have seen this work. The detainees in my compound were some of the

most violent in Iraq. Most were responsible for multiple deaths of both civilians and military personnel and most would not hesitate to kill me and my men if they had the chance. Obviously, I had to maintain discipline but I was also fair with each of them. It was not my place to judge.

I remember one detainee in particular who was being transferred to another facility for possible release. He told my guards that he had changed his mind about Americans and that he would never forget the kindness he was shown in Taji – this from a man who had been interred for over three years! How far will that fair treatment reach? How many people - Iraqis, Americans, women, children - won't be hurt or killed because this man chooses not to fight anymore? How was the world changed because his American jailers treated him with basic human dignity in the worst of circumstances?

The smallest act can have big consequences. The coin you give a beggar may mean that he eats that day. The harsh words you shout may drive someone to a desperate act. Your simple kindness may be the thing that changes someone's life. The point is that we can make a difference in the world - one person, one encounter, one decent act at a time.

There is a story of a man picking up starfish that have washed ashore and throwing them back into the sea. An onlooker stops him and asks why he bothers, the beach is covered with starfish, he cannot possibly rescue all of

them. How can a few make any difference? What does it matter? The man picks up a starfish and holds it up to the other man. "It matters to this one!" he says, and tosses it into the sea (Eiseley, L. (1977).

How can I change the world, you ask? What can I do? Start by picking up just one starfish.

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