

One Small Difference

Step into Action for a Better World

KERRY NELSON



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“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.”

–Clarissa Pinkola-Estes



“I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”

–Ta-Nehisi Coates



“The prospect really does frighten me that they may finally become so engrossed in a cowardly love of immediate pleasures that their interest in their own future and in that of their descendants may vanish, and that they will prefer to tamely follow the course of their destiny rather than make a sudden energetic effort necessary to set things right.”

–Alexis de Tocqueville



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Introduction

When I was a kid my mom gave me a book called *My Book About Me*. In it were spaces for me to write about being Kerry—my favorite colors, friends and family, likes and dislikes, places I’d been, etc. I liked being asked questions about myself; even though it was just a book, I had the comforting feeling that someone was listening to me.

One Small Difference is kind of like *My Book About Me*, only it’s focused on your life as one who cares about making a difference in your community. You’ll be filling in questions like: Who inspires you? What issues most concern you? As you fill in the blanks, this book will mirror back your unique interests, aspirations, obstacles, supports, and possibilities for engaging in meaningful action.

In large part this book grows out of a “Creative Activism” workshop I created with my friend Joslyn Grieve over a decade ago in Oakland, California. People came to our workshops because they wanted to make a difference. Some wanted to volunteer—with the homeless, with adult learners. Others explored questions: How can I make my business more socially responsible? How can I find the right political group to join up with? Many found answers. Finding the right organization to work with was often the key.

“One small difference” really is all it takes. More than once in conversation with a friend we’d say something like, “Maybe we should start a group.” From these initial conversations flowed peace groups, a Green group, a women’s support group, a technical solidarity group. Anywhere from three to fifteen people would meet, make leaflets, put on events, plug in computers, stage vigils, go to protests, and share dreams.

Sometimes it takes courage, too—the courage required to face down the inner demons that keep trying to scare us away from taking risks and engaging the issues we care so deeply about.



As you begin, I want to offer three pieces of advice that I think will help you to start and stay engaged, and ultimately make a difference:

- Do something, no matter how small, no matter how brief.
- Connect with at least one other person who wants to engage on the same issue.
- Understand that you are human and that your energy, interest, and abilities to engage will wax and wane over time. Don't try to be the superhuman ideal engager; engage exactly as you are.



EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT

WEEK 1 START

WEEK 2 ENVISION

WEEK 3 EXPLORE

WEEK 4 UNBLOCK



Marcus: *We were all waiting. In the eighties there was this build up: ‘Free Mandela!’ This whole campaign really got going. And we had these massive political marches. So there was this whole expectation that something’s going to change within the next few years. Everybody was really tense about it: something will break within the next five years or so. This will not continue for very long.*

Dr. Alan Boesak was a great orator. He carried the struggle in the eighties. The government really suppressed us. They really hammered us. But Alan kept it alive. At university he would make speeches. He was banned—and made speeches. He would always say, “Things are going to change. We are winning this. We are winning this.” And that gave us a lot of hope.

Interview with “Marcus” in Cape Town, South Africa in 1997 on “The New South Africa.”



WEEK TWO: ENVISION

Explore what moves you



There's a Need

“People have opened their hearts,” said Sean Sweeney, who in the days following Hurricane Sandy set up a simple Facebook page to connect storm victims with people who wanted to help. The responses were immediate. A paraplegic man needed a generator, and one was donated within a day. A mother sought clothes and shoes for her kids, and they were given. “It turns out, people really, really want to do something,” said Lynn Pentecost, whose agency was given \$15,000 in donations for low income families. She said, “They just want to know how to do it.”

The desire to show up and contribute to our communities is a reflection of two needs. On the one hand, there's a situation that calls out for our attention: a person needs assistance, a community is in trouble, there's an injustice, a situation of violence, a planet that's heating up. On the other hand, there's you and your need to respond. You want to share what you can—your energy, money, attention. You have the capacity to help. To feel held back from helping can even be painful.



When we participate we satisfy a longing to do what's necessary. We feel fulfilled when we hold a bedridden friend's hand in the hospital, or when we experience the joy of taking part in a rally. It feels right.

This week notice what inspires and motivates you to contribute. Notice how good it feels to think big and dream; how inspiring it can be to join with others; how authentic it feels to “do the right thing,” and how grounding it can be to acknowledge your bit part in the big play of our world drama. “All the world's a stage” wrote Shakespeare, and whether you want to be or not, you're in the play.

You Are Moved

Helping those in need is one of the many reasons we initially engage. And maybe this is what's driving you. Or, maybe you're engaging because ...

You just have to:

“I can't in good conscience allow the U.S. government to destroy privacy, Internet freedom, and basic liberties for people around the world with this massive surveillance machine they're secretly building.”

—Edward Snowden

“I was catapulted into the peace movement with the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima.”

—Ethel Bartol Taylor

“When I found out that 97 percent of the original redwoods had already been cut down, and that the little left was still being destroyed ... I knew I had to do something to try to stop it.”

—Julia Butterfly Hill



Someone has inspired you:

“Bill Krause would call and say, ‘This is not right; look what they’re doing,’ and by the time I got off the phone it was like, yes what can I do? And I’d drop everything!”

–Gwenn Craig

“[Jackie Robinson] convinced me early on, though he never knew it, that we mustn’t aim to do spectacular things – but maybe we will do spectacular things. Instead Jackie Robinson left the impression that we should do what we can, because in the end, by standing up to the bully, you win a little victory for righteousness and you give just one other person the example to stand up for truth.”

– Desmond Tutu

You need to live or act in a way that more deeply aligns with your values:

“One day I went to a restaurant in Stellenbosch [South Africa]. And a black guy walked in, who said ‘I’m here to buy takeaway.’ And I had become political enough to know that he wasn’t allowed to eat there—to notice. So I didn’t finish my meal. I just went and paid, and by that evening I resolved never to go to an apartheid place again.”

–Kallie Hanekom

“I became increasingly uncomfortable about having so much while my brothers and sisters were starving. Finally I had to find another way.”

–Peace Pilgrim

You want to make a living doing something that has meaning for you:

“I know it’s a cliché, but I really wanted to teach to make a really significant difference and I just love watching the change in the pupils over the year, you watch them grow in confidence and self-belief and all I want is to give them that because it is the biggest catalyst for getting them to learn and grow. I want to bring out the best in them.”

–Adam Lopez

“When I got out of college in 1970, I went to work for the Housing Authority in Pittsburgh, a kind of social service job, right? I didn’t want to go to graduate school. I wanted to be an activist. I wanted to bring about change.”

–Roberta Lynch



You are driven to protect or promote your rights or the rights of others:

“Last month, I participated in a vigil in Madera for the happenings in Oaxaca, Mexico. Oaxaqueños like myself gathered at the Courthouse park as a way of coping with our frustration and pain for what is happening to our people back in our home state. At the vigil we made posters and voiced chants, we also had an open mic for people to speak their minds. I wrote a letter... a call to action for people to stop trying to drive out hate with hate and to come together.”

– Brenda Ordaz Garcia

“Residents in one third of California’s reservations lacked clean drinking water, and Native Americans here had an average life expectancy of only forty-two years. ... The story was the sort I gravitated toward because it exemplified my determination to give a voice to the voiceless.”

–Belva Davis

High school student Malik Curtis attended a Black Lives Matter protest in Minneapolis in 2015. Why? “It’s just simple,” he said, “Us being oppressed for so many years, and [in] solidarity with Baltimore...I’m with my people, that’s pretty much it... I’m just really tired of it. This is the society we live in and hopefully, we can overcome it.”

You simply have a great idea that you believe can benefit people:

“About six months after moving to my new home, a huge parcel of land went up for sale,” said Buddhist teacher Tempel Smith. He immediately saw a retreat center there—in a location very accessible to people in the East Bay. The land was beautiful and the price seemed within reach if he could find others who wanted to participate.

“I got very inspired. It seemed like if the retreat center were there it would be used.”

In addition to our more altruistic motives, we may want to get involved to make our own lives better. Maybe you just want to connect with others who care about the same causes. Or maybe you want to make new friends or try something new.

“Something taps into my emotions—this is wrong, this is an injustice, somebody’s been hurt here,” said Gwenn Craig, a long time gay rights activist. “You know if it moves me to tears it motivates me to action.”



We act because we need to act, and because we are needed. As the poet Rilke says, “Everything here apparently needs us.”

EXERCISE: Complete this sentence and take a few minutes to freewrite about this:

“I need to engage at this time because...”

You Are Inspired

“Every time there’s a publicized kidney donation, hospitals field dozens of calls from people who say they’re willing to do the same.”

—Mark Barasch

People inspire us. We witness a generous, creative, courageous, or selfless act, and we want to do that too. Or someone gives a great speech. We admire them. We want join their cause.

Inspiration can catch fire; a simple, selfless gesture can lead to a proliferation of positive actions by others.

Edward Snowden inspired journalist Glenn Greenwald to risk everything to get out the story of the National Security Agency spying on private citizens. At the Socialism Conference in June 2013, Greenwald expressed awe at Snowden’s courage. “Snowden was a high school dropout. He has zero prestige, and yet by himself has literally changed the world. ... The choice that he made was so incredibly powerful. I was tremendously inspired myself. I set out—with *The Guardian*—to shake up the foundations of the corrupted and rotted roots of American media and culture.”

Groups inspire us. When he was a teenager, Isao Fujimoto entered a lifelong relationship with the nonprofit American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Isao grew up on an Indian reservation in Yakima, Washington, and later in an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II. It was there he first encountered



AFSC. “When I was in the Heart Mountain Concentration camp in 1942, a young person came to our barracks and said, ‘There’s a present for you! There are presents for everybody in this camp!’ We were completely astounded, you know, because we were in prison. ... AFSC was the only group I know about that went to the camps to help out in all kinds of ways. And one of the most amazing things they did was help the college-aged students get out of the camps and find them a place to continue their education.”

Isao said, “One of the first things I did after being discharged from the army is I went to the AFSC office in Japantown in San Francisco, and I said, ‘I really appreciate what you’ve done during the wartime, and I’m willing to put in my time for you.’ That was in 1958. Ever since that time I’ve been involved with them.”

Isao went on to become a deeply committed, lifelong community activist and academic in Davis, California. Among his many projects, Isao helped start and chaired the Asian American Studies Department at UC Davis. He took students from Davis on inner-city field trips in San Francisco each year, to expose them to the deep service work being done by local churches and service agencies with the homeless. He opened his own home (his enclosed porch, to be precise) to house several small environmental nonprofits, essentially helping birth environmental programs such as the Davis Farmers Market. Colleague Mark Miller said of Isao, “He doesn’t just develop people; he’s interested in doing what he can to help them grow. He tries to provide conditions in which they will thrive.”

EXERCISE: Who inspires you? Describe a person or group that inspires you. What do they do that you admire? What about them is special or distinct? How would you characterize them?



You Want to Join a Movement

“There comes a time when the operation of the machine becomes too odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part, you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.”

—Mario Savio

Movements inspire us. Movements are about change. They try to uproot and shift deeply ingrained patterns of injustice, oppression, and harm. They are the opposite of stasis, apathy, and cynicism. At the center of every movement are people—ultimately lots of people—who give all they can, informing others, lobbying, campaigning, organizing. Hope, patience, certainty, dedication, and determination fuel them. It takes a lot of people saying “this is not right” or “this way would be better” to give birth to a movement and keep it going.

Twenty-first-century movements include Black Lives Matter, OCCUPY, Arab Spring, living wage, immigrant rights, and climate action, to name a few. Twentieth-century social movements are largely responsible for voting rights for women, African Americans, and native Americans; for ending the Vietnam War, and checks on nuclear proliferation.

When South End Press asked Michael Albert, editor of the progressive *Z Magazine*, “What achievements of the Left have given you the most hope for the future?” he answered, “Ending feudalism, ending slavery, enacting labor laws, winning universal suffrage, ending Jim Crow laws, overcoming much of the mindset and practice of patriarchy as it was entrenched throughout the ‘50s and ‘60s, bringing gay rights and liberation into the light of social policy and practice, and putting ecology on the political map. The Left has had a long lineage.”

We join movements because they really are “by the people” and “for the people” and we want to contribute and take part. Movements can have



profound impacts on our lives. If you're a U.S. citizen, consider how your own life would be different were it not for movements like civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights.

In September 2014, I rode with Bing Gong on the "People's Climate Train" from California to join the People's Climate March in New York City. About 150 activists held a four-day-long, continual conversation on the train, sharing information, strategies, and ideas on how to address the climate crisis. Bing produces and co-hosts the show Post-Carbon Radio, and works for the International Forum on Globalization. As we watched the Colorado River winding alongside the train he said, "It's pretty exciting being with other allies and passionate people who are working hard to fight the destruction of the tar sands, even laying down their bodies to stop the machinery. It gets pretty discouraging sometimes fighting the forces, but that's why I go to this protest in solidarity with friends and people who feel the way I do. We're here to stop the destructive forces that are causing ecological collapse."

When we reached New York and joined the People's Climate March a few days later, the 100,000 who were expected had blossomed into 400,000. Manhattan was a sea of diverse, determined, committed people of all ages, from all parts of the country and the world, saying that the planet was worth saving and the political and corporate apathy in the face of the crisis had to end.

EXERCISE: Appreciate movements. Which social movements are you most grateful for and why? Are there any you feel passionate about? How have any of these movements especially impacted your own life or the lives of people in your community? Have you been part of movements? Have you ever thought of joining a movement?



Animal Rights	Anti-Apartheid
Arab Spring	Anti-Nuclear
Civil Rights	Anti-Colonial
Black Consciousness	Anti-War
Disability Rights	Environment
Farm Worker	Free Speech
Indigenous Peoples	Labor
LGBTQ Rights	Occupy
Pro Choice	Women's Rights

You Need to Do the Right Thing

"I used to feel that I had to be good, truly good in my heart and spirit, in order to do good. But it's the other way around: if you do good, you become better."

—Zell Kravinsky

"Disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. ... If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society."—Pope Francis

Your engagement may be driven by the need to do the right thing. To walk your talk. To align your actions with your more deeply held beliefs. Values and beliefs inform our political affiliations, our purchases, and our behavior.

Opportunities to align our actions with our beliefs abound. Believe in human rights? Then don't buy products made in factories that employ children or pay starvation wages. Believe in kindness? Let others go first in line at the grocery store, or let that car signaling you on the freeway cut in front of you. Believe in changing the system? Then join an organization that is trying to make that happen.



As the Sri Lankan leader of the Sarvodaya movement, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, said, “If you think something is right, do it.” And Highlander Education Center’s founder Myles Horton put it, “Neutrality is just another word for accepting the status quo as universal law. You either choose to go along with the way things are, or you reject the status quo. Then you’re forced to think through what you believe.”

South African Pramod Daya, who as a young man loved science and physics and playing guitar, saw no other choice than to be an activist at university in the seventies. In a different situation Pramod might not have become politically active, but he said he felt a “moral necessity” to engage. “You were so privileged to be at university: you had access to resources and money and that kind of stuff that gave you an education. ... And things were so severe and dire in this country. So if you had any kind of emotional content at all in your makeup, you just kind of had to take on the responsibility of being involved in social activism to change the way the world was because things were extremely bad.”

You’ll take a closer look at beliefs in Week Seven. In the meantime, consider how central your values and beliefs are in your life. Do you hold them tightly or more lightly? Which do you most cherish?

EXERCISE: Take some time to reflect on which beliefs and values are driving your engagement. Consider what you believe in and *how important those beliefs are to you*. Especially consider which beliefs are the most important. Which beliefs especially guide you in your daily life and in interactions with others? Write or dialogue with others about this. Here are some possibilities:

Caring for others	Human rights
Justice	Freedom
Teaching and Sharing	Alleviating suffering
Practicing what you preach	Speaking truth to power
Integrity	Courage

