What is our role in creating change?

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Note: This is a new conversation starter for Turning To One Another, 2nd edition.

Proceed until apprehended!

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Several years ago, I read of a Buddhist teacher who encouraged people filled with despair over the state of the world. His advice was simple and wise: “It’s our turn to help the world.” I love this statement because it reminds us of other times and other people who stepped forward to help create the changes that were necessary. We do live in an era that is unique in at least two ways. For the first time, humans have altered the earth’s ecology and created consequences that are just beginning to materialize in frightening ways. And we are aware immediately of tragedies and horrors everywhere in the world, no matter where they occur.

But for all of human existence, no matter how terrible the time, there always have been people willing to step forward to do whatever they could to create positive change. Some succeeded, some did not. As we struggle with our own time, it’s good to remember that we are standing on very strong shoulders that stretch far back in history.

In working with many people in very different cultures, I’ve learned to define leadership differently than most. A leader is anyone willing to help, anyone who
sees something that needs to change and takes the first steps to influence that situation. It might be a parent who intervenes in her child’s school; or a rural village that works to get clean water; or a worker who refuses to allow mistreatment of others in his workplace; or a citizen who rallies her neighbors to stop local polluters. Everywhere in the world, no matter the economic or social circumstances, people step forward to try and make a small difference.

Because a leader is anyone willing to help, we can celebrate the fact that the world is abundantly rich in leaders. Some people ask, “Where have all the leaders gone?” But if we worry that there’s a shortage of leaders, we’re just looking in the wrong place, usually at the top of some hierarchy. Instead, we need to look around us, to look locally. And we need to look at ourselves. When have we moved into action for an issue or concern that we cared about? When have we stepped forward to help and thereby become a leader?

The process that creates change in the world is quite straightforward. We notice something that needs to be changed. We keep noticing it. The problem keeps getting our attention, even though most people don’t notice that there’s even a problem. We start to act, we try something. If that doesn’t work, we try a different approach. We learn as we go. We become very engaged with the issue, spending more and more time on it. We become exhausted by our efforts, but still we keep going. The issue keeps calling to us. Any time we succeed, no matter how small the success, we gain new energy and resolve. We become smarter as we learn more about the issue and understand it better. We become more skillful at tactics and strategies. As we persevere, and if we are successful, more people join us. Sometimes we remain as just a small group, sometimes we give birth to a movement that involves tens of thousands, perhaps millions, of people.