

Doing More by Doing Less

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Over the last few days, I've really been thinking a lot about what motivates people. We had our staff retreat just this past week, using the Enneagram to look at the diversity of our team and thinking about how we work together. That process gave each of us an opportunity to think about the forces that have shaped us, and a bit of insight into why our colleagues act as they do. Then yesterday, we saw millions of women and men and children around the world gather together and March in protest, defiance, and celebration.

Witnessing, and reflecting, I wonder, what draws people out?

Interestingly, one of the places I have found a lot of illumination on motivation actually comes from a story that was told to us at the USC Canada offices earlier this week: A story narrated by Sheryl-Elaine Brazeau, who at one time worked as the personal secretary for Lotta Hitschmanova, the founder of USC Canada. The story Sheryl-Elaine told was that of young Lotta's flight across Europe ahead of the advancing Nazis.

It is a fascinating story, for which I have neither the time nor recall to share with you this morning. Thankfully, Sheryl-Elaine permitted us to record the story and we hope to have it published on the USC Canada website soon. I would encourage you to seek it out.

Two key moments stood out from Lotta's story: in 1939, as Lotta fled Brussels, she saw children left orphaned and homeless by Nazi bombing, and then, in early 1940 she fainted from hunger and exhaustion and woke in an emergency clinic run by the American Unitarian Service Committee.

These two experiences provided Lotta's initial motivation to seek out this very congregation when she arrived in Canada, and, with the support of many of your members, found the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada to provide relief to the war orphans of Europe. It was motivation to make the world a better place.

I'm going to assume that many of us, if not all of us in this room share that motivation, even if our own experiences weren't quite so extreme. I am always struck by the continued alignment between the values and mission of USC Canada, and the tenets of Unitarian Universalism. Tenets 1, 2, and 7, in particular are, I believe, the motivating principles for USC Canada. We share belief in:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I believe these principles are at the core of that very basic human motivation to create a better world. This is the motivation that inspired millions of people, no doubt including many of you, to march yesterday. It was inspiring to see.

I've been marching all my life. As a child I walked alongside my parents and my church community in protests over cruise missile testing, privatization of healthcare, and for better support for children with disabilities. More recently, I have walked in marches — even alongside members of this community — against climate change, military intervention, and concentration of wealth, and in support of Truth and Reconciliation, GLBTQ and women's rights, and acceptance of refugees.

As I reflect back on it, I realise that when you start wanting a better world, there is in fact, a world of work to do!

This learning speaks to the experience of USC Canada, too. If you'll recall, our organization was founded to provide relief to orphans in Europe. Of course, once you set out to make the world a better place, new needs present themselves. Before too long our work branched out. Over 60 years we worked in countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and eventually Central America, offering humanitarian and food assistance, material goods, sanitation, health services, education, and agricultural support. The needs were endless, and USC Canada responded wherever, however, and whenever we could find the resources.

In that time many lives were positively affected by our work. Good things happened, and the world was made better.

But a funny thing also happened. Somewhere along the way, or maybe gradually over a long period of time, we lost some of our focus. We may even have lost some of our passion.

The thing about trying to do everything is that you can never, in fact, do enough, or be enough. It becomes hard to articulate why you do any one thing, when it comes at the expense of other necessary things. Acting for change no longer comes from your motivation, but from obligation. Obligation takes the fun and passion out of everything.

I wasn't around at the time, but in 2007 USC Canada did a very brave thing. With the participation of staff, board, and representatives of our international programs all together, the organization decided to stop trying to be everything. There were lots of reasons for this decision, but ultimately it came down to this:

Where do our skills, competencies and resources best align with the needs we perceive in the world? Or maybe, rather, what change can we make in the world that will have the most impact?

For USC Canada the choice was clear. I could talk about the rationale all day, but suffice it to say that for USC Canada our most impactful work — on its own merit and for the broader impact on global good — is our efforts to maintain and increase agricultural biodiversity. We made a decision to wind down everything except our Seeds of Survival program. USC Canada made a conscious decision to accept being small.

Small, and highly focused.

In the last twelve years USC Canada has invested over thirty five million dollars into seed preservation and breeding. We are a leading global player in supporting farmer varieties and landrace seeds as a necessary alternative to corporate seed Giants. Our participation in global decision making bodies like the committee for world food security and the convention on biological diversity is respected by governments and civil society around the globe. The tools we have developed in our work are being shared and adopted beyond the programs we directly fund.

Impact in the field is equally enhanced. In the last few years USC Canada partners have bred and registered new varieties of drought tolerant seeds; tested new strains and even crops in different ecological zones, and increased the dietary diversity of families and communities. Identifying best practices for maintaining agricultural diversity has led to widespread adoption of agro-ecological methods, with the added benefits of reduced water consumption, better soil fertility, and reduced dependence on external and synthetic inputs.

Focusing our work has allowed us to share learnings on a global level. Farmer exchanges between countries, including Canada, increase enthusiasm and adoption of best practices for seed production and breeding. Achievements in one region are celebrated and replicated in other regions.

The irony of that 2007 decision is that in choosing to do less, we have ended up doing more. Our impact is broader and deeper than when we were larger and trying to do everything.

Doing less always remains a challenge. Our motivations — remember those? Our motivations remain to make the world better. I've always spoken of it as working for Global Justice, with a capital G and a capital J. Everywhere we turn there is injustice and inequity. The desire to jump in and volunteer “We can do that” is always present. Limiting ourselves to our niche seems to go against that activist passion. How can we fix the world if all we are doing is seeds?

The challenging truth is that we can't. USC Canada can't fix the world. We can't fix it by doing seed work, and we certainly can't fix it by trying to do everything.

But alongside that, the reassuring truth is that we don't need to.

You see, we aren't alone in being motivated to make the world better. You are all here, with that same motivation. Five million people around the world marched yesterday with that same motivation. Billions more saw them and were inspired and reassured in their own motivation.

We don't need to fix the world alone. We're in this together. None of us can or should do everything, but we can and should all do something. Whatever that something is, we should do it well.

We at USC Canada know what we do, and, with all modesty, we do it well. Many of you support USC Canada financially. We are grateful for that support, and of course always appreciate new donors and increased support. Still, we know that what we do is only a small part of all that needs to be done, and is not everyone's interest or passion. That's okay.

We remember that what motivated Lotta; what motivated me; what motivated all of the Board and staff of USC Canada is to create a better world. That's an enormous task. We've chosen to do a small part, knowing that it isn't sufficient. We take on our limited part in the absolute faith and trust that our allies in this world — allies like each and every one of you — will also step up to do your own part.

USC Canada has always worked through networks of partnership. In our highly regulated world of overseas charitable activity, partnership often has a specific meaning, involving structured relationships and formal contacts. We choose to see our partnerships as far broader. We are in partnership with all of those individuals, organizations and communities that share that big goal of Global Justice. We are in partnership with you. We are in partnership with our sister development agencies and with civil society coalitions. We are in partnership with all of those who were themselves inspired and motivated in our by the marchers yesterday.

When we add all of those billions of motivated people together, changing the world is a given. But first, we need embrace our connectedness; our community, and let go of the responsibility to do it all alone. Accept that you should do less. It will be enough. In fact, it will be more than enough.

As more than one farmer has reminded me, a seed well planted returns a hundred fold. Imagine a billion seeds well planted.