CAN'T NOT DO

The Compelling Social Drive That CHANGES OUR WORLD

Paul Shoemaker

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Lori, Ben, Nick, and Sam, there is no way I am the person I am without each of you and all of you.
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PROLOGUE: THE POWER OF CAN’T NOT DO

I remember everything and nothing about August 9, 2013. I was sitting in a Seattle coffee shop when an e-mail flashed into my inbox. It was from a Wall Street Journal reporter I’d never heard of, asking if I knew anything about “the person whose plane had just crashed in East Haven, Connecticut.” I had no idea what the reporter was talking about and assumed he had the wrong guy. I reread it just to be sure and hit delete.

Moments later, my phone rang. Through a flood of tears, my friend Susan asked me not talk to any media or answer their calls. Then she told me why. After she hung up, the next flood of tears was down my face. I prayed, desperate for some miracle, any miracle, but I knew the truth. I actually knew a lot about the person whose plane had crashed. Susan had just lost her remarkable husband and her beautiful son. Another family, on the ground, had lost their two wonderful young girls with their whole lives ahead of them. And we all lost a damn good man.

That damn good man was Bill Henningsgaard. He had spent the first 20 years of his career building sales and international channels at Microsoft; he was universally respected. But he’d be the first to tell you that job was really just preparation for becoming a community leader, a catalyst, and an agent for positive social change in the fullest sense. He was the real deal. I had last spoken to Bill, my good friend and role model, just a few days before he and his 18-year-old son, Max, took off to visit colleges. He was one of the first people I interviewed for this book when I was trying to digest and distill, at a pretty casual pace at first, what I had been learning through the past 17 years of my work.
I had been planning to take the lessons of people like Bill, inspiring nonprofit leaders, social innovators, philanthropists, and committed citizens, and share those stories in a way in which millions more could see themselves and find that deeper commitment to their community. It is no exaggeration to say that this tragedy steeled my resolve and commitment. I’d been mulling this over, thinking about writing a book, but my sense of urgency was given a jolt, albeit for the worst possible reason.

I was asked to be one of the eulogists at Bill’s service a week later. More than 1,000 people attended the service. I will never forget walking up to the lectern and turning around to see all of those faces and feeling all that shared pain. I took a few moments and just stood silent to look around the room and take it in. I got the courage to even breathe the first word because of what I felt emanating from the whole room: a shared, profound sense of sadness and loss we were all feeling together. And I felt one more thing . . .

. . . a deep desire to share just a little of what I had learned about Bill and the kind of human being he was. In those gut-wrenching days after 8/9/13, dozens of people sent me notes about Bill, sharing how they felt about him and their reflections on him. One word was used numerous times, not a word commonly used to describe a person, but Bill was an uncommon person. That word was beacon. One of its dictionary definitions is simply, “Someone that guides or gives hope to others” . . . yep, that was Bill. It hurts writing these words right now.

I asked Susan if it was okay to share Bill’s story like this. She told me, “Absolutely! Sharing Bill’s story, how he found his path and belief in the need for everyone to contribute, might help create the kind of world we hope to live in.” You’ll hear more about my friend, Bill, later, but his life, and even the loss of him, galvanized my personal mission in a way I never expected. Now, I can’t not be a messenger and share these stories and their collective wisdom. I can’t not share what I’ve seen, heard, and lived from walking alongside all the people you’ll read about here. I can’t not use what I’ve learned to guide
others, perhaps people like you, who feel the urge to do more for the world and to translate that impulse into action.

Can’t Not Do—The Social Drive That Changes the World

I can’t not do this.

It’s not that I can do this, it’s that I can’t not.

I don’t have time to not make an impact.

I could not imagine not.

I don’t remember the first time I heard someone use one of these grammatically incorrect phrases. But I hear these statements consistently, to this day, from educated and literate people. I know you have heard of “can-do” people, they are eager and willing, we admire them and hope our children become like them when they grow up. But the regular heroes you will meet in this book go way beyond can-do, they can’t not do.

These people make a decision at some point in their lives that there is something, some burning cause, in their world that they have to do something about. That they can’t not do something about, like kindergarten readiness, leadership development, homelessness, environmental challenges, board governance, youth violence, and so many others. Sometimes the cause is a social issue, but it might also be some expertise or personal passion you want to leverage for good in the world. There is a reason, a power, in why they all said something like can’t not do. These people have found a cause that grabbed them and won’t let go. They may face indecision and uncertainty many times along their journey, after all, they are regular people, not superheroes. But they dig deeper for answers, sometimes unconventional, and ultimately find the conviction and dedication to jump in for the long run.
Some of these people have made a career change to commit their lives to their cause, while others have decided they could find and dedicate a few extra hours a week within their busy schedules. Some people bring money to the equation. Some bring street smarts and know-how. Some bring time and motivation. Some bring innovation. Some are willing to connect with others, to go to hard places to find root causes and be humbled in the process. There are many different routes and ways people create change once they have found their can’t not do (Appendix 3 might help you).

Can’t not do is a catchphrase I’m using to capture the essence, the heart, of these people and their choices in a unique and, I hope, memorable way. It’s the framing for the stories I want to share with you. I am beyond passionate, almost desperate, to tell these peoples’ stories and what I’ve learned from more than a decade and a half of day-in, day-out interaction.

I started sharing parts of this book with a few friends. After I sent a draft to my friend, Jim Pitofksy, he called his wife, Becky. She said something he hadn’t heard her say before, but he liked it. Way back before they got engaged, her mom apparently told Becky, “Don’t marry the guy you think you can live with. Marry the guy you think you can’t live without.”

As I started sending out drafts to friends to get their feedback, I kept getting more comments like that, using that double negative syntax in one form or another. Some of them told me that phrasing an idea or question in that way makes it stickier, more memorable, visceral, harder to dismiss.

I’ve been so privileged to work at the intersection between philanthropically minded people and nonprofit change agents—a truly unique vantage point, down the street and around the world. My experiences are real-time, nothing theoretical or from a research lab. I’ve worked very hard over the past year to distill all those years and people and experiences, successes and failures into this one book to share with each of you who is ready to dig in deeper and more
intentionally to help create positive change in your community and world.

As I’ve talked and worked with more and more of these regular heroes, I have realized that they share some fundamental beliefs about the world, possess some common “readinesses” and, over time, have learned some of the same lessons. This book developed out of these commonalities and my experiences, and I believe it can help you translate your ideas and can’t-not-do impulses into action that betters our world.

This is not, repeat not, a self-help book; it’s a help-the-world book. If this helps you feel better, and it probably should, that’s a nice-to-have side benefit. For me, if this book ends up helping you live a happier, healthier life, that’s good, but that’s ultimately a means to an end. At the end of the day, I don’t care as much about helping you feel better for yourself as I do empowering you to do better for the world around you.

This is a how-to book for people who want to help change the world, a street-readiness dialogue between you and me and you and your inner aspirations. Just in case you think I am some turtleneck-wearing, bongo-drum-beating, bleeding heart, woo-woo guru, I’m not. This is on the ground, in the trenches, real world. It’s messy, human work, full of as many failures as successes. These are authentic stories, vital questions, and unconventional answers that can guide and inspire each of us to realize our fullest potential to create positive social change.

**Trees and Labs**

On Earth Day 1970, Andy Lipkis went from being your typical 15-year-old Los Angeles teen to a tree-loving activist. By the time he turned 18, he had founded TreePeople (www.treepeople.org) and was already organizing tree-planting parties that put thousands of seedlings in the ground around Los Angeles. Eleven years later, for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, he spearheaded the planting of one
a symbolic and tangible way of absorbing pollution in the city. Not one thousand, one *million* trees. He started with little more than his passion, but 40 years later, he still heads up the organization, now an environmental leader. I first met Andy in 1988. There was something about how deeply committed he was to this cause. I had never met anyone quite like him. He was unique in his energy, his single-focused, sustained drive. He was a regular guy . . . but then again, he wasn’t.

Seventeen years later, I met Suzi Levine. In some ways, Suzi is a regular gal . . . but then again, she isn’t. She can be a hurricane of energy and began focusing that energy with two brain researchers who were tucked away in a building on the corner of the University of Washington campus. She thought the findings of these researchers could change thousands, maybe millions, of young lives and was not willing to let that opportunity languish without doing what she could to contribute.

Patricia Kuhl and Andy Meltzoff at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences (I-LABS), the world’s first brain-imaging facility focused on children, were learning that the amount of brain development in the first five years of life is astounding. About 85 percent of brain development happens between birth and five years of age, and that percent often shapes a child’s success in life. They also knew that, in the United States, one-third of children show up for their first day of kindergarten two years behind, developmentally. That almost-incomprehensible gap is what the researchers were working to close, but it wasn’t going to get done in academic journals; they had to get their findings and expertise out to the public and into the hands of parents and schools. That’s what Suzi began helping to do in a powerful way (we’ll revisit Suzi in more detail in Chapter 6). Like Andy, there was something compelling about how deeply committed Suzi was to this cause.

Andy and Suzi are not unique in our world. There are others out there, regular heroes making a significant impact on some of our most
intractable social issues. And you probably have never heard of them. Most people making significant change in our world are not famous like Bono or Angelina Jolie or Bill and Melinda Gates. Andy and Suzi are regular people like you and me, like millions of people who want to help change our world. They are regular heroes and they have a overwhelming passion for impacting their community for the better.

There are some big problems in our world. To most of us, they seem so large and impassable that we find it hard to imagine a way forward. But, time and time again, we increasingly see regular people making a difference, sometimes the difference. It might look like they are tilting at windmills. The problems are complex, the politics are murky, and the players innumerable. Yet, there are people who take personal responsibility for tackling the issues. In Andy’s case, it would become his life’s work. For Suzi, it was what she could fit in alongside her professional career. In both cases, success came from committed action arising from a deep personal drive.

The World Does Not Lack Solutions

We know how to solve the majority of the world’s most difficult social problems. This is the surprising truth: we already have proven solutions to most of our social challenges. I not only believe this, I’ve watched it play out in schools, neighborhoods, and communities as the founding president of Social Venture Partners International, a global network of thousands of social innovators, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and business and community leaders that fund and support social change in nearly 40 cities in eight countries around the world (www.socialventurepartners.org). I am convinced that coming up with more solutions to our problems is not our world’s greatest challenge, although we do need innovation. Nor is it finding more money for social change, although that always helps.

What we need most is more human and social capital. Simply put, more people committed for the long-term to making a change.
We need more people in the game, committing to that one cause, that one challenge where they feel they can make a real dent. History has proved that if enough people hammer away long enough at a social problem, we start to change our world for the better. And the amount of positive change one human being can help create today has never been greater. Take Jeff Carr, for example, who helped prove a solution existed to a social problem many at the time thought hopeless.

Jeff Carr grew up in Seattle, but he took off for college to see what more was out there in the world. He chose a physical education major with dreams of becoming a professional soccer player. In his sophomore year of college in the mid-1980s, he took a trip to Portugal’s Azores Islands with an all-star team and saw first-hand what was out there in the world. He saw poverty like he’d never seen in his life, and it shook him to his core. When he got back to school, he changed his major to philosophy and religion.

After graduating, he spent the next 20 years involved in urban ministries and directing youth centers in Los Angeles. In 2006, when most forms of crime were falling in Los Angeles and violent crime was decreasing all over the United States, gang-related homicides, robberies, and assaults spiked about 15 percent higher in Los Angeles. It was a lightning bolt issue, a flash point for the city, and for Jeff. To stop the violence, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa wanted to appoint a gang czar to oversee the city’s gang reduction and youth development programs. The mayor didn’t have to look far. There was Jeff, with his extensive background working in some of Los Angeles’s toughest neighborhoods.

I met Jeff on a trip to L.A. in 2012. Andy Lipkis actually connected us. I had lived in Los Angeles in the late 1980s when one of the prime gang violence prevention strategies was Operation Hammer (Google it). When I read about Jeff’s work, I knew I had to meet him; I couldn’t not. Jeff and I talked about his work and its inception. In 2007, he and his gang violence prevention team had to start somewhere, so they picked the “obvious”—the middle of the night in the
most violent parks in the city, working with young people at risk of joining a gang or already involved in one.

Working with many others in the community, he helped develop a program called “Summer Night Lights,” which kept parks open through the night with organized activities. Jeff used his experience with other programs but felt there might be a better way to combine multiple tactics. In 2008, they started in eight parks. Jeff recruited at-risk youths who had already joined gangs to manage the parks and told them, “You are here because you were chosen.” He was giving these young people the opportunity to change their life narrative from one of villain to hero. Jeff firmly believed that if you changed gang members’ self-perception, you could eventually change their behavior and their lives.

Jeff explained what it felt like. “At first, it was pretty hard; many of the people who had been my friends and colleagues at other community-based organizations seemed to turn against me when I took the city money they had relied upon and created a new strategy and new focus. It meant that some folks couldn’t continue the work they were doing. While this was hard, I knew I had to stay the course and follow through with the change, or we would never get the results we needed. We had a window of opportunity and our job was to get as much done as quickly as we could so that we could keep that window propped open as long as possible and drive as much change through it as we could before it closed.” In this work, you face choices like which matters more, keeping friends or helping the kids in our communities that need us to stand up for them? If you decide to take it on, this work won’t be easy, but it can be life-changing; and that’s a trade-off worth making.

That first summer, the number of homicides in Los Angeles parks went from eight in 2007 to zero in 2008. Overall gang crime dropped 20 percent. The next summer, the program grew to 16 parks, then 24, then 32, with at-risk young people filling more key leadership roles. They were achieving what others felt was impossible.
In 2012, Los Angeles had fewer total homicides (299) citywide than it had gang homicides alone in 2002 (350) and in 1992 (430). Between 2003 and 2013, gang-related robberies in the city fell from 3,274 to 1,021; gang assaults from 3,063 to 1,611. And in 2014, the Los Angeles Police Department announced that gang crime had dropped by nearly half since 2008. Need more data to prove we do not lack solutions? Jeff Carr would never consider himself a superhero. Andy Lipks and Suzi Levine wouldn’t either. Like the regular heroes they are, they were just doing something they couldn’t do.

Seven Questions That Unleash Potential

Maybe you, or someone you know, are a little like Andy, Suzi, Jeff, or Bill. You have that internal feeling that you want to do more for your community, to find and give more to that cause that you can’t not do something about. As you read this book, meet the characters, and read the stories, I hope you will also engage in an internal dialogue with seven underlying questions. These seven simple questions get at the heart of why certain people reach their greatest potential for social change:

1. Are you a determined optimist?
2. Who are you at your core?
3. Are you willing to go to hard places?
4. Are you ready to be humble and humbled?
5. Can you actively listen?
6. Do you believe $1 + 1 = 3$?
7. What is your can’t not do?

Using this book, you can work through answering these questions one at a time, thinking through them in order or jump around. Maybe
a few of them speak to you more now than others, so start there. You definitely don’t need to answer them all at once. It’s not like the people you’ll read about in these pages ever sat down and took a seven-question quiz; I sort of reverse-engineered and simplified what I learned over 17 years. These questions are most surely the ones they commonly faced, wrestled with and are living out. Answering them will give you a road map to finding your can’t not do.

What matters, then, is that you really chew on at least one or two of these to get you started, allowing the question to stick in your mind and open new possibilities to how you see yourself and your choices in life. Open your mind to impulses that may be inside you, waiting to be released. In short, start to unlock your potential to transform your world and the way you serve others.

Why ask questions instead of give answers? The first boss I had out of college, when I was bright-eyed and full of energy and optimism, drove me crazy. When I went to him for answers, he’d ask questions. When I proposed an answer or solution to a particular problem, he’d have more questions. It drove me nuts, and I wondered what was wrong with this guy and how he’d ever gotten a job there in the first place.

Ten years later, he rose to be the CEO—for all the right reasons—of that Fortune 500 company, and I’ve long since learned the power of the right question. One great question is far more powerful than a dozen answers. A question asks people to think through the problem and own the answer for themselves, far more deeply and powerfully than just giving them the answer ever would. It took me a while, but I came to recognize that my boss’s frustrating questions were actually a great gift. Thanks, Brad.

I know that it takes more than just a question to make change happen. But I also know the people who dare to open their hearts to ask themselves and authentically answer these questions are the ones who will take big steps and truly create big changes in our future.