

How* to bring about a better world

by
Bärbel Teubert
bteubert@web.de
www.welt-in-frieden.de

* Some people asked for some suggestions on what one could do specifically as a reaction to my "Appeal for a Better world". It would contradict my basic philosophy to design a model that would apply to everybody (not to mention the fact that I would be totally overwhelmed). Everybody has to decide the path that he or she takes. For me, this is immutably modelled on the values of general human rights. The sky's the limit for creative thinking when we are talking about making our world more human, just and peaceful.

What can we ourselves do?

First of all, smile

The first and simplest thing you can do is give your neighbours a smile whenever you see them. You might add a greeting to that. Hopefully, it might cause a chain reaction and your neighbour - maybe after a brief period of disorientation - would start smiling at other people, too. After a while, you might even have a chat and that goes on and on until all of a sudden the entire world is smiling. Isn't that a pleasant vision? Well, there were also a few people who had a vision of reconciliation after the Second World War that initiated a longer-lasting process by creating a unified Europe.

It is also important to protect nature

Become aware of the fact that our natural environment forms the basis for life on this planet. Don't just talk about it, do something! For starters, do your best to preserve it along with the beauty of the world. Don't dump all of your rubbish on it and don't contaminate our environment with toxic substances that are hard to decompose such as waste products from the production of nuclear energy. You could also act sustainably - no matter whether we are talking about private industry or agriculture - and remember to apply these principles to your consumer behaviour. For instance, raspberries in winter unnecessarily boost the concentration of pollutants in the atmosphere just like the import of other similar foods. So think whether they are absolutely indispensable to your well-being or if another food would make you just as contented. And while you're at it, don't forget animals because they also have a right to uncontaminated food on the land and in the ocean.

Treat your fellow human beings with respect

Accept the fact that not everybody is like you - after all, that would be pretty boring. Instead, try to respect everyone even the way they differ from you. Try to understand what is different about them and be tolerant of it. You are not being threatened just by the fact that they look different, talk different, believe in something different or have a different agenda for their lives than you. Tolerance doesn't mean having to cast doubt on yourself, your own culture and your values. It's enough to just accept and respect other people the way they are, to see them as human beings and grant them the same needs that you have. Accept the diversity of humankind as a gift and use it as a means to expand your horizons. Culture is not only where you come from.

Respect general human rights

Try to recognise the fact that all people are bestowed with an inborn dignity and should have the same rights. That includes freedoms such as the right to practice your choice of religion and the right to free speech just as other basic rights such as the right to social welfare and the right to an education. Nobody is hurt when socially underprivileged persons in your society or elsewhere in the world have the same access to education as everybody else and they are so secure economically that they can live a life of dignity. On the contrary, social equity is a precious commodity for each and every one of us. Most problems come from the fact that others are not respected and even treated disrespectfully and sometimes they are not given their basic rights such as the right to self-determination. So, if we are serious about respecting general human rights and act accordingly, we have already laid the basis for freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Avoid sweeping statements

Sweeping judgements don't get us anywhere. They only harden the lines of assault which makes it hardly possible to communicate. Imagine how you would react if you were a member of a particular group being discriminated against based on sweeping prejudices just because one or two (or maybe even more) members misused the trust others placed in them, broke laws or acted in some other immoral fashion. Get rid of the word "those" from formulations such as "those politicians", "those welfare recipients", "those scientists", "those foreigners" and "those fat cats".

A society with a democratic political system is dependent upon people actively get involved as politicians, which means as representatives of various groups in society. That not only calls for a desire for power, but also a big chunk of idealism and commitment to their community. However, when we just accent the negative (which unfortunately does exist), the people who commit their energies to working for the common good will no longer put in the effort. After all, who likes being run down and attacked with sweeping prejudices? Even welfare recipients are not all lazy and not all representatives of big business are unscrupulous and people from a foreign country are not just here to take advantage of us or do bad things to us. There are lawbreakers in every community and there is no doubt that they should be punished. But they are just individuals. Take a closer look and differentiate in our own society and all over the world.

Watch out what you say

Make sure you think what you say and how you say it. Words can be so destructive but they can also be uplifting. Start in your own family. You can show mutual respect by taking the

words and deeds of other people seriously, showing empathy and trying to understand that other people actually want to say or get across to you. Forget about constantly interpreting, judging and condemning. After all, you can do someone an injustice just by being ignorant of the actual situation. Instead, enter into genuine communication and if you are in doubt, just ask your opposite what he or she actually meant with what they said or did. Train yourself just to perceive without automatically acting judgementally. It is not easy, but it is worthwhile. Finally, don't just always be against something, but for something when you talk about or do something. There is always a winner and loser in a struggle against something or someone and we can lose just as easily. However, if we advocate someone or something in good faith, there is the possibility of peace in us and in the final analysis among people in general.

Accept your own responsibility

We are all responsible for what our world looks like on a small and a large scale. Of course, one person cannot change the whole world by him- or herself. But, if each and every one of us works for a good cause, the resulting change will not only be great, but also tangible. We should accept our responsibility being open, honest and reliable. If we were not able to rely on one another anymore, we would really be lost. Therefore, let's make an active contribution – the best would be in the area you are most interested in and as much as you can do. That could be helping a lonely elderly (or younger) person, a single parent or contributing your work to groups that sponsor children from socially disadvantaged families or Amnesty International. You might support improved cooperation among various groups of persons, commit your energies to environmental groups, political parties, development policy or fair trade. There are so many possibilities.

Take advantage of your right to vote and don't just tell people "they're all the same". That's simply not the case. If you just withdraw and neglect your responsibility, someday you make sure that the people in the political arenas really are all the same. Why don't you go to your representative's office and let him know how you feel about certain issues? Lobbyists are much more active at that game – and we know what that spells out. Incidentally, there have been initiatives coming to the fore recently that are something like a citizen's lobby because they can support you in their campaigns depending upon your issue and attitudes.

Keep yourself apprised of the situation

You can only act responsibly if you are on top of the situation. Be very discriminating about the sources you use to keep yourself in the loop. Not everybody is reliable and a lot of people conceal their real interests behind a supposedly balanced flow of information. Keep yourself on top of the situation by reading reliable print media and listening to radio and watching TV. Remember that tabloid and popular radio shows tend to blow things out of proportion. That sparks our interest, but we are not really informed and it can be disastrous to take decisions based on popular distortions.

So, let's try to get balanced information, commit our energies where we are and as much as we can and give other people a smile. That alone would be a lot.