

I Want a World Where.....

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Have you ever heard the story of Mohini, the regal white tiger who lived at the National Zoo in Washington D.C.? For many years Mohini paced relentlessly back in forth in her 12 foot by 12 foot cage. Then, the zoo staff decided they wanted something better for Mohini and set about to create an outdoor park for her, composed of hills and trees and a pond. However, when Mohini was released into her new home, she retreated to a secluded corner of the compound where she spent the rest of her life, pacing back and forth until she had worn an area, 12 feet by 12 feet, bare of grass.

Tara Brach, who tells Mohini's story in her book, Radical Acceptance, remarks: "Perhaps the biggest tragedy in our lives is that freedom is possible, yet we can pass our years trapped in the same old patterns. . . Like Mohini, we grow incapable of accessing the freedom and peace that are our birthright."

For me this is a story for our times because, increasingly, we are being socialized to believe that we are powerless to affect change. No where is this more apparent than among our young who have been born into a world pocked with turmoil: weapons of mass destruction, political corruption, homelessness, AIDS, pollution, child slave labor, genocide, terrorism, climate change... the list goes on.

Remarkably, even though our young are aware of the 'mess' that they have inherited, they are not afraid to speak of their hopes for a more sane, just and peaceful world. When I ask students to talk about the world they wish for, I hear things like: "I want a world where there are no weapons, no wars, no hatred; I want a world where children are cherished and nurtured and where elders are honored and respected; I want a world where everybody is "family," where people share, rather than horde."

Given the opportunity to give voice to the world they yearn for, our young do not disappoint. What is disturbing, however, is their response when I ask: "Do you believe that your vision for a 'better world' is achievable?" Here, I find that many of our young admit to hopelessness. They seem to have lost their faith in humankind, lost their faith in the future.

When our young—the very ones we place our faith in to create a ‘better world’—believe that they are powerless to affect change, it does not bode well for our future.

Gandhi, among others, pointed out that our beliefs determine our destiny. He was right. We don’t need to be victimized by disabling beliefs; we can choose what to believe; we have choice.

There are two things all of us—both young and old—can do to free ourselves from the disabling belief that we are helpless to affect change. The first entails being honest with ourselves. When I hear someone complain that there is nothing they can do about the condition of the world I ask: “How does this belief of yours—that there is nothing you can do—serve you?” This question is usually greeted with consternation. But let’s be honest about it: We hold our beliefs for a reason.... Saying that nothing can be done about the state of the world gets us off the hook; it “serves us” by freeing us from responsibility to act. At the same time it renders us powerless to affect change.

The second thing we can do to free ourselves from our conditioned helplessness is to recognize that we are not alone in our vision for a better world. If you doubt me, try asking those you encounter—both friends and strangers—to complete the following sentence: *I want a world where.....*” and I bet that you will be moved and inspired by what you hear. Once we realize that we are not alone—that we all share a common yearning for a safe, sane, just and peaceful world—our hopelessness and apathy have the space to transform into resolve and action.

In sum, our times call for bold actions grounded in courage, creativity and compassion. This is not a time to play ‘small.’ As Marianne Williamson reminds us: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate; our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.” May we all allow our light to shine fiercely 2006.