

How Much Good Can One Person Really Do?

Transcript of Charles Eisenstein's Talk

<https://charleseisenstein.org/video/how-much-good-can-one-person-really-do/>

Say that you have learned ecological restoration techniques, and you found a piece of land that you love and it has a damaged stream that's been confined in concrete and you tear down the concrete, and you rediscover its old meanders, and you create water retention areas, and you're restoring this beautiful, beautiful creek, and you know that as the water slows down and is no longer channeled that it will carry less sediment into the salmon runs in the watershed below it and you feel really great about this, you're like, "Yeah, I'm in relationship to a being that I love: this land, this water."

But then, some doubt comes into your mind. You read the headlines about climate change or whatever else and you're like, *None of this matters, because in the face of this gigantic problem, what good is it to take care of just one little creek?* And maybe I should not spend so much time on that, and really write a blog or make a film or, you know, fundraise to lobby Congress to have legislation that will save all the creeks. Like, maybe I should do *that*.

So, hopefully you won't listen to that voice to the extent that you'll abandon your little creek. Because--isn't one of the reasons why the world is in the state that it is because everybody mortgages what is really pulling at their heart for the sake of something abstract, for the thing that they think that they have to do for the numbers to work out? To suppress the care, because the numbers, the metrics, the rational plan demands that you pay attention to this other thing.

So, okay, but isn't it true that taking care of one little creek isn't going to change the world? In the theory of change that we've inherited, yes, it's true. It's true that nothing you do matters. Because you're just one little person. And what you do, unless you have tons of money and a big platform or lots of force at your disposal, you can't do very much, can you? That view, it's based on a theory of change that is Newtonian. It says that something in the world changes when you push it, when you exert a force on it, and if you exert a little force, you make a tiny little change. If you exert a big force, you make a big change. So in order to be a worthwhile person, you have to leverage your force somehow. For example, through money or through your project going viral or scaling up. Then it matters, but not otherwise.

So, if you believe that, okay, for one thing, you're subscribing to an obsolete physics. Now, probably most physicists would not yet say that this is obsolete, but I'm not going to actually go into the scientific argument around this. But I will invoke Rupert Sheldrake, who articulated a theory that he calls "morphic resonance", which is really a beautiful example of what I mean by interbeing.

Morphic resonance says that any change that happens in one place will create a field of change, or strengthen a field of change, that allows the same change to happen somewhere else. So, any act of service to a stream or a service to the soil will create a field that brings more

acts of service to the soil around the world. Now, it may happen that way because you happened to film it on YouTube and people got inspired by it and, yeah, you can explain how this thing created a field of change. But it doesn't depend on that. This principle goes beneath the vector that happens to operate to bring this change to other people. It works even if what you're doing seems completely invisible. If you're holding the hand of somebody on their deathbed and there's a moment of forgiveness, and it feels like that was the most important thing in the world that could be happening right now, that intuition is true, and even though you walk out of that room and your mother's dead now, still something momentous has happened. You have added to the field of forgiveness. No act is wasted. This is a different theory of change. It doesn't mean that you purposely refrain from publicizing your work, but it means that you trust the opportunities to do so when they come and *if* they come.

One way I try to explain it is, okay, say, who's the most important person in the history of South Africa? Well, Nelson Mandela. And he certainly did big things and he was the most prominent spokesperson for the ANC and then he was the president of South Africa and if it weren't for him, the country may have descended into bloodshed, right? But was, actually, the most important person in the history of South Africa Nelson Mandela, or was it maybe his grandmother? Now, I actually don't know his biography but I can easily imagine, what made him into the person that he was? It might have been a special grandmother who imparted knowledge and experiences to him that bloomed into maturity when he was in prison, and if it weren't for that grandmother he might just been another warrior. So, maybe it was the grandmother.

How do you know what the most important act is that you could do? On a two year time scale, those invisible acts of compassion are not important. But on a 500-year time scale, they can send ripples of change out into the future that might be much bigger than whatever the movers and shakers are doing. The movers and shakers--they make big waves on the surface of the ocean, but they don't change the deep currents. All of us have an equal power to change the deep currents because every act matters.

So, yeah, I'm skeptical sometimes of the impulse to value something or to engineer scalability into it from the very start. You know, here we are recording, we're filming this--I don't know what to call it--interview, with the idea that it'll be a more powerful impact on the world if we film it and make it available for people to watch online, but that may not be true. It might actually have been more powerful if we had just had a conversation, me and the few people in the room here. Who knows? If we had had a conversation with no camera eye looking at us, what conversation would we have had? What impact would that have had on the four or five of us in this room, that would bloom forth in generations to come? Maybe because it would have influenced the way that we treat our children or the way that we treat some other person in our lives, and that influences something else and something else. I don't know. The world might be better off if these cameras are not actually working. I don't know.

All I know is to trust what is called forth from me at any time. That is my job and that's everyone's job, to ask, "What is mine to do right now? What am I to say?" And we have an

internal guidance system that can bring us to the right action and the right speech. And it's a guidance system that we are not really in the habit of listening to. In fact, we've been trained to override it, to *not* listen to it. So, to recover it, maybe takes some time and some practice, to recover trust in your desires. 'Cause you're not "bad".

In the Story of Separation, you're "bad". Your desire is to maximize your own interest. But in the Story of Interbeing, your basic nature is that you want to give. You're part of a larger whole. You want to exercise your function. You want to exercise your purpose. In the Story of Separation, you don't even have a purpose. You're just a flesh robot. But in the Story of Interbeing, you're here for a purpose, because there is an intelligence outside of the self, outside of the human being. The qualities of a "self" pervade the world. Consciousness, intelligence, intention, agency, subjectivity, sentience. All things, all things have these qualities in very different forms. Human consciousness is very different from the consciousness of a turtle or a rock and the consciousness of the planet, of the cosmos, is also different, but it's there. So we are woven into this larger intelligence. We know that we have our role and our place in the tapestry.

So our deepest desire is to fulfill that. And what is that? Like, sometimes it makes sense, given whatever you think you know about climate change or social change, sometimes it makes sense: "Yes, my purpose is in alignment with the way I think the world works. The purpose that is calling to me through my care." Sometimes, though, it does not make sense, given everything you think you know. Sometimes the call is toward something that, how could that possibly make a difference in the grand scheme of things? To make this meal tonight as beautiful as I can-to take care of this puppy. Like, how's that going to do any good? Just another mouth to feed.

So, yeah, our habit of quantifying things, of rationalizing things, that can get in the way, that can obscure or deaden the guidance system that we're born into, that aligns care and purpose in the larger emergence of this world, which is now going through a transition into a new story. And I believe that in each of us, in our unique way, in this time, are called--well, maybe not everybody. The old story's not quite done yet. Maybe your destiny and your purpose is to take that old story to its final extreme. And that's what excites you. To push it to the end. Like, if that's you, then I have nothing to say. I'm not going to say you should change your story. Like, only you know that. You'll come to that, if that is in your destiny.

But a lot of people, probably most people who are listening to this, probably your destiny and your purpose is in some way to contribute to the new and ancient story that I'm calling "interbeing", to serve that in some way. That may make sense to your rational mind, but may not. The call might be to just be a beautiful parent, to bring these principles--to raise children in a way that doesn't rely on shaming and conditional approval and control and hovering. And "What's wrong with you?" and "Why did you do that?" To even just raise one family in that way is a huge accomplishment. Even if you pass on 10% less of the programming that you received--you don't have to be perfect, but even to pass on a little less of it, that's an immense accomplishment, to pass on a little less of the trauma. If that happens every generation, in 500 years the world will be very, very different and the people of that time will thank you. They will thank their ancestors for having done this hard thing at the turning point when there was no

assurance that they were doing any good at all, when they were facing despair (talking about us here).

Our descendants are rooting for us, wishing us strength to do the things that don't make sense to us, that don't make sense to our mind, that make sense to our heart. The heart is unaffected by the rationality that has us sacrifice the compassionate thing right in front of our face. So, because our minds are very deeply steeped in the ideology of separation, they are very often in conflict with the heart. And so we get people saying, you know, people devaluing the mind and saying we should listen to our heart instead. And maybe that is a good antidote to the malady of our time, but ultimately what we want is for heart and mind to be aligned, and that happens the more that your mind can adopt the logic of interbeing. The more aligned it will be with your heart, the less conflict there will be, the less irrational those choices to be at the bedside of a dying person, to be there for a friend, to take care of that little creek, will seem. They won't seem irrational anymore.

Now this is something that's very hard to do under your own power. Fortunately, we have allies to remind us that it's not actually irrational. It's just irrational according to an obsolete logic, but it makes total sense. 'Cause I'm doing it too, in whatever way I can, but I'm afraid to do it in the next way. There's this step that I want to take now, but I'm afraid to take it, and I'm not ready to take it, but I see it, I know it's coming. I know what I'm going to have to do. I'm not ready to do it. How do I become ready? Again, not something that you can achieve by yourself. The way you become ready is with help from the people who see that it actually is the rational next step to understand that it's a necessity for your development, that you'll be okay. And they can hold that knowledge. I mean, really a lot of it, I mean for me at least, and for so many people who I talk to, it's kind of a social climate. It's like, well, I do know that it's the right thing, but am I just being naive? Am I just being impractical? Sometimes, yeah, sometimes you are being impractical. I'm not saying to ignore the facts on the ground and do something that--see here's the difference. If you have this secret knowledge that I'm just doing this for show, I know it's not going to work, then you're probably engaging in some exercise of vanity, of futility, of martyrdom.

But often it's not that voice. Often it is a doubt that is coming from outside, coming from the society that we grew up in, that assaults you. It's impractical. It's unrealistic. It's idealistic. It's naive. And you know it's not true. And then that voice maybe takes the form of a parent or somebody, or a friend, and says, "Well, how are you going to actually do that? That plan doesn't make sense! Where are you going to get the money to get the land? Where are you going to do this? How are you going to do that? No one's going to believe you! No one's going to join in! How are you going to pay people to do it? Volunteers? No one's going to do that!" What they are doing is defending; they're the immune system of the old story. They're defending the status quo against a threat. And often that assault comes from a secret longing to be doing that themselves. They're basically assuring themselves or consoling themselves--yeah, they're consoling themselves for not doing it.

You know, it's like, "I wish I was doing this thing, and here's why it's okay that I'm not." And then projecting those reasons onto you. "Here's why you shouldn't be doing it." And maybe it takes

some practice to distinguish: what is somebody pointing out your blind spot, and what is somebody preventing you or trying to stop you from entering the place that they wish that they could enter.

I cannot offer a formula to distinguish, but knowing that there are these two different things might bring awareness to it and you might develop your own ways to distinguish what's coming from a legitimate intuition about a blind spot and what is just an assault--the old story grabbing at your ankles.