

Making a Difference
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"One person can make a difference and everyone should try." This quote from John F. Kennedy has always inspired me. I just appreciate the message, especially when we see issues that exist in our world that we desperately want to do something about, but then we have those moments of doubt, wondering if we can do anything to actually make an impact, to make a difference.

On this Earth Day I think it's worth celebrating creation. As the Psalmist says, "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord." [1] I want to celebrate creation today by exploring the impact a few people have had to make this world a better place for those of us living on this earth here and now and for giving hope to future generations. I want to explore people who lived into JFK's message that one person really can make a difference in this world.

We'll begin in Italy in 1208. That spring, a young man named Francesco Bernardone had a life changing moment in the middle of church. He felt called by God when he heard these words, "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food." [2]

So Francesco gave away his shoes, his tunic, and his staff. He wore a simple tunic and the hood of a shepherd, he tied a cord around his waist and he began to preach and attract some followers too. [3] In time, this man who walked away from a world of privilege and wealth to live in simplicity with his fellow monks and the rest of creation became known as St. Francis of Assisi, one of the most popular saints in history.

St. Francis loved nature; he is often depicted out in the world, preaching to birds and caring for creatures. He lived a life of simplicity and humility, praising God for the good creation Francis observed. He's perhaps best known among environmentalists for his "Canticle of Brother Sun," which goes like this:

We praise You, Lord, for all Your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,
of You Most High, he bears your likeness.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.

We praise You, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,
fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Water,
so useful, humble, precious and pure.

We praise You, Lord, for Brother Fire,
through whom You light the night.
He is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Earth,
who sustains us
with her fruits, colored flowers, and herbs.[4]

Sounds more like a Native American prayer than something uttered by a Catholic saint in the 1200s, but there you have it. St. Francis was certainly a person who changed the landscape of medieval European monasticism and has influenced Christian thought about creation ever since.

In fact, the nuns I stayed with when I was in India are Franciscans. When I was there I defied my travel doctor who told me I was not to touch any animals, and I kind of adopted the stray dog who hangs around the convent. I named him Sunny and I would pet him and talk to him all the time—the villagers and the nuns thought I was crazy. But Sunny followed me everywhere, Pash, my friend and mentor, would say, "Oh, here's your dog coming to greet you!" Sunny would run as soon as he heard my voice, wagging his tail to welcome me back to the convent.

One day I asked the sisters why they let Sunny hang out at the convent so much—Indians don't have dogs as pets in the same way that we Americans do. I saw terribly skinny dogs roaming the streets searching for food everywhere I went and even saw men throw rocks at dogs to get them away from them. So it was a bit surprising that this dog was permitted within the convent grounds as much as he was. But Sr. Valentine, the Mother Superior told me, "Well our order is Franciscan, and so we are kind to all animals." All these years later, the legacy of St. Francis and his love for all creatures, including my Sunny, lives on.

But speaking of saints, let's jump way ahead to America in the 1960s because some have called Rachel Carson the "patron saint of the environmental movement." [5] Carson was an American scientist, who wrote a book in 1962—*Silent Spring*. This book is credited by many as beginning the modern environmental movement. Her main concern was the usage of pesticides and the damage it was wreaking on the land. Carson is credited with "launching the concept of the environment as a system that sustains us and that we must learn to live within, rather than a mine, dump or playground. It infuriated government and industrial interests and she was attacked by lobbyists as an alarmist." [6] All these years later we can hopefully appreciate the difference she made in beginning new conversations about the impact humanity can have on the environment and the importance of being responsible stewards of creation. "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try."

But I have one more example to tell, we've seen St. Francis in Italy in the 1200s, Rachel Carson in America in the 1960s, and now we're off to present-day Malawi. I was recommended to read this book before traveling to Zambia this summer for our Communities Without Borders trip to learn more about African cultures and contemporary issues facing the continent, it's called *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind*. It's the story of William Kamkwamba of Malawi, and this book is just flat out inspiring, calling us to see that one individual against all odds can change his or her community through creativity and passion.

William lives in this tiny village in Malawi, and his father is a farmer. The family ends up nearly starving to death in the midst of a famine that cripples the whole country. His father has to borrow against his future crop to feed the family and after paying back all the loans and selling all his meager crops that did come in despite the famine, there is no money left to send William to high school. The family can't even afford to get William a new pair of shoes and school uniform, let alone books and supplies. But instead of sulking and becoming bitter, William goes

to the library and reads for hours to try to keep up his studies and not fall too far behind his classmates. At the library he discovers an American textbook called Using Energy and this book changes his life.

The book begins, "Energy is all around you every day... sometimes energy needs to be converted to another form before it is useful to us. How can we convert forms of energy? Read on and you'll see." [7] William does read on and he reads about windmills and starts getting really interested, as he says, "With a windmill we'd finally release ourselves from the troubles of darkness and hunger. In Malawi, the wind was one of the few consistent things given to us by God, blowing in the treetops day and night. A windmill meant more than just power, it was freedom." [8]

And so William sets out to make a windmill, he goes to the junkyard and finds scraps from old rusted out cars and other machines. He reads on and discovers how to use batteries and learns about currents. He wires his whole house and ends up constructing a makeshift wind turbine in the back of his house. The day he puts up his machine, people flock to his house calling him crazy. But it worked. All of a sudden, he released the blades of his turbine and let the wind do all the work. The single light bulb he had attached to his creation all of a sudden lit up and people couldn't believe their eyes. William called his invention, electric wind.

Word spread of William's invention and eventually he gets selected to attend the TED conference in Tanzania to present his project to this world conference of scientists and inventors. New friends and sponsors help put him in an even better school and he returns to his village with new supplies to improve his windmill after this life-changing opportunity. Eventually every home in William's small village in Malawi has a solar panel, complete with a battery to store power. As William proclaims at the end of his story, "If you want to make it, all you have to do is try." [9]

So on this Earth Day, I commend St. Francis of Assisi, Rachel Carson, and William Kamkwamba to us all as people who tried to make our planet a better place, and they succeeded. They serve as examples to us all when we may feel a little down about how we can help when we see problems that make our hearts ache or turn our stomachs in anger and frustration. For you see, "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try." May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Psalm 96:11-13.

[2] Matthew 10:7-10.

[3] Richard P. McBrien, "Francis of Assisi, friar," In Lives of the Saints, 404-407.

[4] http://prayerfoundation.org/canticle_of_brother_sun.htm

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2006/nov/28/climatechange.climatechangeenvironment>

[6] Ibid.

[7] Using Energy as quoted by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, The Boy who Harnessed the Wind, 167.

[8] William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, The Boy who Harnessed the Wind, 169.

[9] William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer, The Boy who Harnessed the Wind, 281.