

FOREWORD

When I became active in the nuclear disarmament movement in 1984 I thought the only way to bring about change was to protest with placards. I quickly learned that issues of social justice, women's rights, violence prevention, and peace education were all interlinked and that nuclear weapons were a symptom of a dysfunctional global society. Governments and the military-industrial complex had become so enmeshed they were no longer able to fulfill their responsibilities for the well-being of society.

I learned that there are many ways to support education, and that most were more fun than carrying placards—although I found peace marches were wonderful in their own way. Musicians, artists, dancers, educators, women, religious groups, and scholars all found their own ways to support changing attitudes toward peace, human rights, and the environment.

Today it is cliché to say that humanity stands at a crossroad, but perhaps this is cliché because everyone recognizes that we face life-threatening decisions. It seems to me that humanity stands not at a junction of a road, but at the edge of a cliff. If we continue

business as usual we will crash into the abyss. As the saying goes, we must change direction or we will end up where we are going. No one can ignore the crises we face: modern warfare, threats of nuclear weapons, abuse of human rights, economic collapse, climate change, crop failures, environmental destruction, and loss of species.

Many people respond to the scale of these challenges to our survival with hopelessness and helplessness. It seems clear that governments are unable to respond quickly to the need for fundamental changes in our institutions and our attitudes. In fact, change is most likely to be initiated by civil society, or “people power” as it has been called. This book outlines clear guidelines for the essential paradigm shift from militant nationalism to a healthy, collaborative society integrated with the natural world.

There are three pillars of a healthy society: government, a strong economy, and civil society (Perlas 2000). Civil society brings conscience to bear on the decisions of the other two sectors. Until recently, civil society has been the weak pillar, and the results have been global destruction of nature, war, and grave social injustice. Over the past twenty years, civil society has become a formidable force for change, and governments have been forced to take citizens into account as they make decisions. Instant international communication is a powerful tool for civil society. On the one hand, citizen journalists expose corrupt and secretive governments and businesses; on the other hand, they share successful strategies and new ways of thinking with those working on social change in distant communities.

Things are getting tough for dictators these days. Since 1986 when the Filipino dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, was toppled by massive civil disobedience, some sixty dictators have been thrown out of office, most of them without violence (Mack and Nielsen 2005). We must credit Gandhi for the first overwhelming demonstration of people power, which happened when he led the resistance that forced the British out of India. Civil society has learned to stand up and, unarmed, defeat government by moral suasion. Nonviolent

resistance brought down the Berlin Wall and led to the end of the Soviet Union and many other dictatorships. As people connected across borders, they began to reject the notion that other nations were enemies. Instead, they pressed their governments to find diplomatic solutions to conflicts.

We can feel optimistic about the capacity for civil society to bring about change when we consider some of the many successes brought about nonviolently by ordinary people working in their own communities and in international groups.

Several civil society organizations united in a global campaign to ban landmines, and to their amazement caught the attention of sympathetic governments, who moved the process forward. Canadian Foreign Minister, Lloyd Axworthy, worked collaboratively with international nongovernmental organizations to bring like-minded governments to Ottawa, to discuss banning these weapons. Because so many countries were supportive, the process moved ahead quickly and in 1997, only five years later, the treaty to ban antipersonnel landmines was signed. Continued pressure from citizens led to the recent banning of cluster bombs, which had not been included in the original treaty.

In the early 1990s, civil society pressed the United Nations to request the International Court of Justice in The Hague to give an opinion on the legality of nuclear weapons under international law. The Court ruled that not only are nuclear weapons illegal, but also that the nuclear-weapons states have a solemn treaty obligation to eliminate them. This ruling has had far-reaching implications for governments and for international law. It has been successfully cited in court cases against activists using civil disobedience to protest against nuclear weapons bases in Europe and the UK. The protestors argued that they were acting to prevent their countries from breaking international law, and the courts agreed and acquitted them of charges. At last we can begin to be optimistic about progress toward a Nuclear Weapons Convention that will ban these terrible weapons.

For many years, human rights activists were appalled that brutal dictators had immunity from prosecution for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. People demanded the founding of a court that could try individuals and hold them personally responsible for such crimes. Once again, governments agreed with this civil society initiative. They founded the International Criminal Court, which came into force in 2002.

Other trends offer more cause for optimism. A surprising report in 2005 from the Centre for Human Security, *War and Peace in the 21st Century*, (Mack and Nielsen 2005) shows a strong global trend away from war since the end of the Cold War in 1991. Between 1991 and 2005, major wars (more than one thousand battle deaths per year) and genocides declined by 90 percent, and wars in general dropped by 40 percent. The number of international crises dropped more than 70 percent in the same time period. Some one hundred armed conflicts have quietly ended since 1988. The researchers credit the increasing successes of the United Nations in nation-building, the founding of the International Criminal Court, and the increasing influence of civil society with bringing about this change. Civil society organizations now play a significant role in resolving conflicts and bringing warring factions together.

Women have long argued for a place at the table during negotiations to resolve political conflicts. According to the UN, women make up 70 percent of workers for peace and social justice in the world. Research confirms the importance of women in changing the context of conflict. One author measured the empowerment of women in a society by whether they have the vote, can stand for office, hold paid employment, and control their fertility (Caprioli 2005). In states where women have these rights, the likelihood of their country using military force to resolve internal conflicts is markedly lower than in states where they do not.

Many countries, particularly in the developing world — in places such as India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Rwanda — have ruled that at least one third of seats on local councils must

be reserved for women (Ashford 2006). The requirement for these offices to be filled by women has led to rapid increases in programs teaching literacy and numeracy to women. Balancing the genders in decision-making is leading to improved educational opportunities, especially for female children. The role of education in reducing prejudice and encouraging critical thinking is important in preventing war and environmental destruction. Learning nonviolent means of parenting is a deeply satisfying way for young adults to influence the future of society.

Citizen journalism is a formidable force for change, particularly because of the ease of transmitting video from all corners of the earth. When we hear from those who live in difficult circumstances, we begin to understand that a military response will not solve their problems. In some countries radio programs are being used to build understanding of different groups in order to reduce inter-ethnic hostilities. The programs are plotted like soap operas, placing the characters in situations that require them to rise above their prejudices. They have had a remarkable impact on building understanding in communities at risk.

These are only a few examples of successes of civil society affecting communities, governments, and the United Nations. There are hundreds of such stories — many you know in your own neighborhood — which refute the tired dogma that you cannot change the world. We can change the world, but not without hard work.

This book is based in a keen awareness of the challenges we face, the evidence that we are capable of meeting those challenges successfully, and the ever-present danger that we may fail to activate that capability. The crises we face today cannot be resolved without you and me and everyone else on the planet. This book sets out the steps. Let's take them together.

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