
“Peace punk”: a radical life to make peace happen

“Shifting the Culture of Social Change”

By Bart Weetjens

Bart Weetjens knows that unresolved conflicts starts internally. After having been working for 20 years to his successful peace project to rid post-war countries of landmines, he almost went through a burnout syndrome. To be able to go on, he became involved in a new project for social change. One thing he had learned was that preventing conflicts is also “an inside job”.

After 20 years of work, I was close to burn out. I remember vividly how the work had started in October 1995. I had been traveling in Mozambique and Angola and I had been deeply impressed by the fact that communities were living in post-war areas, terrorized because of the landmines. Almost all of the people in these communities were farmers, but with no access to their villages and farms, living therefore from generation to generation in poverty in growing slums around larger cities, without any hope of reversing the situation.

Angry about this injustice

Thus I was angry, VERY angry about this injustice. Today, I know that this anger or sense of injustice is actually the much-needed seed leading to commitment for social justice and a more peaceful world. I imagined myself in these people’s situation and thought about what I would do if I were in their place. What could I do to rid my land of landmines and live without fear? Trained as a product designer, I looked at the available resources, and although there were almost no material goods available, I finally found a natural solution: rats.

Rats to save human lives

While most people may see rats as vermin, I had a long history with them, a deep love and affection for all kinds of pet rodents: hamsters, mice, squirrels, and of course, rats! I knew about their excellent sense of smell and their intelligence, trainability and logistical skills. So I set out on a journey to start training rats to save human lives by detecting landmines. Today, with the help of a lot of friends and partners, more than 103,000 landmines in countries like Mozambique, Angola, Thailand and Cambodia have been detected by rats. Thanks to our staff in the APOPO project, 26 million square meters of land are once again available for local communities, to build their homes and live in peace. This changed fundamentally the lives of about one million farmers who were able to return to their home and live without fear. But while Mozambique was declared fully free of land mines in 2015, I found myself in trouble.

Losing oneself in empathy

My journey of social commitment, my life at the service of a superior good showed me the real risk of losing oneself in empathy with a particular cause. I also see this symptom in many other people who work for peace and social justice. We need to understand that if we let the cause

devour us, we lack the strength and the equanimity to manage the cause at long term and meaningfully. This may lead to burn-out, depression, addiction, or all kinds of negative mental states. When I realized I was about to burn out, I gave up the managerial responsibilities of my project to focus on myself. To re-invent myself. “Who is Bart without the rats?”

Doing well in society is inspired by inner wellbeing

Through Ashoka, a network of social entrepreneurs that had endorsed my work, I became acquainted with another Ashoka fellow, Aaron Pereira, who had been working on inner wellbeing with social entrepreneurs. His idea was that doing well in society is inspired by inner wellbeing.

I went to see him in Paris on a beautiful spring day in 2015, and I was deeply touched by his project, meant to provide an inner development support for experienced social entrepreneurs. Just like Aaron, I recognized that inner wellbeing is really the most important issue we need to achieve to be able to lead happy and meaningful lives, and that all we do in the outside world is in a way a reflection of our state of mind. So I proposed working with him and to help him support this project. Since that day, Aaron and I have been colleagues.

The Wellbeing Project is not only focused on a support to social change leaders; it actually aims to shift the social change culture from the ideal of the hero/martyr to a healthier notion of inner wellbeing; it seeks to cultivate a kind of personal level prevention that ultimately serves society.

Support based on individual needs

The Wellbeing Project’s work has four principal pillars: first, the Inner Development Program. This supports experienced social entrepreneurs in finding and nurturing a deeper sense of wellbeing via personal programs. It consists of three retreats, lasting over one-and-half years, to provide support based on individual needs.

Secondly, research and evaluation, which provides the data necessary to meet the ambition of shifting the culture. In a longitudinal research study on the relationship between inner work and the quality of social change, data is rigorously collected among the 60 social entrepreneurs participating in the Inner Development Program.

Thirdly, learning and gathering. This pillar gathers global and regional leaders in the field of social change. They can learn from the researches, work together to shift the culture and explore a new support infrastructure for those who are working in the field of social innovation.

And then, last but definitely not least, there is “storytelling”: collecting and sharing stories from social entrepreneurs about the impact of their work on their personal and professional lives.

The Wellbeing Project is a collaborative project directed and executed by four partner institutions: Ashoka, the Fetzer Institute, Esalen, and the Synergos Institute. In a very short time, the Wellbeing Project has become a global community of people and institutions, all working towards greater care and compassion for the wonderful people who work to build a better world, and as well to support the many causes and movements for which they work.

Turn that burn-out spiral

Social workers who participate in the program are strongly affected on a personal level: they witness deep changes in how they approach their work-life balance. Some realize that they always put their work first, their family after, and only in the last place their personal needs. The Wellbeing Project helps them to turn that burn-out spiral into a burn-on spiral and to develop the insight that they can only keep going productively if they work from a core of wellbeing.

Lucky to encounter the practice of zazen

In my case, I was lucky to encounter the practice of Zazen, a sitting meditation. This practice has been a very effective path towards deeper understanding and self-acceptance. I think meditation or mindfulness practices work even more effectively when combined with some type of counselling or therapy: any confidential formal or informal conversation with a trusted person. Together, mindfulness and counselling have an enormous transforming power, to turn trauma and vulnerability into personal resilience and sustainability.

Conflict, seen from the perspective of personal wellbeing, starts internally. Very often we have a set idea about things and we become rigid in our thinking - often because we see through lenses coloured by past personal traumas. It is liberating to see that conflict prevention also starts internally and that every sentient being has the power to liberate himself. If we let terrible events direct our attention outwards towards injustice, we also need events to turn us inwards towards contemplation, so that we will be able to keep the meaningful work going”.

Personal data:

Bart Weetjens is a Zen monk and a social entrepreneur. He lives with his wife and two daughters in Antwerp, Belgium. Bart holds a Master's in Product design from Antwerp University. With his organization APOPO (www.apopo.org), he runs an effective action model against mines that has been replicated in six countries in Africa and South East Asia. Bart is an Ashoka fellow, received the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship and is also a co-leader of www.wellbeing-project.org.