

Jason Sowell: Stop Trying to Change the World by ted.com

So five years ago I spent time in a laundromat for the first time in my life. I was very fortunate in my life that I did not grow up needing to use a laundromat. We had a washer and dryer very available to us in our family's home and I did not go throughout my life with that need. But the reason I spent time in this laundromat this particular time five years ago was because I was not there to do my own laundry, but was there to do other people's laundry, and in that moment in that time I realized I learned a lot of lessons. I realized what laundry means to people.

I went into a laundromat with a group of volunteers to simply pay for people's laundry, to put quarters in machines, to bring soap for them to use, and albeit we did it very terribly because I don't know if you've ever tried something like that, but in disrupting someone's day like that you get some really interesting responses. We got a lot of, "What are you selling? What do you want from me? Why are there a group of people that I've never seen in my neighborhood before in my laundromat trying to pay for my laundry?" And I learned a lot of lessons in this time and in the five years since I began this journey I saw a lot of things that I had never seen before.

One of the things that I'd never seen before were families pushing things like grocery carts through a neighborhood with their laundry. I used to work at Kmart when I was a kid and I always wondered why people stole grocery carts. I found out five years ago people use them to transport their laundry. I also saw more dirty blankets and dirty clothes in one family than I'd ever seen at one time, more dirty laundry than I thought was possible for one family to have, and at the same time that I saw those things, I began to realize some people were not as fortunate as me that they get to wash their clothes as often as I do because of the expense, because of what it takes, the time, effort and everything that it takes to walk down the street pushing a grocery cart with laundry in it to a laundromat, and then spend the hours there washing these clothes. Not only did I see things like this, but I also heard a lot of things that I had never heard before. I heard stories of kids that were embarrassed to go to school because they didn't have clean clothes to wear and all of the other things that came along with them going to school with dirty clothes, the battle that it was between them and their families, their parents, to simply get them to go to school because of that embarrassment.

I heard stories from parents that struggled with just the simple dignity of knowing that they had clean shirt and a clean pair of pants to wear to a job interview, and all the self confidence that they lacked going to that job interview with dirty clothes. I heard a lot of things and saw a lot of things and in those moments I thought to myself how in the United States of America what we consider to be the richest country in the world, in a culture

where we talk about changing the world and we do so many things to change the world, how something as simple as having clean laundry is a struggle for so many. How does that happen? This cannot happen in our world, but I realized it's very true, and it's a very real state for many people.

At the same time that I saw and heard these somewhat depressing things from these families, from these kids, I also began to do these kind of disruptive things in these laundromats. Going in with no signs, no forewarning of any kind, and just showing up and trying to pay for people's laundry. And people began to realize we're legitimate, we're not there to take advantage of anybody, we simply are trying to do something to show some love to you.

I also began to hear and see some other things. I began to see things like kids finding community in a laundromat of all places, beginning to smile and understand what community really means from a just a random group of strangers. Families that were smiling because they knew, at least for the time being, at least for the week they could give my their kid clean clothes to go to school. They can smile because the money that they were going to spend and that they'd scrambled together to spend on this laundromat they can now spend on some better food or something else that they need for the family. And very interestingly I heard a very simple yet profound statement at one of the very first times we did this in a laundromat as a lady came up and dropped off her adult son and we tried to explain to her why we were there and she looked at us very skeptically and wanted to know what the catch was and I explained to her that we're really not here for anything other than just to help you pay for your laundry when that realization hit her she said this, "There really are nice people in the world." And it's a simple statement, but in that statement when she said it, it hit me very powerfully because I thought in that in that moment something so simple as thinking and recognizing that there really are nice people in the world, that your view, and your understanding of the world around you that you live in and everything that you live with, that it took something as simple as paying for a few loads of laundry with no strings attached for the realization to come to you that there really are nice people in the world.

So as we continued to do this the idea began to spread, we kind of learned some things and started you know putting up some signs that said who we were and why we were there rather than just you know guerrilla jumping people and pushing them out of the way as they begin to put quarters in their machine. This idea began to spread, we began to spread it around the Tampa Bay Area and around the state of Florida and we began to begin to spread to other places and one of those places that spread to was Ohio now where we have a group of people doing these types of things, in a city called Canton in Ohio.

And the first time I went to Canton, Ohio I met a man named Dale and this is him. Dale has an interesting story, and his story when I met him and heard his story truly taught me the power of the simple act of kindness. Dale when he first came to the Laundry Project he came not knowing that anything was going on at this laundromat he was homeless at the time he was jobless and he had gotten together a little bit of money and he was actually bringing another friend that was homeless to the laundromat to help pay for his friend's laundry. And so they were walking down the street and got to the laundromat and as they approached they were greeted by some volunteers that were there to help and they told them what was going on, that the laundry day was free, "It's on us. You wash your clothes and we're paying for it." And in that moment Dale said, "Wow! I was bringing my friend to do that but now we can share this money and get some food and all that kind of stuff. " And so in the little bit of time that he was

there, volunteers talk to him and heard his story and met with him, that was a couple years ago. That first project that he came to was not his last. Every month that they did a project Dale was there. But within about three months Dale was not there just to get his clothes washed. Dale in that time had gotten a job was able to get a place to live and then beyond that when he would come back to the laundromat he was bringing rolls of quarters himself and volunteering to help other people do their laundry that showed up.

For two years Dale has done that and he's continuing to do it and through his story I realized the simple yet profound ability of changing someone's life and helping change someone's life by something as small and simple as helping them with their laundry.

Now some people would say, "But it's just laundry. It's just something small, it's not a big deal." But in those kinds of statements I think is the danger to us of "changing the world", because it's truly in those small things where change happens in lives and in communities. And the danger is that we overlook those simple things. "Well it's just this, it's only this little thing." And when we say those things we've missed the depth of whatever that small act of kindness is, because if you think about it as laundry it is just laundry. But with clean laundry so much more happens with clean laundry. Dignity is found with a simple act of having a clean shirt to wear, it makes the difference for a child going to school with his self-confidence. How do we expect a child, when he's concerned of being picked on because he has dirty clothes, how do we expect that child to believe that one day when he grows up he can be anything he wants to be if he puts his mind to it? How do you expect him to go to school and focus on those educational things that he needs to learn to accomplish his dreams?

Something as simple as helping him have a clean shirt and a clean pair of pants is very life-changing for that child. Something as simple as having a clean shirt for a parent to go to a job interview can completely change the trajectory of a family's life. Something as simple as having a clean blanket to sleep on at night how much that changes the mental state of someone to know when they go home and they crawl in the bed they're going to be sleeping in a clean fresh blanket. How much peace that brings, how much more rest they can get. It's those simple things that change the world and in those simple things, simple things like putting quarters into a machine, a roll of quarters into a machine to pay for someone's laundry to be cleaned, something as simple as that can bring hope to communities in a very large way.

So in all of this and these few years that I've been doing this I've learned one very simple truth, one simple thing that I've come to the conclusion of, that we must stop trying to change the world because the world and all its problems are too big for any one of us to change. When we focus on changing the world we miss many times the simple things that truly do change the world. We overlook the things like clean laundry. We overlook the things like saying thank you. We overlook all the simple things that seem insignificant to us and because of that we get overwhelmed by how much the world needs to change.

I think we should take a lesson and follow the example of a lady named Somali. Some of you may know she is a heroine of human trafficking. She was trafficked as a child herself and was able to get out of it and now she does work to rescue little girls from sex trafficking in our day and age. And this is what she said, "I do not feel like I can change the world. I don't even try. I only want to change the small life that I see standing in front of me which is suffering." I think she has it right. We have to stop trying to change the world and focus on the simple small thing in front of us that we can do. The suffering

that occurs in front of us, the life that is right in front of us, standing in a laundromat struggling over having clean clothes, the life that walks in front of us every day, that we bypass and simply don't recognize because we're too distracted by other things. Stop trying to change the world and change the simple thing in front of you that you can control, and that you can change in that moment. Thank you.