

No Impact Man's Guide to Activism by Colin Beavan

This article from the YES! Media archives was originally published in the Spring 2011 issue of YES! Magazine.

So many of us have good ideas for helping the world. But we tuck away our ideas. I did. I'd tell myself that if the idea were any good someone else would have already done it. That I'm not capable of making a difference. I'd sit on my ideas, get on with my life, and then feel angry at the world because the problems I cared about didn't get solved.

I had that fear of going first.

Then I took my first hapless step into what I call accidental activism. In 2006, I started a project where I lived as environmentally as possible for a year—with my little family, on the ninth floor of an apartment building in the middle of New York City—to attract attention to the world's environmental, economic, and quality of life crises.

I had no experience as an activist. Yet suddenly my project caught fire.

My book and film, both titled *No Impact Man*, ended up being translated into 20-plus languages. Some philanthropists appeared and offered me funding to hire consultants to get NoImpactProject.org off the ground. About 20,000 people have now participated in our educational immersion program, *No Impact Week*.

And how have I felt through all this?

Like a deer in the headlights.

How am I supposed to stand up to all this? Surely people can see how selfish and shortsighted I am? That I'm sometimes mean to my family? People like me aren't supposed to do things like this. We're supposed to wait for people who have their acts together, and follow them.

But if we wait for those people, we're done for.

A lot of people know way more about activism and citizen engagement than me. I'm pretty ordinary. Frankly, I don't even always want to be of service. But I've now learned a lot about how to be an ordinary person, filled with self-doubt, who still takes the risk of trying to do something about the world. Maybe you're like me. And maybe the things that have helped me will help you, too.

Be stupid enough to take the first step

My first step was just to begin living with the lowest possible environmental impact. A few people said I was “too stupid to know that one person can’t make a difference.” Think on this story (with apologies for high schmaltz quotient):

Two frogs—one very smart and one very stupid—are caught in a bowl of cream. The sides are too steep to climb and they have no foothold to jump. The stupid one begins to swim as hard and fast as he can. The smart one looks over and says to himself, “He’s too stupid to know that all that effort will make no difference.”

Having weighed the hopelessness of the situation, the smart one decides that the most intelligent thing is to give up. So—Blub!—he drowns. The stupid one keeps trying. Just when his legs are about to give out the cream starts to get thicker. His struggling has churned the cream to butter. He’s surprised to find himself on solid ground. He jumps out. By stupidly pursuing the first step (swimming), the second step (jumping out) appeared, as if by magic.

The question is not whether you can make a difference. The question is, do you want to be the person who tries? Do you want to be like the smart frog, who relies on the brain that tells him there is no solution, or the stupid frog, whose heart tells him to try anyway?

Maybe you care about food deserts and kids not having access to good food, or maybe it’s incarceration of local youth, or maybe, like me, you worry about inaction on climate change. Whatever it is, pick up your placard or call your senator or gather your friends. Don’t worry about the second step. Just be too stupid to know the first step won’t work.

Use your personal story to inspire a movement

Part of the reason one person can make a difference is that one person’s efforts soon inspire other people’s efforts. So inspire other people to get involved by sharing your personal story. Not just the story, say, of the hungry children in the Global South you are trying to help, but your own story.

In *No Impact Man*, I share stories of how I tried to keep my food fresh without a refrigerator, how I had to eat mostly cabbage in the winter, and how I washed my laundry by hand. People didn’t suddenly realize that they, too, should handwash their clothes. Instead, they learned, not that they should make a difference—which statistics and figures tell us—but that they can make a difference—which personal stories have the power to tell.

It is through the personal that people connect with the political.

No matter what your cause, look for the powerful, personal story about how you got involved and how being involved has improved your life in some way. I’ve heard it said we shouldn’t have to tell these stories—that people should automatically care. The thing is, once they know, people do care. The problem is that they are often overwhelmed by it. So the job is not to shove information at them that makes them feel guilty for not doing something. The job is to give them a story that shows them how to do something.

Get off the internet and into real life

Back in the ’60s, a string of civil rights sit-ins began when four students from a Black college in North Carolina sat down at a Whites-only Woolworth lunch counter. In the end, about 70,000 students participated in sit-ins that spread across the state. As Malcolm

Gladwell points out in a New Yorker article, the action didn't start with lots of Twitter followers. It started with lots of flesh-and-blood (as opposed to Facebook) friends.

The strong social bonds and long-standing mutual trust gave those first four students the bravery to stand up for themselves. Gladwell says that the strong ties of real friendship and community—not the weak ties of the virtual world—are necessary to make us feel supported enough to take meaningful risks for our values.

I ran a blog at NoImpactMan.com, and many thousands of people went there to discuss their views on and methods of environmental living. It was a good thing. In the absence of real-life communities of shared environmental values, the blog provided a lot of people with some measure of community support. But the stronger, more action-oriented communities are formed in my work when people come together for our No Impact Weeks.

One of the most accomplished friendship-based communities I am familiar with, 350.org, the grassroots climate organization, began with a group of students who lived together at college and then in the Bay Area. They have grown their little house party into an international organization of hundreds of thousands of climate activists. They use the web to aggregate the actions of thousands of friendship-based groups. But the point is the actions taken by small communities of friends or neighbors—not the information sharing.

So use the internet, of course. But use it to get people to do things in real life. What if the many hours spent leaving angry comments on the Huffington Post were instead spent gathering once a week in a coffee shop. Sooner or later, real action—as opposed to real, um, clicks—might occur. Get people to come together. They need each other.

Trust your vision

So you have your idea, you've taken your first step, you've gathered like-minded people, and now you have a little bit of energy and success. Great news! This is when the critics and second-guessers arrive. That's a reason for not getting started in the first place, right? Nobody bothers to second-guess you when you're just fantasizing about your great idea.

I suddenly found myself invited to go on Good Morning America with Diane Sawyer. As they say: "WTF?" I was horrified. I'm sure I had an overinflated sense of my own importance, but I was worried I could send people in the wrong direction.

I had no real endorsement other than—again—my own trust in my intentions. I had to go on national television trusting in myself and my vision.

Absolutely the hardest thing of all was this: I had to accept that I might be wrong and do it anyway.

Sadly, lots of arguments break out in activist communities about best methods. People tear each other apart as though the scenario is either/or when really it's and/also. We need many shoulders against many doors. What I've learned as I've come to meet so many amazing engaged citizens is that it takes many different strategies and many different styles to make the changes we're hoping for.

So trust your vision. You may find that the biggest sacrifice you can make for the world is

to face the possibility of being publicly wrong. And to move forward anyway.

Take care of yourself

Once you get involved in this kind of work, the pressures mount—many of them from within rather than without. We need to take care of both the insides and the outsides. I started by saying you just need to take the first step, but this step is just as important. If you can't sustain yourself, you can't sustain your work.

No Impact Man, in many ways, began as an extension of my meditation practice. A lot of the confidence I needed came from inklings of understanding of the Truth—whatever the hell that is. And of Service. But while I was making time for TV appearances and press interviews and rallies and favors and guest appearances on blogs I lost time for my meditation.

Then anxiety arrived. And depression. I was running on fumes. I was draining the battery without charging it. The good news is that I am back to my regular practice. I feel better. Of course, I'm not saying you should necessarily meditate, just that you need to find what suits you to take care of your insides.

About the outsides: A couple of years ago, after so many TV interviews and radio interviews and international press appearances (and, by the way, repeatedly having to face accusers who said I was trying to get rich from the world's problems), I looked at my bank balance and saw I had about \$200 left—about \$3,000 less than my monthly nut. I'd been working all my waking hours on what I believed in and couldn't take care of myself. Luckily for me, I didn't have to change much (like, I began to ask to get paid when someone asked me to make a speech) but I did have to face my guilt and confront my monkish self-image. There is a meme in our culture: You can be a monk or a merchant. Monks do good and merchants make money. If you make any money—if you find a way to take care of your outsides—you can't be an ascetic monk, and you're not really doing good.

Imagine, though, if we create a new meme. What if we show each other how wonderfully well we're managing as a result of taking our ideas for social change and running with them? What if we bragged about outperforming the bankers every so often?

But even if we don't get the chance to do that, we should at least make good homes out of our lives. Without loving ourselves, the love for others will wither. By taking the burden of the world on our shoulders, we leave no room for the strength of others. In other words, have fun!

After all, the world isn't worth saving if there isn't time for joking around.

Besides, we might as well enjoy ourselves when you realize how much work there is to get done. With two wars in progress, melting ice caps, and an economic system teetering on the brink of collapse, there just isn't time to wait for some guru or leader to give us permission to act on our good ideas.

Who's going to fix things if it isn't us? I can't help thinking that the time has come for us to take back our culture. It's time for every citizen with a good idea to get to work, to trust yourself, to start. Sooner or later you have to accept the fact that you need no other authority than your good intentions and your loving heart.