

The Man Who Transformed a Wasteland by Margaret O'Keefe

Mahatma Ghandi once said “be the change that you want to see in the world”. This week Margaret O’Keefe meets an inspirational businessman who has used obstacles as a means to create positive change for himself and his community.

“In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. And that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there’s something stronger – something better, pushing right back. ” - Albert Camus

I have walked in the semi-wilderness of Hampstead Heath in London for many years. One of the roads I use to enter the heath starts at the exit of a train station. In 2008 a large strip of wasteland leaned behind it looking down towards the tracks. It was filled with rubbish and featured a hideous slab of concrete with graffiti smack in the middle. On the odd occasion after forgetting to avoid it I would ask myself why ‘nobody had done anything’. And, like many others I would continue to walk past with a righteous sense of indignation. Earlier this year I had a meeting near the station. As I prepared to avert my gaze what I saw from the corner of my eye made my jaw drop.

We each have a wasteland of some kind or other to deal with whether real or metaphorical.

In the place of a trashed wasteland I was stunned to see an abundance of tulips, daffodils, roses, camellias, a pond, exquisite wooden perches and a beautifully landscaped area perfect for small gatherings. A sign attached to the railings with ‘Welcome to the World Peace Garden’ beckoned me in. A little girl was skipping through one of the paths as her mother walked above at street level. Chimes tinkled overhead and I soon found myself sitting next to a tree with branches filled with little paper tags flickering in the breeze. Each carried a handwritten wish about ‘what I want the world to be like when I grow up’. I later found out they had been attached by children from 3 local schools and that this was the ‘Tree of Hope’. I had to tear myself away.

As I was leaving I saw a man I had occasionally seen in the area and asked “do you know who is responsible for this magical place?” Jonathan Bergman gave me a knowing smile and said ‘yes – me, with the help of many others.’

Jonathan, now an estate agent, was formerly a stage actor for 20 years. The former wasteland was directly across from his office. He saw it everyday as I had, like an ugly blot on the landscape. Then one day he joined a man who was leaning over the railings

looking down at the rubbish. Jonathan said "it's horrible isn't it". They both stood there shaking their heads. Then the other man said "how about getting it for the community?." Jonathan initially thought it was a crazy idea but somehow the seed got planted. "I tried to acquire the land for nothing – not surprisingly that didn't work" (he laughs).

It was owned by a property company. The freehold was sold to a residents' block and the lease was too short to interest some potential contributors. "I was originally given permission to tidy it up but it was rat infested and there were things I wanted to change." After 3 years of negotiating with owners and local councillors Jonathan bought it with the help of 4 others for £25k. Dr Chhaganbhai the owner of a local health shop called Mistry came forward 'like a dream' to help finance the completion.

They set up a charity and decided to enlist the help of an architect and conceptual designer. A vertical garden screen and tree walk were proposed. After obtaining planning permission and presenting the idea to the local council many local residents were against the design. Despite having looked at the same rubbish tip (which had been deserted for over 100 years) they complained bitterly and actually rallied against the project. As the months rolled by, the opposition became considerable.

The original design got rejected and there were all sorts of objections over a further two year period. "They wanted a natural garden not a tree walk." Jonathan and his partners almost gave up.

Then one Sunday, Jonathan decided to pick up the trash. 'I simply had got sick and tired of looking at this strip of land with people throwing rubbish on it.' A local resident and Buddhist called Nick Evans arrived with a pickaxe one morning saying 'I just bought this pickaxe and I'd like to try it out'. Later, Tony Panayiouto a horticulturalist /landscaper (and Buddhist from another tradition!) stopped by and said "do you want a hand?"

Then the Heath Hands Society came for a day to do a major clean-up. It turned out that the original man at the railings (Michael Wardle) is a civil engineer and designer. He offered to cover the concrete with wood, create steps and build a platform which is now used for music recitals, poetry readings, yoga and multiple other gatherings.

"People started to chip in and gave us furniture. It was a completely organic process. We worked the land doing stuff that didn't require permission. And from this opposition we created this beautiful garden. If not for the opposition it wouldn't be what it is today."

Despite the beauty of the garden, what resonates most for Jonathan is the fact that it brings people together. He mentions the different sorts of people who visit the garden: "residents, doctors, poets, patients, musicians, people who play chess, carers, artists, meditators, shopkeepers, people who practise Qi Gong, a brass band, members of local churches and synagogues, school children..."

When a colleague suggested they change the name from Peace Garden to "World Peace Garden' Jonathan thought it ridiculously ambitious. Yet, after agreeing on the name, the United Nations Association donated £6000 to the project in support of harmony & understanding.

The garden has become a sanctuary and inspirational meeting place for people of many beliefs. It also provides a marvellous opportunity for neighbours to come together on small projects to support the upkeep of the place. Artist & speaker Eva Schloss (Anne

Frank's step sister) planted a Cherry blossom tree and spoke to children in the garden about life in the camps and her relationship with Anne. Now on Mitzvah Day sometimes as many as 60 volunteers from a variety of faiths arrive to plant & clear alongside local residents.

More recently Transport For London (TFL) asked if the people involved with the World Peace Garden could help co-create an 'Energy Garden' at the train station. The ambition is to make it look like an extension of Hampstead Heath itself. It is to be run by TFL along with Groundwork. Their aim is help 50 train stations go green with plants (both edible and ornamental). Groundwork will link with local schools and people in the community will be invited in to plant vegetables.

I asked Jonathan why he stuck with the project in the early years despite all the odds. He admits it was very tough for a while "of course I had second thoughts but I thrive on challenge and not doing anything about something doesn't make it go away!".

He remembers one particular afternoon in the early days when bags of wood chips were delivered to him in the pouring rain. A few guys were drinking pints in the pub across the street and guffawing about the prospect of Jonathan getting drenched while laying down the chips across the ground. "The more they laughed the more I shovelled". He says that caring for this garden has transformed his life.

"On a Sunday morning it's like working in a monastery garden. I've learned a lot from digging and watering. It's a great meditation that brings out the best in myself and other people." Today he acknowledges that it wasn't just a noble fight to beautify a wasteland. Looking back he sees that it was actually a personal development process that allowed him to confront his own demons.

'It was a different kind of journey. I was the one fighting. I needed peace. I now realise I can change me but I can't change you. In the course of this gardening thing I learned that being directly hands on I learned about myself. I've become a better human being. When I am internally better then that has a knock on effect on others. In the end, I and the community co-created something we all love."

The ultimate aim is to inspire the creation of peace gardens anywhere so that communities can come together: small, manageable places where people can come and ease the strife of everyday life.

We each have a wasteland of some kind or other to deal with whether real or metaphorical. What strikes me about Jonathan's rather heroic story is the immense power of persistence in the face of adversity. Ghandi is often quoted as saying 'be the change you want to see'. It has become such a common leadership refrain many of us forget its intrinsic meaning.

Jonathan intuitively got the fact that a fight for the original garden design was not going to create peace for himself or others. He did what he could and little by little, as the external (and internal) rubbish got cleared and seeds got planted, he came into more harmony with himself. As he worked on his own peace of mind this got reflected in that garden and others got inspired to join him as a result.

Every leadership journey has its challenges. For me this serves as a reminder to see obstacles as fuel for raising the bar towards something better. Or, as Jonathan says, when the going gets tough just keep shoveling! Sooner or later we may be surprised and

perhaps even astonished by how much light we can create from darkness.

In the age of disruption that we live in I can't think of a better time to reflect on the ethos of what Jonathan's charity stands for:

The World Peace Garden Camden is an opportunity to briefly step outside our busy lives and think about a world in which respect for life and the pursuit of peace in every aspect, makes more sense than emphasizing divisions between peoples and going to war.

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