

We are inundated daily with bad news: another mass shooting; the effects of climate change; more deaths of young black men; continued war in the Middle East, to name a few. It is easy to become numb, discouraged or depressed. Here are a few stories that offer me some hope. I trust that they will do the same for you.

First story

Musician Chad Bernstein began mentoring and teaching music to at-risk youth while he was a student at University of Miami. He'd been invited by a friend to lead a workshop for some youths at a detention center. It was rough going, until the instruments came out. Bernstein says that there was a marked shift in the energy in the room when the music started. Suddenly, these kids were interested in what was happening. "It was obvious that music was able to open doors that were previously locked," says Bernstein. That was the beginning. Bernstein went on to found Guitars Over Guns with his father, a financial professional, in 2008. The younger Bernstein later earned his doctorate at the U. of Miami, where his dissertation focused on the effectiveness of music mentoring for at-risk youths.ⁱ

The philosophy of the Guitars Over Guns Organization, or GOGO, as it is known, is to provide mentoring, instrument education and ensemble training.ⁱⁱ They operate in partnership with several middle schools in the poorest sections of Miami and, more recently, Chicago. GOGO brings in professional musicians from the local music scene, who mentor and teach for a small stipend. The program helps to fill a void in schools where music programs have been the victim of budget cuts, or where there never have been music programs.

"The arts are a great equalizer. You put an instrument in front of two kids, and they [both] are struggling with the same thing," says Bernstein.ⁱⁱⁱ GOGO has reached hundreds of kids, including 500 this past summer alone. This school year they are working with about 100 youth in Miami and 40 more in Chicago. The vast majority of those participating have improved their grade-point average, attendance and decision making skills. Suspensions among participants have dropped to near zero.^{iv} Regarding what is happening with these youth, Bernstein says, "As musicians, we understand what kind of power can be found in music especially when you're dealing with difficult issues in your life."^v

Another story

Last Thanksgiving, I had the pleasure of meeting Kinari Webb, founder of Health in Harmony, and a long time friend of my sister and brother-in-law. She was leaving the next day for her other residence, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Kinari is one of those rare people for whom their life-work becomes clear at an early age.

While a student at Reed College, Kinari spent 1993 in the tropical rainforest of Gunung Palung National Park in Indonesia studying orangutans. What she observed changed her life. The

survival of the orangutans was being threatened by illegal logging within the park. The illegal logging was taking place because families needed immediate cash for their very survival.

Paying for health care needs was at the top of the list. Grinding poverty left them debilitated. Medical care was many hours away, poor and expensive. Though the villagers realized they were cutting down the forest on which their well-being depended, they were forced to make choices for short-term survival. How many of us would not make that choice if it came to medical care for our child?

Kinari decided to become a physician and to return to Indonesia "to work together with local communities to improve both their health and preserve the natural environment."^{vi} In 2005, Dr. Kinari Webb founded Health in Harmony, and in 2007, with Dr. Hotlin Ompusunggu, she established ASRI, an Indonesian non-profit that from the beginning has linked human health care with care for the forest.^{vii} The acronym ASRI, means "harmoniously balanced."^{viii} The two organizations work hand-in-hand, with Health in Harmony providing publicity, fund raising and expert volunteers, while ASRI runs the local operations.

Doctors Webb and Ompusunggu spent 2006 in a journey of radical listening. They traveled from village to village, asking, "What would it look like if the world said thank you for protecting this precious rain forest?"^{ix} They learned that, in addition to affordable health care, villagers needed economic alternatives. They were very specific. They needed to be able to farm their rice organically.

Slash and burn agriculture has been their traditional method of farming for thousands of years. In slash and burn, areas of rain forest are cleared, farmed for a few years until the soil goes sterile, then abandoned. With many fewer people, this worked. Over time, the small cleared areas would recover. The villagers knew that it was no longer a viable method of farming. They had heard of a method of sustainable farming, but did not know how to do it.

The villagers knew that logging was making their lives worse. Malaria increases when forest is cleared. Water needed for rice farming becomes less available. There was consensus among every village and between villages as to what the solutions were. They did not have the knowledge or the means to implement these solutions on their own.

Enter Health in Harmony and ASRI. Together, they have established a mobile clinic. They have purchased a 4-wheel drive ambulance. They have trained community health workers and midwives. They have instituted a barter system of payment for health care, rather than cash. What is bartered? Seedlings for reforestation. Manure for organic farming. Handicrafts or labor. There is a 70% discount for non-logging households.

They bring in highly trained doctors from top universities in the U.S to work side by side with Indonesian doctors. The training goes both ways. America has an excess of doctors with means,

but who are looking for purpose and meaning. There are more volunteers than the program can accept.

The results are astounding. After 5 years they found that infant deaths have declined from 3.4 per 100 households to 1.1. Incidents of fever and diarrhea have declined by 20%. Persistent coughing lasting more than three weeks, which often means tuberculosis, has declined by 16%. Finally, births per mother have dropped from an average of 3.1 to 2.6.

On the conservation side, the results are equally astonishing and heartening. Where there were once 1,350 households logging in the national park, there are now only 450. One village has had a reduction in loggers from 100 to 10. ASRI is instituting a chainsaw buyback program to get that number close to zero. Former loggers have become farmers. With sustainable organic farming they do not need expensive chemicals to get started. Health in Harmony estimates that they have helped to save over 1,500 orangutans.

The organizations founded by Doctors Webb and Ompusunggu have discovered what many NGO's worldwide have discovered: what you do may not be as important as how you do it. Local people have the answers. People get excited when they are empowered, when they are listened to. One village chief told Kinari that before, there was no hope among the villagers for their future. Now they have hope.

It is stories like these, the story of Guitars Over Guns and the story of Health in Harmony and ASRI, that help to give me hope. And they are not alone in their work.

Environmental author Paul Hawken discovered something a few years ago. In the many talks he gave around the country and around the world, he gradually became aware that there was something huge going on. Something no one was tracking. Individuals and small groups of persons were engaging in environmental and social justice issues in huge numbers.

And, as we have just heard, environmental and social justice work are related. Hawken says that he learned this from a Native American. The division between human rights and ecology is an artificial one. The way we harm the earth affects all people and the way we treat people is reflected in the way we treat the earth.^x

When Hawken first tried to research the number of groups worldwide which were registered in some way that were doing this type of non-governmental work, he came up with 30,000. As he refined his research methods, it grew to 100,000. But as he continued to dig, the numbers just kept getting larger. Hawken now thinks that there are between 1 and 2 million organizations in the world which are working for ecological sustainability and social justice.^{xi}

By the traditional definitions of a movement, this is not one. It doesn't have centralized leadership. It doesn't have unifying ideologies. It is under the radar of most people, even those involved with one or more of these organizations. Hawken has reached the conclusion that this

is the largest social movement in all of human history. It involves tens of millions of people. It is self organizing, coherent and organic. Where it will lead us, no one knows. But it gives me hope.

In my final story for this morning, I will talk about the Climate Accord that was signed in Paris last December. While this was all over the news while it was happening, it didn't take more than a day or two to disappear after it ended.

What is astounding about this pact is that there is one at all. It is the first time that agreement has been reached which bridges the rich-poor divide around climate change. It is the first truly international plan to address climate change. It seeks to limit global warming not just to 2 degrees Celsius, but to "pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase" to 1.5 degrees Celsius.^{xii}

This latter goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius came about because peoples and nations with the most to lose, those where elevations are just a few feet above sea level, were heard. These are not powerful or rich nations. These are nations like the Marshall Islands, which will likely end up under water even if global warming is limited to 2 degrees. One might say that some radical listening took place in Paris.

Dr. Kinari Webb concludes her recent TED Talk, not yet published, with these words: "All of our salvations are intertwined." The health of a rainforest in Borneo matters to us. All of our actions matter to everyone.^{xiii} Sounds a lot like our 7th UU principle, doesn't it? We respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. It gives me hope that there are millions of organizations, tens of millions of people worldwide, like Kinari, like Chad, who get this, who are working for ecological sustainability and social justice.

May it be so.

ⁱ Christian Science Monitor, People Making a Difference, January 18, 2016.

ⁱⁱ <http://guitarsoverguns.org/the-program/foundation-and-philosophy/> Accessed 1/29/2016

ⁱⁱⁱ CSM

^{iv} CSM

^v <http://herohighlight.com/guitars-over-guns/> Accessed 1/29/2016

^{vi} <https://www.healthinharmony.org/about/board/>

^{vii} <https://www.healthinharmony.org/about/mission-history/>

^{viii} <https://www.healthinharmony.org/about/mission-history/>

^{ix} <https://www.healthinharmony.org/about/what-is-radical-listening/>

^x Paul Hawken, 2

^{xi} Hawken, 2

^{xii} <http://www.csmonitor.com/Environment/Energy/2015/1212/Rich-and-poor-nations-agree-to-first-ever-global-climate-pact>

^{xiii} <http://livestream.com/accounts/50006/events/4371497>