



Changing the World Three Feet at a Time

October 17, 2018

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Dr. Paul Slovic, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, studies human judgment, decision making, and the psychology of risk. He recently gave a sermon on Rosh Hashana at Temple Beth Israel in Eugene, in which he reflected on pervasive societal inaction when we believe that we can't make a significant difference. In his studies, he found we decline to act in the face of great need because of the misconception that our efforts would be fruitless.

Using multiple scenarios and isolated test groups, Dr. Slovic tested the hypothesis that people give less or take less action as the magnitude of the problem increases. In one study, people were asked to donate to a charity to help a starving child, who was identified with her name, photo and the country where she lived. In a second group, participants had the same chance to donate, but were also informed of the magnitude of the crisis – that millions were starving in the region where the child lived. The result? Donations dropped almost in half when donors were told that the child was one of millions in need. Other scenarios for giving or action produced similar results as the extent of the problem became known.

Dr. Slovic urges us to avoid this trap: “Just because we can't help everyone doesn't mean we should help no one. We gave a name to this deception of our feelings: we called it '[pseudoinefficacy](#)', a false sense of inefficacy, false because we really could do something that was meaningful and worthwhile.”

When the troubles of our world seem too big to tackle, we can be lulled into this sense of pseudoinefficacy. It's tempting to check out, rather than advocating for change or working against poverty. It's a little like thinking, “If I can't change the world, I'll just watch tv.” Dr. Slovic's research compels us to act, even if the impact might seem small on the larger scale of human suffering.

Aunt Doty offers less scientific, but still profound wisdom: “I don't know how to change the world. But I can change the three feet around me.” These words of his Aunt Doty changed Dr. Gregory Ellison's life. The author of several books including *Fear+Less Dialogues*, Dr. Ellison went through soul-searching about how to serve God authentically. Around him, colleagues and friends were making powerful statements for justice, including marching in the streets. For Dr. Ellison, however, this form of activism was not true to himself. Aunt Doty's words led him to study more deeply Jesus' activism: “Jesus contested social inferiority by *impressing a profound sense of belonging* upon all (lepers, adulterers, tax collectors, and even Roman soldiers) that crossed within his three-foot orbit.” (emphasis added)

Within our 3-foot orbit, we *can* effect change for the better. The challenge for us is where we will venture, as we measure this 3-foot circumference. If we only stay in safe circles, we might well miss our calling. “Jesus laid a path to social change that placed him in constant contact with unlikely partners,” writes Dr. Ellison. Will you risk encounters with unlikely partners? Those are amazing spaces for ministry. We might not change the world, but we can do something meaningful and worthwhile, 3 feet at a time.