



Sprouting Seeds of Compassion

MARC IAN BARASCH decides to see what would happen if he simply planted a seed of good intention and waited to see what came up. That seed grew into millions of trees. Here he offers tips on how you too can make a difference.

*Enough words have been exchanged;
Now at last let me see some deeds!
... What does not happen today,
will not be done tomorrow.*
—Goethe

I CAN ALMOST PINPOINT THE MOMENT when I decided to save the world. It was sometime after my Mom died—my Mom who was the secret solar center of my life; whose letters always ended in exuberant sign-offs (*lovelovelove*, three exclamation points); who'd insisted, despite her terminal diagnosis, that I not cancel my book tour because the subject—compassion—was, for her, life's indispensable thread.

I'd begun writing my book *The Compassionate Life* to blow the dust off my bodhisattva vows, little suspecting how much the ideas on the page would get under my skin. Hanging out with the folks who do the heart's heavy lifting—homeless shelter workers, kidney donors, people who forgave their mortal enemies—made me want to get out from behind the desk and do something for the world (wherever that was).

When I heard Mom was suddenly fading, I cabled from a Seattle bookstore to a New York-bound redevye, arriving just in time to say goodbye. Afterward, people kept coming up to tell me things that Mom had done for them: little things, big things, always specific, usually unasked for. A giver to the end, she'd done a final boon for me, too, leaving me enough money to pay my debts and live for a year without working.

I needed the time—to mourn, to reassess, to molt. One day, loitering in a used bookstore, I met a beautiful Russian who was visiting on a Fulbright, and I took the poet Rumi's advice: *Gam-*

ble everything for love. We soon moved in together, though she found my career trajectory baffling: what exactly did I *do*? I tried to explain *wu wei*, the Taoist art of “not-doing,” insisting this was not the same as doing nothing. She looked dubious.

I realized I'd embarked on an ad hoc metaphysical experiment: what would happen if I planted a seed of intention to do some tangible good, and waited to see what came up? I'd long been inspired by my activist friends who saved rainforests, protected human rights, made peace in war zones. Some of them were wealthy enough to never worry about money, but why wait until I got rich to be the change I wanted to see? “Why,” I half-jokingly asked a friend, “can't I be a penniless philanthropist?”

Cue the voice-over: *Be careful what you wish for.* One day, visiting a friend's house in Malibu, I met an old man who had spent his life planting trees. As we talked through the afternoon, with the blue Pacific murmuring rumors of the world's vastness, and nearness, he explained how trees were the ecological equivalent of one-stop shopping: they could restore degraded soil, increase crops, feed livestock, provide building materials and firewood, restore biodiversity, sustain villages, and bring dormant springs back to life—all the while sucking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

I had a minor epiphany: *green compassion!* It's said that in meditation, you should practice as if your hair is on fire. Now, with the forests burning, land desertifying, and the climate creeping ominously up the Celsius scale, what was I—or any of us—waiting for?

My friend in Malibu gave me the umbrella of his nonprofit foundation and a small loan to start what I dubbed the Green World Campaign. I decided to work for free, testing the germinating power of pure intent, the fecundity of the void. My kitchen table became campaign headquarters. Soon enough, willing hands appeared: a former World Bank country director; a geospatial expert from UC Berkeley; a former corporate technology officer from New York; a climate change lawyer in London; an adman whose footwear campaign was a case study in *The Tipping Point*.

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We cadged a Hollywood crew to make a video touting agroforestry, funded a pilot project in Ethiopia. When my savings were depleted and I began to doubt my sanity, a movie director astonished me by writing a check to support me for six months. "I like the idea of planting trees," he told me, "but right now I want to water the tree-planter."

Someone gave me a ticket to Ethiopia so I could see for myself the programs we were supporting. One night I found myself the only foreign face among ten thousand Muslim pilgrims at a backcountry religious festival in the Gurage Zone. Families set up campsites bounded by sheets and chanted and clapped through the night, their silhouettes backlit by smoky orange fires. I felt enfolded, no longer a stranger in a strange land but a global citizen, permanent home address Earth.

Later, I visited a remote village where the main water pump had been broken for more than a year. The stagnant well was infested with parasites. The young people had to trek for miles each morning to get fresh water, reserving a few gallons to keep a few scraggly tree seedlings alive. For under a thousand dollars, I was told, they could get their pump fixed. Done, I said. *Kadam!* they yelled. *Wonderful!* I reveled in the joy on the kids' faces, amazed that scratching a few symbols on a piece of paper could renew a village.

A Mexican organization working to restore the forestlands of an indigenous Tlahuica community soon asked to be Green World Mexico. I was emailed by a forestry professor in Zambia, by a tribal prince in Kenya, by a community doing ecological restoration of India's sacred Arunachala mountain. It dawned on me that there were groups all over the world creating organic models of rural development to turn barren land green again, and we could help weave them together.

The campaign was becoming an interface for direct planetary action, an emergent network of global citizens. It was exhilarating, and also heartbreaking. There were the inevitable screw-ups. I was reminded how our grasping, aversion, and ignorance ever shadow our generosity and openheartedness. Philanthropy can be a competitive scrum where the most ringing declarations of *we're-all-in-this-together* devolve into *what's-in-it-for-me*. I learned the truth of the Arabic adage: "Love all men, but tie up your camel." I saw how the ensorcelling web of symbols called money obscures the imperative to preserve the green Earth. In Ethiopia's Rift Valley, a mosquito donated a malarial parasite that nearly killed me, proving how small things of no seeming consequence can thwart our loftiest purposes.

But as long as you're willing to keep having your heart broken, all things are possible. The ground, no matter how many times you land on it, hard, is the working basis: the earth beneath your feet, the dirt under your fingernails. I've spent four stubborn years at my unexpected posting in the forest legion, and it's resurrected my hope and blown my life wide open. Though I'm hesitant to recommend my approach (*Don't try this at home!*), I offer, for what they're worth, these few *aperçus*:

Expect Synchronicity: The Bible lauds the mustard seed of faith. It's said in Hinduism that "the means gather around *sattva*." New

Agers reference “the power of intention.” Businesspeople talk about what happens when you put “skin in the game,” while Buddhists refer to *tendrel* (a Tibetan term that means both serendipity and the interdependence of all things). Whatever’s at work, I’ve had a growing sense of invisible orchestration and behind-the-scenes cosmic string-pulling since I started groping for ways to do my part for Gaia. I’ve also learned that when doors magically fly open, you’d better walk in with your pragmatic hat jammed firmly on your head, your practical feet encased in sturdy shoes, and your sleeves rolled up for the grind of making (and keeping) it real.

You Don’t Need Money (Then Again, You Really, Really Do): Time, energy, vision, and love will go an astonishingly long way, but funding counts. “Your balance sheet is feedback,” a business adviser bluntly told me. “It shows whether you have a viable model.” True, the only meaningful metric is the thriving of people and planet. And the financial system *is* fictive (the numbers only work when people at the “bottom of the pyramid” are omitted from the bottom line, and the value of nature is discounted to near zero). Put on a *real* green eyeshade and nearly every business on Earth is revealed to be running in the red. Still, one must respect—no, embrace—the dance-partner of illusion: money may not be “real,” but you suffer when it tromps on your instep, feel the joy of efficacy when it empowers your mission. Beyond that, as Whitman said, “Resist what insults your own soul.” If we all were to start doing what we authentically believed to be the needful thing, we could yet pull the fat out of the fire.

Don’t Get Grandiose (and Don’t Play Small): Self-anointedness is an occupational hazard for would-be world-savers. It’s easy to succumb to the Atlas syndrome (*don’t shrug!*). On the other hand, what’s at stake these days is the fate of the Earth and of generations to come. If you believe there really is enough to feed, clothe, house, heal, and educate everyone, that our environment can be green again, then follow Goethe’s inimitable words: “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it.” Our problem is less a shortage of resources

than a shortchanging of our imagination. Compassion is just the ability to see the connection between everyone and everything, everywhere—and to act on it.

Go With What You’ve Got (and Ask for What You Don’t): Trust that solutions are self-emergent, that the right people will self-aggregate, and that to ask what the universe wants is not a crazy question. Sketch a few back-of-the-napkin diagrams of your networks of networks (and notice how the degrees of separation dwindle to nil). You’re a neuron in the global brain, a muscle cell in the heart of new planetary body. Suss out your function in this evolving physiology, stay authentic, keep signaling your fellow organelles, and you might find the resources you need close at hand, among your friends and neighbors.

Start With a Seed: I think a lot about seeds. How does a tiny dot of seemingly inert matter buried in dirt produce such beauty and utility? A seed is less a physical object than it is the germ of an idea. It’s the information it contains that mobilizes elements in the soil to join the dance that creates magnificent living structures. There’s something within each of us, within each situation, that already knows how to grow, that just needs light and nourishment to potentiate truly magical creative forces. If you start small, dream big, plant a seed of intention, and care for it, it’s not unrealistic to expect something marvelous to come up.

I’ve come to admire the metaphoric elegance of a tree: donating free oxygen, running on solar energy, sheltering all creatures, putting on a display of life’s ceaseless generativity. Since forever, people have gathered beneath trees to parley and palaver, to picnic and to play. Every faith has a Great Tree somewhere in its narrative. Each sapling we help to plant feels like a resurrection of hope, an emissary to future generations. We’re now setting out to scale up our efforts, convinced that the Green World Campaign can help plant billions of trees, restoring the economy and ecology of some of the world’s poorest places. I made up a slogan, a mantra I apply to both daily increments and grand gestures: *It’s amazing what one seed can grow*. Sown in the ground, planted in the heart, each day it grows a little more true. ♦