

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

William F. Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

*“Everybody thinks of changing the world, and nobody thinks of changing himself.”*¹

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)

The words of a 19th century Russian novelist were echoed by the famed strategic psychotherapist Jay Haley who once observed that people often seek psychotherapy not to change but to keep from changing. In other words, we are more often concerned with changing others than in changing ourselves. In revealing the paradoxical secret of change, Georgia psychologist Daniel Johnston once noted, “If you change yourself, the surprise is that others may change as well” (2001, p. 44). Dr. Johnston’s observation had been made centuries earlier by an Anglo-Saxon Bishop (1100 C.E.) whose words of wisdom were written on his tomb in the crypts of Westminster Abbey:

“When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would have then been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.”

Many years ago, I dreamed I could change the world. I wanted to be a doctor, a teacher, a theologian. Many years later, when I had become none of them, I realized that I have become all three of these things and more. Somewhere in between, I no longer dreamed of changing the world. I focused on changing myself. Yet how do we change ourselves? As Sigmund Freud observed, “Emotions are the fuel of change.” The process of changing ourselves involves awareness, acceptance, and action.

In studying the process of self-change, James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo Diclemente (1994) identified six stages of change. Beginning with precontemplation (or being unaware that there is any need for change), the stages of change include contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. According to Martin Seligman, a former president of the American Psychological Association, the beginning of real change is “the knowledge of the difference between what we can change and what we must accept in ourselves (1993, p. 15). Seligman’s insight is a cognitive-behavioral restatement of the Serenity Prayer that has become a contemporary secular chant: “God, Grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”²

On the larger societal scale, the first step toward responding to an unacceptable situation is to recognize the need for action. According to social worker Mark Homan (1994, 2016), once an unacceptable situation has been identified, there are four basic responses from which to choose. One option is to change our perception by identifying the situation as acceptable. Or, we can recognize the situation as unacceptable and then decide to adjust ourselves to it. A third option is to leave the situation, either by physically leaving or emotionally withdrawing. Finally, we can identify an unacceptable situation as unacceptable and then do what we can do to change it.

Putting books and theories aside, I invite you to step out of your comfort zone and consider making a positive change in your life. Are you encountering an unacceptable situation in your life? Have you considered the possibility of changing your situation by changing yourself?

Footnotes

1. According to another source, Leo Tolstoy once said, “Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself.” In Mead, Frank S. (Ed.) (1965). *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*. London: Peter Davis Ltd., p. 400. However, because the world has been changed by both men and women, a more modern translation would read, “We all think of changing the world, and none of us thinks of changing ourselves.”

2. Seligman’s insight is a restatement of the “Serenity Prayer” popularized by Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), who some regard as one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. Niebuhr, in turn, once credited the prayer to the eighteenth century German theologian Johann Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1782), who wrote under the name Theodor Wilhelm.

About the Author

Dr. Doverspike is an Adjunct Professor in the doctoral clinical training program of the Department of Psychology at Emory University. He is also Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor in the Mercer University College of Health Professions in Atlanta. He is Adjunct Professor in the counseling program at Richmond Graduate University. He earned board certification Diplomates in Clinical Psychology (ABPP) and Neuropsychology (ABPN). He was President (2003-2004) of the Georgia Psychological Association (GPA), Editor of the Georgia Psychologist magazine (1997-2008), member of the GPA Executive Committee (1997-2008), and member of the GPA Ethics Committee (1995-2008). He has served as a member of the State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (2008-2022), which is the Georgia Board of Psychology. He maintains a private practice at the Atlanta Counseling Center.

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