

# WANT TO BE A CHANGE AGENT? HERE'S HOW!

by Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

Good morning!  
Come into this circle of love,  
Come into this community of justice,  
Come, and you shall know peace and joy.  
Come now, and let us worship together.

Let me introduce you to a soft-spoken Southern businessman his name is Ray Anderson and he is the CEO of Interface, the largest commercial carpet firm in the world. Something happened that radically changed his company, and that something happened first inside of Ray Anderson.

It all started when he was asked to give an environmental vision for his company. He worried for three weeks about what he would say. And well he should have, because he didn't have a vision. He didn't even have much interest in the topic. "Frankly," he said, "all I knew was comply, comply, comply." That can often mean "as bad as the law allows." By coincidence someone sent him a copy of Paul Hawken's book *The Ecology of Commerce*. He said, "Reading that book was like someone threw a spear through my heart. I wasn't half-way through it when I felt a powerful sense 'of urgency and knew exactly what I was going to say. . . I knew we were headed way beyond compliance."

Anderson's first move was to turn his own company, with its manufacturing sites spread across four continents, into-in his words-a "restorative enterprise," not merely recycling waste materials but returning to the earth more than was taken out. Anderson and his associates in 110 countries began re-imagining and redefining their business. Over the first five years of this effort, Interface invested \$25,000,000 in waste reduction and saved \$122,000,000. He's not there yet, though-he's working toward making his company completely sustainable within 20 years, taking nothing from the Earth and doing no harm to the biosphere.

Anderson's second order of business was to help other companies move in this same direction. By 1998, he was traveling almost constantly, giving more than a hundred speeches a year to businesses and environmental groups around the world. He's interested in creating "the next industrial revolution." Ray tells his listeners, "Business is the largest, wealthiest, most pervasive institution on earth. We're a major part of the problem. Unless we become part of the solution, it's over, and our great-grandchildren won't have a world worth living in."<sup>1</sup>

As I think about this story, I ask myself, "How did this conversion come about? What were the elements that led to such drastic change?" First of all, someone asked Anderson to give a speech on the environment. We don't know who this person was, or why he or she asked. But somebody cared, and that somebody asked. That request started a whole chain of events. I don't know Anderson, but he must be a person who is open to hearing points of view other than his own, else why would he have agreed to read Hawken's 5 book. Who gave him the book? And what was this "powerfully sense of urgency" he speaks of? I can't help but think that grace was operating through this whole process, and that Anderson, for whatever reason, allowed that grace to shake him and change him.

This is how it happens-change, I mean. Someone imagines an educational event, someone else asks speakers, another does the press release, still others come early to the event and set up the chairs, see that the microphone is working properly. Change doesn't happen by accident, and it doesn't happen most of the time from the top down. It happens when ordinary people decide to move on what they know. Not just what they know in their heads, but when some inner necessity compels them-moral outrage, a sense of justice, passion, compassion.

Near the beginning of this church year, I gave a sermon on leadership, and after that sermon I had two people on separate occasions approach me and say, "Well, what about follower-ship? I'm not a leader. What about people like me?" It is interesting to me that I see both of these people as leaders, but let's not argue the point. Suppose you see yourself as 'just a foot soldier.'" Do you really think that change can come about without you?

Think for a moment about who brought an end to the Vietnam War. Who freed women to pursue their true passions, their various callings? Consider the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., was at the heart of the leadership, but hear these words he spoke as he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize: ". . . some years ago, I was seated in a huge jet at O'Hare field in Chicago. In a matter of moments, the mighty plane was to take off <but> we heard the announcement that there would be a delay in departure. There was some mechanical difficulty. . . Looking out of the window, I saw a half a dozen men approaching the plane. They were dressed in dirty, greasy overalls. They assembled around the plane and began to work. Someone told me this was the ground crew. All during that flight, I am sure that there were some on the plane who were grateful for our competent pilot . . . I am sure that many of the passengers were conscious of the co-pilot and the <charming and gracious> stewardesses, but in my mind, first and foremost, was the memory of the ground crew.

"There are many wonderful pilots today, charting the sometimes rocky, sometimes smooth, course of human progress. Pilots like Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young and A. Philip Randolph. And yet, if it were not for the ground crew, the struggle for human dignity and social justice would not be in orbit. This is why I thought of the Nobel Peace Prize as a prize, a reward, for the ground crew: 50,000 Negro

<sup>1</sup>Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*. New York: Harmony Books, 2000, pp.10-li.

people in Montgomery, Alabama, who came to discover that it is better to walk in dignity than to ride in buses; the students all over this nation, who in sitting down in restaurants and departments stores were actually standing up for the true American dream; . . . Americans, colored and white, who marched on Washington. In the final analysis, it must be said that this Nobel Prize was won by a movement of great people whose discipline, wise restraint, and majestic courage have led them down a non-violent course in seeking to establish a reign of justice and a rule of love across this nation of ours."

You who think you're just part of the "ground crew," you are a change agent. You are a change agent when you gather signatures on a petition, when you turn away from homophobic humor, when you join a march for something you believe in. Social change seems to be so elusive, and we push and push and push, and the time is not quite right, and then the time is right, there is a "tipping point," and the great majority of the culture moves in a new direction. The powers that be cannot stand against the will of the people. They can do nothing that we the people do not allow them to do.

So you want to act for social change? Here's how-I'm calling this Sewell's "Laws of Change." There are ten of them.

**Law #1: Go with your passion.** If you're not energized by your justice work, if it's not satisfying in some elemental way, let it go. Never, and I repeat never, allow yourself to be motivated by guilt. Acknowledge your responsibility, especially if you are personally laying waste to the earth or whatever, but guilt is something else-it is not enabling, but disabling. And forget will power. It will work for only a short while. Have you noticed that about diets? Actually, we don't say diet now, we say "food plan." Suppose your food plan doesn't include chocolate chip cookies, but you have a meeting at your house and somebody leaves a whole plate of cookies with you. You eat one and then you are overcome with guilt. You say, "Oh, no, I've had a cookie! I'm a bad person. Might as well eat the whole plateful." Forget will power, forget guilt-these are not healthy and dependable motivators. Go with your joy and your positive energy.

**Law #2: Be what you want to see.** You've heard this before, but it's where you have to start. Your most powerful witness is the way you choose to live. You can't get in your SUV and go out and get people to sign petitions encouraging Congress to support laws requiring fuel-efficient automobiles. It's easy enough to point the finger at someone else, but you have to ask yourself, "OK, what do I have to do to 'walk the walk' and not just 'talk the talk'?"

**#3: Enlarge your sense of family.** We say "my family," and we generally mean **our** immediate family, our next of kin. And we tend to take care of our own. That's just **not** good enough. When I grew up in the South, I knew people who were "nice" people, "good" people, "generous" people, and of course gracious and hospitable, as Southerners are wont to be. But their family, maybe their neighborhood, maybe their church and school-well, that is where it ended. They seemed to be unbothered that 2/3rds of the town-the Black 2/3rds-lived in shacks built on big rocks, had windows covered with tar-paper instead of screens. Those children were not their children.

But in principle, are we all that different? How big is your family? People die in this church, and they leave all their money to their children. People who've been members of this church, who've been ministered to, for 30, 40, 50 years die and never leave a penny to the church. I don't understand this, really. I explained to my boys that they would inherit some of my money, but not all of it. Not that we're talking about a lot of money. But they were surprised. They didn't like that idea. But why should they

inherit my money? They have had every advantage in life, and they are able to care for themselves and their families. As I explained to my sons, there are children nobody cares about. I have to care about you boys, I said, but I have to care about those other children, too. And I'm not talking just about the children in Portland, or just in Oregon, or not even just in the United States-wherever in this world my government puts its hands, there too are my children.

**#4: Give up cynicism and embrace hope.** *Cynic* comes from the Greek root word *kynikos*, which means **canine, or like a dog**, and lends itself to sneering and sarcasm. The cynic distrusts others and believes that people act only from selfish motives. The fact is' it's difficult not to be cynical when you open the morning paper and read the latest pronouncement from the leaders of our national government. Or when we read about the Enron/Anderson scandal. But I know when I feel myself beginning to feed on sarcasm and to snarl like a dog, my energy changes, and I begin to feel helpless and hopeless. It's not enough to know what's wrong with the world-we have to begin to imagine what we would like instead, to have a positive vision. As Unitarian Universalists, we're too often clever at analysis, good at defining the problem, and then we stop there, smug and self-satisfied. Not only must we say no, we must then find a way to say yes, else we will sink into despair or pull back in smug self-righteousness.

**#5: Refuse to stand by passively when evil is at work.** Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke out early on against the war in Vietnam. Many of his friends, he says, of both races, disapproved of his stand. The press said he was getting "out of his depth." He was told to stick to the business of civil rights. But one night he picked up an article entitled "The Children of Vietnam," and he read it, and he said to himself "Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam."

Once in a while when I speak on economic matters, someone comes up to me after the sermon and says, "*You* know, Marilyn, I wish you would just stick to spiritual matters-you know, you really don't know anything about economics." I see people on the street without a place to live. I know that there are hungry people, many of them, in our state. I know some working people have to have two or even three jobs just to stay afloat. How much of an expert do I have to be to see that this is wrong?

**#6: Start small and build from there.** I liked the approach that Rick North and our Seventh Principle group used a few Sundays ago when they asked us to make a simple pledge about the food we eat. "Eat one meatless meal a week," the pledge said. Since I signed on the dotted line, I have been more conscious of what I'm eating. You learn how much grain it takes to grow a pound of beef and all of a sudden, that big steak looks, well, vulgar. You don't have to be a vegetarian tomorrow. Or ever. Start small. And remember, you don't have to be involved in every issue-choose one that makes your heart beat faster. You will discover before too long that all the issues are connected, for they are all swirling round in the common vortex of greed, the greed of the few bleeding the lives of the many.

**#7: Surround yourself with people whose values you respect,** people who can teach you and help you grow. We are such social creatures-we become more and more like the people we hang out with: we are informed by their words, their behavior. Choose your companions carefully.

**#8: Join with others in groups, for what you cannot do alone, you can do with others.** Those groups can then join in coalition with other groups, and your common voice will become too strong to ignore. Remember the words of Marge Piercy:

"it starts when you say *We*/ and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more."

**#9: Look for those "teachable moments,"** those times when an issue is lifted up in the public eye, and there is energy around it. Capital punishment was a non-issue for most of the public for a long, long time- 80% of the people were in favor of it. Then DNA testing came along, and leadership came from the governor of Illinois, who put a moratorium on executions in his state, making other states re-think their laws. Somehow now the time is right for a change. And Enron? Enron is a gift. This scandal makes so very clear how big money runs our government. The need for campaign finance reform has been brought into sharp relief

**#10: Don't become invested in the fruits.** As change agents, we have to recognize our limitations-we cannot control the outcome. **We** can only be faithful to the work. Susan **B.** Anthony was never able to go to the polls to vote, you know. She died at the age of 86. **A** month before, she spoke for the last time at a suffrage convention. Standing firmly in faith, she said to the gathered company: "Failure is impossible." Much of the work we start will be left to future generations to complete, and that's all right. It will ever and always be that way.

Perhaps you've been sitting there thinking, "Well, I do want to become more involved, but I'm not sure where to start." I want to tell you of some opportunities that you can take advantage of today, with our social justice program here at the church.

--You can attend the forum on "Leading Transformational Change," co-led by Walt Roberts, a member here and a change agent with a lot of know-how, and co-led by our own Social Justice Director, Kate Lore. I plan to be there, too. It's this coming Thursday evening, from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.

--You can join a new group called "Stand for Children" that is just organizing and will be advocating for children. Other chapters are forming all over the nation.

--The Peace Action group is being reorganized, and you can help with that effort. Since it looks as though we are revving up our war machine to attack Iraq, this group has important work to do, and *now*.

--You can join one of our thriving action groups, the Economic Justice group and the Seventh Principle group, which works on environmental issues. Or the new group forming around health care issues.

There will be tables in Fuller Hall downstairs during the coffee hour so that you can sign up for any of these groups you wish to join, or you can talk with someone and find out more about a given group.

But I guess the question remains, why do any of this at all? We're all so busy-why get involved? Well, for one thing, if we are maturing spiritually, our lives demand that we act. Spirituality is not some feel-good experience on a mountain top. The reality of it is down in the flatlands, the valleys, where the people live. Also I have to say that for me the answer is that if I don't get involved, I would fear the questions of my children and grandchildren. They will ask: "Where were you, Mom, when people walked the streets with no shelter? Where were you when the ozone layer got a hole through it? Where were you when our

country went on the attack because we waited more oil to keep up our fancy lifestyle, and so many civilians were killed? Where were you? And where was the church?" I want to be able to say, "Yes, I was there. And the church was there. We were faithful. We did our best. And now it is you who must carry on. You have learned from us that a better world is possible, and you have learned from us to never, never give up." So be it. Amen.

#### PRAYER

Spirit of Life, we come today wanting new life. We come in all humility knowing that we cannot do everything, but wanting so much to be faithful to the best that we know. Let grace flow through our lives, directing us in the way that we should go. Give us courage when we are afraid. Give us patience when change refuses to come. May we together, holding one another and loving one another, build a land where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream. Amen.

#### BENEDICTION

May your hands find the work that is yours to do, and may your heart be bold enough to do it. Go in love and go in peace. Amen.