

Featured in PARADE Magazine

We Can Move Mountains

by Matt Damon

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Actor Matt Damon, famous as the hero of the three Bourne movies, is also the star of films such as The Departed and The Informant! But the Oscar winner spends a lot of time working for charitable causes. We asked him why giving is so important.

When I was a boy, my mom had a magnet on the refrigerator with a little picture of Gandhi along with a quote from him. It said: "No matter how insignificant what you do may seem, it is important that you do it." As a child, I was raised to believe that, and to this day I do my best to live it.

Nowadays, sentimental magnetized credos have gone the way of nostalgia, and technology has forever changed the way younger generations communicate. But those are still really good words to live by.

I got an allowance of \$5 a week when I was a kid, but I never spent much money on anything. My mother was involved in all sorts of causes, and when I was about 12, I started sending a little bit every month to one of them. I learned then that you find one thing that matters to you, and it changes your whole mind-set.

Here's something that matters to me right now. Every 15 seconds, a child dies because of a lack of clean water and sanitation. I should probably repeat that: Every 15 seconds, a child dies because of a lack of clean water and sanitation. A billion people on our planet will never have a clean drink of water. There are 2.5 billion people in the world without toilet facilities. That kind of deprivation isn't even on our radar in the U.S., but in Africa it's the central preoccupation of many people's lives. And the most devastating thing about it is that it takes so little to change it. Just \$25 will give someone clean water for life—yes, just \$25 will change someone's future forever.

I've taken a lot of trips in the last few years to places like Africa and India and Haiti to try to learn what conditions are like. You can read about extreme poverty and possible solutions, but it's really powerful when you get to meet the people and shake their hands and listen to their stories. I try to keep my trips short because my kids are so young that my wife, Lucy, can't come. We don't like to be separated, but we both feel it's so important to learn about these things. There's so much I don't know. In the future, I know these trips are something we'll do as a family.

There's so much need, it's so hard to decide where to give. For me, I look at the organizations that are actually doing the work on the ground. I co-founded Water.org, which focuses on water and sanitation. I was in Ethiopia earlier this year, and I watched children taking filthy water out of a hand-dug well and putting it in bottles to take to school. The water was so dirty, it looked like chocolate milk. I wanted to knock it out of their hands and say, "Don't drink that—it could kill you." The dilemma is that drinking nothing at all will kill them even faster. Parents in these impoverished areas lose children every year to diseases that could be completely prevented if they had access to clean water.

In poor rural areas, people can spend five hours each day just getting clean water. Water.org is creating a microfinance model that gives individuals loans they can use to connect their homes to a water source. As a result of not having to spend time walking to the clean-water source, they are able to spend more time working—so in short order, the loans get paid off, and they have extra money in their pockets and clean water in their homes. These loans are being paid back at such a high rate that commercial banks now want to get involved.

Poverty feeds into the clean-water crisis, which contributes to hunger, and so on. There's undeniable interconnectivity among these issues. Just one of these problems can be deadly on its own, but in the most disadvantaged areas there is a perfect storm of problems. And it takes its greatest toll on children. To that end, I also do a great deal of work with an organization called ONEONE, which is a charity focused exclusively on helping children, with a concentration on clean water, hunger, health care, education, and play here in the U.S. as well as around the world.

I went to Tanzania a couple of years ago. President Bush had just started the President's Malaria Initiative. I visited a clinic where a young woman came in with her horribly sick 5-month-old son. His eyes were rolling in his head, and I thought he would die in front of me. I was shocked. I asked the doctor, "Is he going to be okay?" And the doctor said, "Yes, we gave him the medication to reduce his fever." Relief ran through my body, and I got this adrenaline rush. That's a very cool feeling: hope. Later, the mother told me how she had walked for two hours to get to the clinic. Her older child had died the year before from malaria because she didn't have access to medicine. It was awful what this woman had gone through—but with heavy hearts, we arrived at a sense of optimism. Her 5-month-old would live. I saw over and over again that people were alive because Americans were willing to be generous.

I've been very lucky in my life, but even the average American lives in a way that is almost unthinkable to a couple of billion people in the world. There's an unbelievable imbalance. I think it's incumbent on all of us to do what we can to mitigate other people's pain. There are so many

ways you can help.

My brother has a group of guys in Boston who all run triathlons together. They do it for fun, but they also look at it as a platform for raising money and awareness. My friend actor Don Cheadle organized a poker game for charity. But you don't have to be famous to say, "Let's have a poker tournament at my house. Everyone's going to buy in for \$20, and I'd like the top three winners to give at least half their take to charity." As this happens more and more at the community level, we can raise the next generation to be so much more aware of the world they're living in.

I can't think of any more important value to instill in our children than the desire to help others. I feel strongly about setting an example for them. Real problems can be solved by the next generation if we instill in them the right values. I'm not a politician, and I don't want to tell anybody how to live. But I must say, all these years later, I still think Gandhi had the right idea: No matter how small the contribution we make may seem, it's crucial that we all do our part.

Please find out what you can do to make a difference. Take five minutes to educate yourself on an issue you didn't know about before. Then tell somebody else. Or make a small donation, if you can. Every dollar counts. Charitable foundations would rather have a million people donate \$1 each than have a handful of people write big checks, because that means millions of us are getting involved. If you give \$5 and talk to your neighbor about giving \$5, that's a big deal. If that conversation goes on across the country, we'll really start moving some mountains.

We're here for such a short time. When your great-great-grandkids study history, don't you want them to be proud that you were part of the solution?