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I recently suggested individuals—even whole societies—can affect change in cultural and social problems if we let go of our cherished mantra, "live and let live," in favor of "live and help live."

How do we do that? Here's an example.

In the spring of 1940, after the Nazi army had invaded France and was rapidly conquering the entire country, thousands of French Jews headed south, leaving behind their most cherished possessions—even family photographs—to obtain visas to Portugal or Spain. However, these countries had scarcely any interest in playing host to a flood of ragged refugees. The Portuguese government instructed its consul in Bordeaux that every visa he approved would have to be ratified by its Foreign Ministry—which, of course, would take its sweet time doing so. As things turned from desperate to chaotic, the Portuguese consul, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, decided to ignore the edict. For ten days, he and his staff worked around the clock, hardly stopping to sleep, to issue thousands of life-giving visas, which typically covered entire families. Before collapsing from exhaustion, Sousa Mendes had saved the lives of up to 30,000 people. Today he is credited for orchestrating "the largest rescue operation by a single individual during the Holocaust," according to Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer.

You may object that you're no diplomat with staff to undertake momentous services. That's not the point of the story. The point is, Sousa Mendes knew he risked his career but went ahead anyway. (Needless to say, the Portuguese government fired him. His hastily-issued visas were, however, accepted as valid.) The man, stuffed shirt though he may seem in photographs, used his imagination. Rather than submit to dogma, he used his life to "live and help live."

We can do the same. Supposing you offered to give a talk in your neighborhood school with the laudable goal to warn youngsters away from recreational drug use and weekend drug parties. You arm yourself with statistics. "America represents 5 percent of the world's population yet we incur 27 percent of its overdose deaths; not only that, we consume 80 percent of the world's opioids," and "The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports, in 2021 more than 106,000 persons in the U.S. died from drug overdoses, including illicit drugs and prescription opioids." The figures keep growing.

You may convince their teachers, but will you convince the students?

To use your imagination, you'll have to ask yourself what in the experiences of young people might cause them to risk their lives on drugs. What day-by-day struggles do they negotiate, in school, with families, among peers? What are they desperate about? Political hatred locally, statewide, nationally? An overheating world that parents scarcely notice and no lawmaker seeks to address apart from holding speeches for or against global warming? Parents who work two and three jobs without health coverage, let alone retirement benefits? Obviously, you should

precede your talk with a question-and-answer session before even addressing student concerns—but would they open up to you, someone they've never met and may not trust?

You read somewhere that many overdose deaths are thought to be suicides. How do you broach the subject of suicide? Wyoming has twice the national suicide rate. Has your neighborhood school experienced a student suicide, or have they heard of a school in a neighboring town or county that did? Does your target school have guidelines to look out for student suicidality? These questions would have to be answered by the school's administration. In today's classroom censorship, where so much common-sense instruction is hyped as immoral or is banned outright, your first task is to convince the principal to allow a talk on substance addiction and its consequences.

Finally, you know that suicidality is closely linked with mental unhealth, and you also know that mental problems originate as a combination of a particular society's prejudices, an individual's personal history and experiences, and our genetic legacies. How can you begin to address these complexities?

At this point, Sousa Mendes's signing thousands of visas and affixing his stamp on each document may seem like child's play compared to addressing an assembly in your neighborhood school. You no longer feel justified to broach the subject, even with your next-door neighbor whose fourteen-year-old, the neighbor confided, is suicidal and has a history of drug use. What do you do?

First off, forget about notions of success. Sousa Mendes had no assurances that the Nazis would stop short of invading his country and that its Jews, along with its desperate refugees, might be lost in the end. And you have no way of knowing the principal's reaction, his teachers' votes should she ask for it, let alone the students' receptivity to your message, should you get to deliver it. But even after you've cleared all the hurdles, what can you do to convince the students, the faculty, and the principal who undoubtedly will attend, ready to interrupt and shape the message according to what she perceives to be protocol?

What you can do is share your experience. I myself would start with an anecdote about my school days—not of the “As valedictorian I spoke on XYZ” kind, but of something to which desperate kids might respond. I would have been thirteen or younger and considered myself a loner. I had no friends among my classmates. I always arrived at the last minute and left as soon as school was out; plus, I was an unruly child who talked when we were supposed to write quietly. One time our teacher called me to the front to identify the location of the Guadalquivier on a huge map. I had no idea. It couldn't be a river in Germany or France, but was it in Spain? North Africa? I just stood there, feeling ashamed. Then the teacher chided me for my muddy shoes. “This is a place of higher education! You should groom accordingly.” To my surprise, a classmate spoke up. “Edith delivers on her bike for her dad's bakery before she comes to school.” I had no idea any of my classmates knew about this. And to stand up to Professor Doktor Brunner! It's only by accident that I learned, someone sympathized with me.

You, too, will find fitting instances once you start thinking about it. Maybe you were a 1965 flower child who experimented with marijuana, morning glory seeds, and hashish while your

parents had strong negative reactions to your “playfulness” and its consequences (you landed in juvenile court). Maybe your family, or someone you know, experienced a suicide and you’re able to describe the anguish, upheaval, and massive guilt that death brought to family members, the immediate community, and the suicide’s friends, fellow students, co-workers, and acquaintances. Maybe you know of a drug overdose death that threw a community in disarray. Such a message can be interspersed with a telling statistic and discussion of the implication of the sobering numbers: “The synthetic opioid fentanyl is thought to be the leading cause of death for Americans ages 18 to 49.”

Next, you must rehearse what you want to say. The impulse to present may have originated off the cuff; your speech can be no such thing. You may be an expert on the subject—maybe you clerked in a drug-treatment court—but that does not mean you’ll be good at talking about it. Even if you’re not much of a writer, it’s best to jot down your ideas and develop a sequence. You may want to practice your speech, at first as an audio recording, then in front of a mirror, then as a video recording.

At first blush such a preparation may strike you as stilted or forced, but no pianist thinks of her repeatedly-rehearsed performances as forced. No poet thinks less of herself because she has memorized for a “reading” her poems or the poems of a writer she admires. One poet I know memorizes simply because he cannot read without a set of heavy lenses, which he feels will create a barrier between his audience and his message. I myself was reading excerpts from Erik Molvar’s “Requiem for a Desert Elk” during publicity readings for an anthology of Wyoming Writers that Molvar was unable to attend. As I entered the concluding passage, I choked up with tears. Before the next reading, I repeatedly read the passage aloud to myself and finally decided, my audience might as well catch a glimpse of how deeply my fellow writer’s story affected me. As long as I was able to articulate clearly each word, each phrase, each sentence, that was enough. And so, I concentrated on speaking clearly rather than suppressing emotions.

Now and then, maybe once in a lifetime, we are confronted with a choice akin to Sousa Mendes’s. Then it’s our turn to use whatever fountain pen and rubber stamp are within reach. It may well be, imagination is the deciding factor. It’s possible, imagination alone may detect the choices that exist at a given moment.