

Acting as God's Partner

by

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A Newton church has a large sign on its lawn. That sign, just like our sign here, announces service times and clergy names. But that church sign also says, "If you are looking for a sign from God – this is it."

How do we recognize a sign from God?

This week I thought about that as I considered again a subject that has intrigued me for many years.

How does God work in the world?

Some believe that God observes us, makes decisions about us and then directly causes changes in the world.

While I honor that view, I do not share it. I see God as a divine and underlying force in the world, a creative energy that lies behind the world we observe.

I do believe that God works in this world, but I believe that we are the ones who do that work. God has no eyes and no hands. We have those. We need to use our eyes to see what needs doing. We need to use our hands to carry out that work. For me, that is the way God works in the world.

These thoughts came to me as I considered three people I learned about this week. Three people who saw what needed to be done and responded by doing it. These three are excellent examples of God's partners.

Alan Lightman is a physicist. He's a professor at MIT.

He's also a successful writer. His 1993 book, "Einstein's Dreams," is an international bestseller.

Eight years ago Alan Lightman found a third and more urgent calling: to educate young Cambodian women and train them for leadership.

One conversation led him to see the need for that work. One visit to Cambodia convinced him: this was what he most needed to do with his life.

The conversation that changed his direction in life took place in 2003. He spoke with a minister who told him about a tiny Muslim village in Cambodia called Tramung Chrum. The minister had been helping young girls in Cambodia stay in school. He told Lightman about the village's only school, a tiny structure with a roof of palm fronds.

Some of us might hear that story, admire what the minister is trying to do, and move on to other matters. Not Lightman. He wanted to know more. Later that same year he and his daughter went to Cambodia to see for themselves what the minister was doing.

They found he was working in a village of about 500 people, mostly consisting of a Muslim group that is one of Cambodia's ethnic minorities. With neither running water nor electricity, the local economy was based on subsistence farming and menial labor.

"We were overwhelmed," Lightman later recalled. "These people had gone through tremendous suffering in the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970's. In spite of that, they had hope and resilience."

The Khmer Rouge genocide was carried out by a despotic ruler of Cambodia named Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge government arrested, tortured and eventually executed anyone suspected of belonging to several categories of supposed "enemies." This included almost everyone with an education, or even people wearing glasses (which, according to the regime, meant that they were literate). Many of the victims were taken to sites (also known as The Killing Fields), outside Phnom Penh where they were executed and buried in mass graves.

The exact number of people who died as a result of the Khmer Rouge's policies is debated, but it is generally agreed that the number certainly exceeds one million and may exceed two million.

As a result, there is a particularly urgent need to educate the citizens of Cambodia in order to rebuild the country. And the need to educate women is especially acute since their opportunities to learn were limited even before the genocide under Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

When Lightman and his daughter arrived in the little village, they were greeted by mothers holding babies. These women came up to them and asked for their help to build a school. Lightman said, "They had nothing, lived in abject poverty, but they wanted a school, a future. We were so moved."

Lightman raised money from family and friends and built the school requested by the villagers. That school, a concrete-and-steel-girder structure, replaced the little room with a roof of palm fronds.

The impetus for Lightman's next project came from Veasna Chea, a native of Tramung Chrum. She completed law school in Phnom Penh. She did that by living for four years with three female classmates in the space on the mud floor beneath the school for four years. Male students could live in the Buddhist temples in the city. But female students were not welcome there. In fact, there weren't any safe places for women to stay in the city, so very few women attended college.

Once again, Lightman took on the challenge. He found contractors. He built first one dormitory, then a second one.

To support this work on an ongoing basis, Lightman established a foundation, the

Harpwell Foundation. Its mission is to empower a new generation of women leaders in Cambodia and the developing world.

The two women's dormitories in Phnom Penh built by Lightman's foundation house 84 women. They provide a haven, nurturing young women who will help rebuild Cambodia's professional class. Lightman hopes to prove that high expectations and a safe, healthy, and inspiring learning environment will bring out the best even from the most underprivileged students.

Living conditions in the Harpwell dorms are orders of magnitude better than what the residents have known. The young women who live there grew up in rural areas in one-room dwellings made of thatched palm leaves with no electricity or plumbing. Lightman says, "The normal future for them would have been to be taken out of school at age 13 or 14 to work in the rice fields, married at age 15 or 16, unless they were sold into prostitution by their parents."

Lightman saw a need. And he responded. Lightman has acted as God's partner to make one part of the world a better place.

Sister Rose Thering is our second example.

Rose Thering was born in 1920 in a little town in Wisconsin. The town is called, believe it or not, Plain. The population of Plain, Wisconsin, is just 771 people.

She was the sixth of 11 children in a German-American farm family. Her family prayed together daily.

She wanted to become a nun. She entered a convent at age 16. She went on to receive a thorough Catholic education, including a bachelor's degree, a master's degree and a Ph. D.

Her doctoral dissertation concerned the treatment of Jews in Catholic textbooks. She was shocked by her findings. She later recalled that she "almost got ill" reading texts that Catholic schools throughout America used to educate school children. She discovered that the only positive references to Judaism in these books concerned Judaism's role, according to them, as the forerunner of Christianity. The books also claimed that God punished the Jews, and still does punish the Jews, because of their rejection of Jesus. These books nearly made her sick because they also openly blamed all Jews for the death of Jesus, often in very graphic terms.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council. The Council met for three years. Its purpose was to address relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world.

Cardinal Augustin Bea relied in part upon Thering's doctoral thesis in order to prepare portions of the 1965 Vatican II document "Nostra Aetate," which means "In Our Age." That important document changed the Catholic doctrine on many topics, including its attitude toward Judaism. In that document the Vatican renounced the claim that all the Jews who were alive at the time of Jesus were responsible for his death. Also, and even more

important, *Nostra Aetate* changed the Church's teaching about the Jews of today. The Catholic Church used to claim that God eternally punished the Jews for the death of Jesus, a teaching that was used to justify modern anti-Semitism. *Nostra Aetate* denied that claim. The document put it this way: "The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God."

As Thering recalled later concerning those rulings, "They were 15 lines in Latin, but they changed everything."

Thering continued in the years that followed to raise consciousness about anti-Semitism and to fight against it.

She traveled to Austria in 1986 to protest the inauguration of President Kurt Waldheim because of his implication in the Nazi deportation of Jews from Greece during World War II. She went to the Soviet Union in 1987 to protest the treatment of Russian Jews.

She joined the faculty of Seton Hall University. There she established workshops on Judaism for church leaders and teachers and led student groups on tours of Israel. Fifty-four tours of Israel.

Until very late in her life, Thering remained an active and vigorous opponent of anti-Semitism. A film about her life and activism, "Sister Rose's Passion," was made in 2004. It was nominated in 2005 for an Academy Award.

Her work continues with the Sister Rose Thering Foundation, which carries on her lifelong fight against anti-Semitism.

The third person I learned about this week, also doing God's work, is John J. Wood.

In 2000, at age 35, John Wood left an executive career at Microsoft Corporation to form Room to Read. It is a non-profit organization that combines the heart of Mother Theresa with the scalability of Starbucks.

Room to Read helps children across the developing world break the cycle of poverty through the power of education.

Wood founded Room to Read out of deep concern that nearly one billion people lack basic literacy and that over 200 million children in the developing world are not enrolled in school.

This is what John Wood says about Room to Read:

I was blessed with a solid education, which was a wonderful foundation for my future. As a result, I had a great career. I started Room to Read as a way to give that same opportunity to children in the world's poorest places. Education is a hand up, not a hand out. It is within our power to be the generation that ends poverty, so we need to think big and execute flawlessly.

Last year, Room to Read celebrated its 10-year anniversary with the opening of its 10,000th library. Room to Read reaches more than four million children in ten developing countries. It operates more than 1,000 schools and 10,000 libraries filled with over seven million children's books. Working in collaboration with local communities, Room to Read has empowered children with increased access to high-quality educational opportunities.

John Wood left the corporate world after an encounter with his trekking guide on a vacation in Nepal. The guide showed Wood the simple room that served as the village school. There were just 20 books there. The villagers had picked them up from the trail after backpackers abandoned them. They kept the books in a locked safe to prevent children from taking them home.

Wood decided right then that he had to help. He launched a book drive for one school. He then turned that one-time act of kindness into the basis of inspiration for the global education movement led by Room to Read.

On the ten-year anniversary last year, John Wood said:

We began our work with a simple desire to bring books to the children of Nepal. It gives me great pleasure to return to Nepal to open our 10,000th library and watch hundreds of children enter it and be surrounded by brand new local language children's books that Room to Read has published. Our strong global team is now opening, on average, six new Reading Rooms per day in the nine countries where we now operate. This means that over 3,000 children gain access to new libraries every day.

Alan Lightman. Sister Rose Thering. John J. Wood.

Three inspiring people. They saw a need, or an injustice, they believed that they could help, and they turned that belief into action.

We can do it, too. We don't have to build schools in a faraway country or alter the course of a major religion or extend literacy to millions of children in order to serve as God's partners.

Alice and I have a cousin who is doing God's work. She cares selflessly for her adolescent daughter, a young woman who is now eighteen. The daughter has suffered for her entire life with a profound, chronic disease. It is called tuberous sclerosis. It's a genetic disorder that causes tumors to form in many different organs, primarily in the brain, eyes, heart, kidney, skin and lungs. The disease reduces our cousin's daughter's mental age to about 18 months. It deprives her of the power of speech. It limits her ability to move. And on top of all that she is now dealing with having diabetes. Our cousin cares for her daughter all day every day, getting her the medical help she needs, checking her blood sugar level, advocating for her with hospitals and insurers and specialists, and making it perfectly clear in every way that she loves her daughter. Our cousin is doing God's work.

We know an artist who seeks to capture and reproduce the visions she sees, making those visions available to the rest of us. She is doing God's work.

We know teachers who return to the classroom day after day, seeing the potential in those kids and helping to make that potential real for them, even when the children may be reluctant to cooperate in the effort. Those teachers are doing God's work.

All of these are examples of working as a partner with the divine on the great project of tikkun olam, the completion of the work of creation by the gradual, daily repair of the world.

May we all be strengthened and inspired in our efforts to perceive the ways in which the divine requires our help and to respond by taking action.

And let us say, Amen.