

‘It only takes a few people to stop dropping litter for other people to stop too. It could start with people agreeing to clean outside their home. It doesn’t take much time. We could have one week a year when there’s a sensational spring-clean. We have one in the house so why not across the whole country? You could save the money spent on street cleaning and spend it on re-cycling schemes’

Taraq, 30

Number 10
A New Sort of Charity

JANE TEWSON

Money is not the only way of giving. If we really want to live in a more cohesive society, we must start giving of our time, our talents and our skills

'To feel depressed, cheated, bitter, desperate, vulnerable, frightened, angry, worried about debts or job and housing insecurity; to feel devalued, useless, helpless, uncared for, hopeless, isolated, anxious and a failure: these feelings can dominate people's whole experience of life.'

(Richard Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies*, Routledge, 1996)

I have two visions of our communities in the early decades of the new Millennium.

In the first, I see division – thickening walls of silence, disengagement and mistrust – between people of different cultures, between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', between neighbours who never quite manage to reach out and talk. A privatised world, where people suffer and celebrate behind closed doors. Where people are more likely to feel involved in *EastEnders* than in their own neighbourhood, to 'interface' in 'virtual communities' than to talk to the person next door.

In the second vision of the future, I see connection – vital links of shared experience, understanding and mutual support – between people from all backgrounds. People reaching out across every divide and over every doorstep to share their stories and their talents, confident that everyone has something to give, and unashamed to admit that each of us needs support at some point in our lives.

I would like to believe that, collectively, we can use the unique momentum of the Millennium to begin to make the second vision real. The turning of this Millennium, this once-in-40-generations experience, must be the time to dream big dreams and, more importantly, to put in the sort of sustained effort which will bring

them to life. Imagine if all 58 million of us in the UK decided that from now on we would regularly reach out to make a practical difference in our neighbourhoods. Over time, this could bring about a sea-change in our culture and a total revitalisation of our communities.

Over the last year, Pilotlight (a small, maverick charity which I founded two years ago), has brought together people from different professions and walks of life to try and imagine the power that could be generated by that collective ‘reaching out’, and what it would take to set it alight. David Robinson and his team at Community Links have been a crucial guide and inspiration in this process. What Community Links makes happen across Newham, giving people the confidence and tools not just to get help, but to give it, has grounded our vision at every step, and given us faith that it can work.

We have called our idea ONE20. Perhaps that could be a date – 1/1/2000. Perhaps it could be one 20th of everybody’s working week, dedicated to involvement in the community. Or one person’s skill and passion multiplied 20 times. Or 20 years in which to change the world. Our hope is that people will take part, and then tell *us* what it means!

ONE20 is a vision, a catalyst and ‘toolkit’ to help inspire and enable everyone – from stressed-out City traders to isolated older people and unemployed 17-year-olds – to give their time, passion and skill in their local neighbourhood, and transform their own sense of community and achievement along the way.

Of course, this happens already. Many people are involved in volunteering schemes: they go shopping for a neighbour, or look after someone else’s kids during a family crisis. But where is this culture of sharing – of reaching out to make a difference to oneself and others – encouraged and celebrated on a grand scale? Where is it systematically supported by business and government?

Where is it seen as normal and fun? Where do ordinary people go to find the motivation to become involved, or inspiring examples of what can be done, or accessible information about where their skills are needed locally?

Our dream is that ONE20 will become a catalyst for all of this activity. If it succeeds, we hope it will help to build a more inclusive society, where pride is based on communal as much as individual achievement, and in which people give time in their communities as a matter of course.

Achieving this vision is an enormous task. And we are determined not to spawn another enormous bureaucracy to make it happen. Instead we want to help kick-start an unstoppable movement which, ultimately, is owned and run by everyone, from the bottom up. ONE20's role will be to inspire people – from those in big organisations to individuals – to get involved, to make it easy for them to do their bit, and to tap into the wealth of knowledge and activity that's already out there in communities.

Coming up with the practical steps to encourage such a sea-change in society has really challenged us. What has helped most is to remember that the ancient traditions are usually the best. What have people always done when they have wanted to build cohesion in their communities? They have told stories, had big celebrations, and exchanged ideas and information. This, essentially, is what ONE20 will be doing – but we'll be doing it with 21st-century tools. Using television to tell the human stories behind burning social issues, and to celebrate what people are already doing to turn their communities around. Using the latest publishing technology to produce a 'rough guide' to giving time in your locality, to be dropped on everyone's doorstep. And setting up telephone call-centres so that people can easily access information about how to get involved. The trick will be to take advantage of these new technologies, put them to use in making

us feel connected, and in touch with each other – rather than allowing them to distance us from what’s happening outside our front doors, as so often happens now.

Another essential part of any traditional community event is the full and active participation of the community’s leaders. Again, we want ONE20 to reinterpret the tradition, and bring it up to date. As well as challenging politicians, chief executives of big companies, media stars, or the editors of local papers to roll up their sleeves and get involved, ONE20 will be tracking down the ‘unsung heroes’ who make every community tick. We will give them the chance to make their voices heard, and ask them to pass on ideas which they believe can bring about meaningful change.

There is one major tradition, though, that ONE20 wants to totally reinvent and reinvigorate – even turn on its head. This is the now accepted belief that ‘charity’ and ‘philanthropy’ are mainly about money – specifically, those who have it giving to those who don’t.

Of course, money is crucial, and desperately needed. But too often giving money, rather than connecting us with each other, simply puts barriers between us, ultimately disempowering both the giver and the receiver. Handing over £1 to a person living on the street might stop us feeling guilty, and buy them a coffee, but it can also prevent us from having a conversation which could ultimately benefit both parties. In this way, social engagement can become just another transaction in the market-place. And those who don’t have any money are prevented from contributing at all.

By focusing on people getting directly involved and giving of themselves – their time, talents and skills – ONE20 will seek to open up a whole new approach to ‘charity’. One which is inclusive, direct and mutual, and which actively embraces human connection as a vital part of social change. Restoring people’s confidence – whatever part of the social spectrum they occupy – that they in

themselves have something to contribute, something to share that will make a difference, is perhaps ONE20's most important aim.

One of the major barriers to achieving that aim is the very language we use to describe social issues. This has got to change. To be labelled as 'socially excluded', to be told you attend a 'failing school' or live on a 'sink estate' is an instant silencer, blocking your potential and initiative. Even words like 'community' (which I have used so liberally here) can backfire for people who feel that it's precisely 'the community' that is shutting them out.

The only way to change that language is to change the mindset behind it. It's exactly the same mindset which tells us that 'they' (the marginalised, the excluded ones) need 'us' (the mainstream, the privileged) to bestow solutions to their problems from above. By bringing people face to face to tackle problems which affect us all, we hope ONE20 will begin to turn such prejudice around. The truth is that it's people who have been through the mill themselves who often have the most to contribute, and the best ideas for workable solutions.

This is why, in building the vision of ONE20, we have tried to stay close to the work and spirit of grassroots organisations like Community Links. It is here that we've tapped into the real inspiration and ideas. On a recent visit, a small number of us spent time with a group of Asian women who had come together to tackle domestic violence. I was moved to ask the one thing that would make the most difference in their lives. 'Breaking the silence about what is happening,' they said. Breaking that silence, finding powerful and authentic ways to tell the truth about hidden problems in our communities and matching them with inspiring examples of how people, like those Asian women, are working together to confront them – has now become a central aim of ONE20's media strategy.

Everyone who has worked on ONE20, I think, has shared with me an overwhelming sense that what we are hoping to achieve is at one and the same time crazy and unrealistic and totally necessary. (Perhaps this is how all of us feel in confronting the enormous needs and the enormous potential ahead of us in the new Millennium.)

But I hope it isn't only blind faith that keeps us going, and makes us believe that something as ambitious as ONE20 could actually work. I really don't think so. I believe all of us know, because we feel it ourselves and see it all around us, that there is a very real hunger in our society for reconnection and re-engagement. And it's often the darkest moments that tell us it is there. In response to atrocious tragedies on the news. When we walk past – or even step over – people living on the street.

Faith does come into it, though. We have to have faith in the fact that it is the very depth of our despair and frustration that will turn us around – if only we are grabbed by the collar and shown what to do. We have to believe that the moment when old traditions and language are wearing out is the very moment that is ripe for re-invention. It is that sort of moment, I hope, that we all lived through at the stroke of midnight on 31 December 1999. I just hope we can grab its potential by the tail.

Tell me. I forget.

Show me. I remember.

Involve me. I understand.

Jane Tewson was the founder of Charity Projects and the co-founder of Comic Relief. She is now director of Pilotlight, a small charity which seeks to act as a catalyst for adventurous approaches to social change