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## **The serious work of creating a better future**

### **To be agents of change, we must find courage to fight our own cynicism**

MIKE WHITEHEAD

I have had some meaningful conversations lately. Not about politics, strategy or economics, but gut-wrenchingly honest discussions about the current direction of our community, our nation and our world.

Some of these talks have been with CEOs, politicians, surgeons and attorneys, others with students, ministers, community leaders and journalists. These chats have educated me and given me great hope. Because despite the appearance of insurmountable differences of opinion and ideas, when it comes to what's important to us, we have a lot in common.

For example, these conversations have made it clear that there's a lot of frustration and discouragement about the direction of our society. The angry exchanges we hear in the news and the silent resignation of the people who choose to ignore it are both symptoms of helplessness.

Many of us also say that if we could, we would put an immediate halt to the things we disagree with, and get down to the serious business of creating a better future for ourselves, our families and the world. But would we, really?

Because to get there takes some sacrifice. We have to turn off the autopilot. Wake up. Flip the switch and take the controls. We have to drive rather than be driven -- by the next meeting or the next mortgage payment. We have to be willing to look at our habits, assumptions and perceptions to determine what we want for our future and how to get there.

The human race has a tendency to rely on what has already happened as being the rule for the way things should go. Sayings like "business as usual," "conventional wisdom" and "part of the system" demonstrate why we feel helpless -- we are operating under old rules but expecting different results.

#### **We cling to doubt, fear**

I found myself nodding in agreement when a presidential candidate recently said " we are not just up against the ingrained and destructive habits of Washington, we are also struggling against our own doubts, our own fears and our own cynicism." While doubt, fear and cynicism don't seem like enviable qualities, we sometimes cling to them ferociously. Otherwise we are compelled to look beyond our ticket, our race, our income level or any other fragmented way to look at the world.

To do this, we must be willing to take the time to look closely at ourselves. This way we can begin to accept the possibility that we can be guilty of the same behaviors that frustrate us about others. When we can see this about ourselves, we can fully contribute to the powerful conversation about improving our community.

However it can be awfully tempting to focus on trivial matters -- to check on the score of the ball game, think about what's for dinner or what's on TV, or check our e-mail. This way we can avoid the whole uncomfortable conversation - both what frustrates us about the world, and how we are avoiding it.

This is why being intentional and living purposefully takes a lot of courage. It can be uncomfortable and messy. Sometimes we get stung by disappointment. But to move toward a future worth hoping for, we have to become capable of recognizing and embracing it when it shows up. This means giving up the anger and judgment of pessimism -- even for a moment -- so that we can detect the subtle shifts that make real change possible.

### **Marsicano offers vision**

Sometimes a large shift occurs. Take, for example, the announcement that the Foundation for the Carolinas, one of the largest community foundations in the country, with over \$800 million in assets, is turning its sights to civic leadership. CEO Michael Marsicano has walked out on a ledge with a bold new vision for improving the fabric of the community.

This, like any new path, will be full of challenges -- because that is the landscape of reality-making. New ideas and social innovation only emerge when we are willing to step out of the safety of the status quo and risk becoming uncomfortable.

Becoming larger than our own small desires and preoccupations is a critical and recurring commitment, and one that we are all eligible to make. Leaders cannot create positive change on their own effort. Engaged voices and committed people are soul of the vision.

As Gandhi said, "There go my people; I must run to catch up with them for I am their leader."

We are the agents of change, in every choice we make today. Living today toward a purpose gives us the opportunity to be everything that we want to see in the world.

*Community columnist Mike Whitehead is principal of Whitehead Associates Inc., a leadership and culture development consulting firm. Write him c/o The Observer, P.O. Box 30308, Charlotte, NC 28230, or at [mike@whiteheadassociates.com](mailto:mike@whiteheadassociates.com).*

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