

I need a hero ? refuse to stay silent ? it's our best hope

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The Hope Project is only in its second year, but for me it has already become one of the most anticipated events of the year.

With the Hope Project's mandate to raise money and awareness to help promote equality and end violence against women, we are making sure that voices are heard on a subject that we feel strongly about.

It also provides an opportunity for us to unite in a common conviction. When our community has united in thought and purpose, I always come away feeling that all can be well with the world. Of course, I know that given the state of the world we now live in, sadly that may never be true. On any given day, we can awaken to senseless violence, junk-fed societies, crumbling economies and a dying planet. And somehow ? even knowing all this, most of us instinctively opt to keep our heads down. So where, after all, is the Hope?

The Hope is there, and it is found in people like this year's guest speaker Judy Rebick, who for many years has had the courage to voice our quiet thoughts and fight for the things that make a better world. Judy is a self-described activist. I believe that activists are the true heroes of our age.

What makes an activist? I doubt there is one true formula. Positive role models, focus, drive and a personal connection to a cause likely factor in, as does a strong desire to create positive and peaceful social change. One dominant characteristic is the ability to put the needs of the collective ahead of the needs of the individual. In this age of self-improvement books and social media constantly feeding our inner narcissist, selflessness is not a virtue we often encourage or reward. We need people who are willing to step out in front of a movement, to use their passion and energy to create more passion and energy?to inspire, to stir up, and to engage others. We need them to be ?brave, bold and brilliant? on our behalf. And we need to recognize and applaud their efforts. We need to show those working for the common good that their work is valued.

We don't all need to be public heroes to make a difference, though. Margaret Mead said that it is only through the actions of a small group of people that the world can be changed, and if we look at the successes of social movements such as the women's rights movement, we can see the truth of her words. Not all members of the ?small group? will have the qualities necessary to become a leader. Regardless, in order to be part of a movement, action is implied, which means taking our convictions beyond the doors of a luncheon. Social activism can take many different forms ? from publicly protesting and engaging in civil disobedience, to writing letters or to simply voicing an opinion. So if there is something we care about, why complacently duck our heads and wait for someone else to voice our outrage for us? Surely we believe in the morality of our own emotions and thoughts, so why not stand up and speak out?

Activism can be, but is not only, about acts of extremism; it is about finding ways to voice concerns about fairness and equality and respect. Many participants in social movements choose to focus their activism by directing their everyday lives to reinforce and reward the values in society they agree with. So do we still need our heroes then? Absolutely. Think of any of the social movements throughout history and you will be able to name one or two larger-than life personalities who are strongly associated with the movement and its ultimate successes. However, behind each of these leaders was a committed group of people, whose names were never known, but without whom very little would have been accomplished.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, said, ?We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.?

So perhaps heroism can be more broadly defined than we thought. Those who choose to follow the leader, take a quieter stand, but are, in their own way, leading by example. Perhaps that, too, is an act of heroism. Heroes may be the leaders who are out in front, but they may also be the everyday people who take part in behind-the scenes activism, but receive no recognition for doing so. Our best hope lies in our knowledge that there will always be people who refuse to stay silent, who will lead us in heroism and will follow heroism: to keep us listening, to keep us learning, and above all, to keep us caring.

The Hope Project event takes place Sept. 23 at Hockley Valley Resort, from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tickets available at familytransitionplace.ca