

MILES ROSTON Q&A

Did the process of writing your first book (*Kevin's Questions*, Exisle Publishing 2006) **teach you anything that you brought to** *Making a World of Difference*?

Writing the first book was similarly a worldwide journey, about specifically one topic, the HIV/AIDS epidemic. But it helped hone my sense of storytelling, which I hope is ever more improved. It also helped me develop the tools to trust my instincts in finding stories and characters, and establish a rapport with more ease, friendship, and allowing myself to be more surprised.

What inspired you to write *Making a World of Difference*?

The inspiration to write *Making a World of Difference* was after years of working on social issues in documentaries, and focusing most of all on children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. I'd often seen people working in institutions who had devoted their lives to making a difference, and yet were often stymied. And I began to feel that way myself sometimes. So first of all, I wanted to see, in as open a way as I could, what did really work when trying to change lives for the better. Reading Mother Theresa's diaries full of her despair made me ask the secondary question: could a life devoted to changing things for the better mean a better life for oneself as well?

You are well known for your films, *Make It Real (to Me)* (2005), *14 Million Dreams* (2003), *Aliens Among Us* (2002) (TV), and *Last Chance for Peace: Sierra Leone* (2000). Why did you become a filmmaker?

First of all, many of my first memories are of growing up in a TV studio, which my parents worked for and which we lived above. I've always been immensely moved by films, as well as books and music. And films utilize music and writing as well. I love the rhythm of edits, the dynamics of a scene, and the emotion that can arise from watching a film, especially in a theatre with other people. There are some films I've seen with an audience and have been unable to speak because of being so touched, and that's just a fantastic experience. I love books as well, because in a way they become full films in my

head and heart. Both mediums allow you to step outside your own life into the lives of others, and therefore more deeply into facets of yourself you didn't even know you had.

What enabled you to pursue your career path?

I have had a fortunate career, especially of late, in that I've been allowed to initiate projects and see them through. Having the support of my publishers at Exisle was a big help, knowing there was a home for the book as well. Living a life where I have freedom to move, for this book especially, was crucial in order to being really open to all sorts of experiences and people. And I'm grateful for having had that freedom.

Do you ever miss your career in the music industry?

The career isn't over yet! I produced a Russian accordion virtuoso's debut CD last year, and am going to be working closely with musicians on the next film. So it's just a momentary absence due to the work I've been doing.

Do you enjoy being constantly on the move? Do you have a base (i.e. somewhere you constantly return to)?

For many years, I actually stayed put, in New York City, where I was born, went to university, did music and eventually ran my production company. I've experienced a few bases since leaving NYC, notably Australia, Thailand, stints in South Africa, and as you know the Netherlands. I'm sure some day I will grow up and settle down. Realistically, of course, my work whether in film, writing or music always entails travel, so how much time I get to spend in my future base remains to be seen. I'm also planning some fiction projects that will hopefully allow me to stay put as well. But I've been fortunate in finding something of a sense of community which creates a sense of home as well.

How does this affect your own happiness and wellbeing?

On one level, there's often a sense of where am I now? Sometimes I can even wake up quite confused as to which city I'm in. But one thing I do is carry certain pieces of home with me, some

small boxes my mother's painted for me, a small keyboard, pieces of cloth from places that have affected me, so that wherever I am becomes my home. This has been a phase of life for a few years now, and I accept it as that, knowing that I've had other phases where I've been settled for a while. And what is reassuring is that many places feel like home now. I've been welcomed in by many communities, so strangely the transience even offers some security now. I'm not worried about losing a home for example, but rather feel that I'll be all right wherever I go.

Does the suffering you've witnessed get you down?

There are times where I feel I could do far more to alleviate the suffering I've witnessed. I also know there is much more work that I need to do, using my tools as a storyteller as well as a simple human being. However, I'm grateful to have witnessed what I have. The resilience and courage of people I've met in the hardest of circumstances is an inspiration. One example was the young man who'd lost his arms in Sierra Leone but was determined to get a university degree, while caring for people around him. Another is even a friend in South Africa making ten dollars a day yet determined to further her education as well. What gets me down more is often the complacency in what we call the First World. Whether in Australia, the US or Europe, sometimes one hears someone talking down refugees, the poor, or anyone other than their own community as if somehow they were different, aka "those people." What all the heroes in this book taught me, from the priest to the sex worker, is that there is no "those people"; there is only us.

How do you cope? Have you developed a mechanism to deal with negative feelings?

Friends, family, movies and of course I do believe fun is important. You can dance or have a party anywhere!

Do you really think individuals can make a difference?

I honestly believe it is individuals that make a difference. Even an organisation is made of individuals; it is often the rules that we make

as societies that get in the way. Whether in developed or developing economies, we sometimes forget that human beings are the focus. And if it's for the betterment of human beings, rules should be bent or broken. That's what makes the famed great ones, Gandhi, Mandela, Martin Luther King as well as the unfamed great ones. They're always looking at what's good for the individuals in their society, and societies are made of individuals. What was the last time anybody went out for a conversation with a corporation or an organization? We are all individuals. And it's only individually that we make a difference.

In your opinion, do you really think we are capable, as a people, of ending global suffering?

Absolutely. I think most of the suffering in this world is created. The suffering I'm speaking of is poverty, lack of medical treatment, war, the lack of education and economic opportunity, and stigmatization – or prejudice, whether because of mental health, what we do as a profession or who we are ethnically. Even in Australia, I've seen people grow up in what I would call insane conditions due to at the very least was neglect. But I can imagine this world as a place where we can free ourselves from these privations. That takes a refocus to look at what's important in life – that is, if we view life as the most important thing, and not profit or comfort. Because at the same time, in life all of us individually have suffering we need to go through, from childhood, through teen angst, through the pangs of unrequited love, and finding identity, aging, getting sick, and eventually dying. These are part and parcel of the human drama, which is fascinating in and of itself.

What are your thoughts on organisations like the UN, UNICEF, the Bill Gates foundation and others?

It's fantastic that these organizations exist. The UN for example gives a formal forum in which difficult and challenging issues can be addressed, even by governments that may be hostile to each other. At heart, though, I'm convinced it is the power residing in the individual that can make a difference. Bill Gates is an individual, and his foundation comes from he and his wife's focus. And he is to be commended for really putting his

money where his mouth is. That said, it doesn't mean one should just think oh well, Bill Gates Foundation is taking care of the problem. It is all the extraordinary individuals who are taking care of the problems – and finding solutions, all of us.

What would you have our leaders do if you were given 'ruler of the world' powers for just one day?

Ouch. That is a tough one. First of all, I might have them meet the people in this book and see what they are doing as individuals, without government backing for one day. Second of all, I would ask of leaders to ask themselves whether their actions were for the real good all their citizens long term. All of the people in the book refer to this: that government tends to think short term; I think that is also true of corporations – witness the global fiscal meltdown in search of short term profit. The world is actually quite beautiful and made of many amazing human beings, of all persuasions, as well as the environment on which we depend. If all the leaders were acting in all of our best interests, the world would like quite different. (I can expand if you like – in terms of what's fuelling so many wars and poverty etc.)

Are there any organisations you really see making a difference, or do you think it's up to individuals?

There are organizations of course making a difference, and they are too many to name. But it is up to the individual to decide to act. After all, change only happens that way. Even the famous leaders I mention, Gandhi and others, were individuals. We can all be heroes, even if it's just among our friends. As Father Michael says, it can start with as simple an act as a smile. Simple individual acts all add up.

What about the recent trends toward the retailing of 'fairtrade' foods and products (e.g. the Oxfam shop)?

This is a complicated issue which I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer. But obviously if we buy 'fairtrade' products, even that act sends a message. That we as consumers want to make a better world

What is your family history? Did you have a nice childhood? Are your family still in New York ? Do you have siblings?

My mother and father still live in New York. My brother is a journalist doing some amazing work, and my sister has a PhD in psychology. I grew up exposed to a myriad of cultures for which I'm grateful, and which probably has influenced the direction I've chosen – i.e. to be open to everything and anybody.

Are you currently working on any film projects?

I'm working still on my film about children orphaned by a disease no one wants to talk about who take matters into their own hands, as well as others!

Miles Roston is the author of *Making A World of Difference* (Exisle, 2010).