

SAVING THE WORLD

ESSAY BY UK CHESS CHALLENGE ORGANISER MIKE BASMAN

Ever since the rise of mass communications, saving the world has become a prominent theme. Early prototypes were Dan Dare and his American counterpart Superman. Since then there have been numerous others, and the sprawling fantasy genre from Harry Potter to Eragon have all featured young, energetic heroes doing great deeds.

In 1965 the Beatles sang, “All you Need is Love”. Later John Lennon improved the message with “You say you want a revolution – we-ell – you know – we all want to save the world... but if you talk about people who hate – well, I’m telling you buddy, you can count me out! Revolution! etc...”

In 1985 Bob Geldof ran the Band Aid concert and repeated it 20 years later. There are various G-8 summits and at one of them Gordon Brown wrote off the Third World Debt. Nonetheless, “saving the world” has not graduated out of specific issues or fantasy worlds, and if you suggest the idea to any mature person, they will look at you from behind their glasses as if to say, “Who do you think you are?”

So, ever willing to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, I will make an effort.

Improvement in the world must come from improvement in the people in it. It is statistically clear that better educated, more intelligent people are more productive, live longer and are happier than others, so if we can increase the number of these people, and they can help others to become better educated, this will begin a rolling movement which will eventually include the world.

Many young people have idealism – witness the success of the “save the world/fantasy” theme already mentioned – but they do not see the link between this and their everyday life; they do not see that they are the key to improvement and just go through the motions of school life. The death of enthusiasm is particularly marked in the teenage years where an “us-and-them” mentality dominates. So the teachers bravely try to keep order and drum learning into them, and the pupils resist sullenly, and then go off and do their own thing. Yet if the pupils realised how important they are, that they are each at the centre of the universe, and that their striving for knowledge and self improvement, alongside their help to others, will be the salvation of the world, we tap into a huge source of energy, and one that needs no financial investment – only a change of attitude.

It could be that education is far too important a matter to be left to teachers – or to the government. If we support the ultimate privatisation of education – down to the level of the child – this does not mean that the child should become antagonistic to the teacher. Far from it, the child would work with the teacher to learn as much as possible, but in this case the child is active rather than passive and can see the ultimate goal, not only of benefiting himself or herself, but also the whole of the planet. This is an ideal to be given to young people, and one which, because of their natural exuberance and optimism (so frequently destroyed by cynicism) they will enthusiastically embrace.

The qualities of character needed at this moment are:-

1. Kindness
2. Knowledge
3. Honesty
4. Ability to work with others
5. Analytical power
6. Decision making ability
7. Ability to withstand pressure

The first four of these qualities I would call the primary virtues – they are the foundation of character, and notably only one of these – knowledge - can be directly acquired through school. Furthermore, any word used is an inexact symbol, even the word “knowledge” I use in a wide sense, rather than as representing “factual information”.

The first four qualities are to be acquired through life, through thought, through study, through experience.

The latter three qualities are a means to turbo-charge the character. They permit better assessments to be made, and also develop the sort of character which can put these assessments into action. What is the use of a great thought if it is not disseminated, or if the creator of the thought lacks the will power to put it into effect?

We can see throughout the world that great decision makers hold sway, but often they lack kindness and many people suffer needlessly; at other times the decision makers have poor analytical skills, poor knowledge, or are overcome with emotion and cannot assess a situation properly.

The importance of the game of chess is that it develops the last three qualities on the list to a remarkable degree. Thought, planning, concentration are improved, all important parts of analytical skill. Thought without action is powerless, and action without thought is mindless. So after deliberating a move, the player then has to put his or her money on it – not once, but 40 or 50 times in a game. There is immense pressure on the ego, and self esteem is severely tested during a long game; something that is often not evident to the onlooker who only sees two people sitting motionless at a board, but is very familiar to the players. This is the sort of pressure that is experienced by a politician or a businessman taking any decision that involves risk and can also be seen when an artist, actor, playwright, or composer produces a new work.

This article is not a pitch for chess as a means for saving the world; it could be pointed out that chess players have not always proved adept at organising their own lives, let alone those of others. But it does show how chess can fit in with the development of character. In this topsy turvy world, it is remarkable that chess is overwhelmingly popular in primary schools, but virtually non-existent in secondary schools. It is precisely in the teenage years that the mind should be developing and where chess should be popular; but it is not. We are not developing the analytical powers of our youth. There are two other groups of people who could particularly benefit from chess – these are females and academics. Physical oppression over centuries has made females risk averse and unwilling to make decisions, but chess can address both these weaknesses and produce a more confident, decisive individual. The same goes for academics, the intellectuals who are more at home in their ivory towers than in getting down and dirty in the messy processes of decision making in real time and in the real world.

So the message of this article is that all of us and all of our children are responsible for saving the world. If we concentrate on the self improvement and the improvement of others and our surroundings, in the space of 40-50 years the major blights on society – war and poverty – will reduce and disappear because these are the result of poor negotiating skills, lack of foresight. Stupid people will produce a stupid world, average people no more than an average world. Once our children understand that Superman and Harry Potter are imaginary characters, and that they themselves are the reality, they will realise the enormous power and responsibility they have; and they will not want to let others down.

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