

Transcription „Our Founder”

TED Talk: Find your place in the universe: Andreas Heinecke

“Well, if you have doubts about your journey or your professional career, if you might have more questions than answers, if you do agree with Peter Drucker that self-realization and community are important needs, if you have empathy for those who are less fortunate, if you cannot cope with violence, injustice or stupidity, if you are looking for meaning, if you are looking, I’d say, for a real purpose, if you are searching for your place in the universe, then it might be the best moment to become a social entrepreneur.

It’s a pleasure to be here today, and I will briefly tell you about my journey in five chapters.

I’m from Germany, I grew up in a small village, middle-class family, nothing special, and I was premature, that means I was born six weeks, let’s say, before the date so to say. And I had a very, very low life expectancy when I was a child. On top I had to spend a lot of time in hospitals, and I couldn’t speak properly because my audition went wrong. My mother took care of me, but I had a very violent brother, and all the time my mother went out of the room, my brother treated me pretty bad. In my neighborhood, there was a boy, I was maybe six or seven years old, and this guy had Down Syndrome. But in these days, you know, there was no Down Syndrome, this was just the “fool”, and when the fool came out of his house he was also kicked and beaten. I was standing in the crowd and was looking at it, and I felt embarrassed, and I felt pain, that this guy, the weakest one was all the time beaten. And of course, I was very ashamed of myself because I did not speak up and say “Hey, guys, why are you kicking and beating the fool?”.

I had a shock. You know, when I was 13 years old, I was quite amazed about German military. So I knew all the battles from the Second World War, I was amazed about the Germans and the German story of the Second World War. One day there was a documentary on TV and the soldiers were marching - I don’t know through Russia or through Poland, I have no idea - and in a moment, there was a sequence where Jewish people were deported on the trains to the camps, and we all know what happened, in war times it means that people were killed in an industrial way. And then I said, pointing to the screen, to my mother who was sitting behind me: They, the Jews, are the guilty ones that we, the Germans, lost the war. My mother started crying and she told me: Listen, well, we have a Jewish family, and they were all killed. And on top I knew that on my father’s side were absolutely strong Nazi supporters. So, when I was 13 years old it was really, how to say, a life turning moment in my life, because I understood how this could happen that I belonged to a family who on the one side was exterminated and on the other side there were the supporters. And from 13 to 30 I spend exclusively all my time to understand what leads people to exclude, what leads people to exterminate. I studied history, I was in a lot of consultation camps, I spoke to survivors, I was absolutely eager to understand how this could happen. I have done my Ph.D. about it and when I finished my studies, I found work in a radio station.

I was embarrassed. When I was working in the radio station, I was asked one day by my director if I can imagine a work training for a journalist who had a car accident and lost his eyesight. I had no idea about blindness and disability, and I thought: Oh, my gosh, 28 years, car accident, blind, what is life without eyesight? Nothing. And I met him and I was literally blown away by his optimism, about his way to cope with the situation, and he really, really turned my life, my understanding and then, of course, I was so embarrassed, because when I judged so surely that this is not a valuable life with my family history, and all my education, how others might judge. That was exactly the turning point in my life when I said, ok, I have to do something.

But what to do? You know, when I met this blind guy for the first time, I understood there is a transformation out of this encounter. And while I studied, I came across Martin Buber, he is a German Jewish philosopher, and there is one sentence that is somehow my mantra, he says: "The only way to learn is by encounter.". And when I understood that there is a way to bring people together on a sort of platform that they have an open exchange, then maybe, maybe the relation might change. And the idea was very simple, I thought: Well, it is so simple, Eureka, in the dark, the blind people are sighted, because they are used out of their daily situation to maneuver without eyesight, and of course, in the dark the sighted people are blind, because they are usually not used to walk around in darkness, and not to rely on their eyesight. This was in fact the day of birth of "Dialogue in the Dark" 25 years ago.

But you know, I think, it is quite a challenge to imagine an enterprise, to imagine a business so to say, when you want to sell darkness. Who wants to sell darkness? Darkness is universal, nobody wants to pay for it. One kilo, two kilo? Or one piece, or I don't know... And the, secondly, who wants to employ blind people? In fact nobody. But when you combine two impossibilities sometimes a possibility comes up and that was exactly what happened. But it took me more than ten years to really bring it up and now we are in 37 countries, we have 8.000 blind people employed, millions of people went through this, let's say, experiment, and it is very, very powerful, and very, very impactful, and I am very, very glad in fact that I could make it.

"Dialogue in the Dark" is absolutely my life, I have to admit. And I think since the day when I was appointed to be an Ashoka fellow, I gained an identity. It was for me the most important gift I got, because when you do something, selling darkness and try to push people to employ blind people, then you feel somehow pretty lonely. Because people don't understand what you are really doing, are you a charity or a social worker? But I was somehow a businessman, an entrepreneur, so I never had an idea to start up a charity, because I believe in the entrepreneurial spirit, I believed in the blend of market mechanisms with a social mission, and this brought me to "Dialogue in the Dark" and keeps me alive.

When people ask me: What is "Dialogue in the Dark"? I all the time say: Well, it is not about to simulate blindness, it is not about to understand how the blind people are coping with different situations, how they walk around, how they perceive life. It is much more about a culture, about a non-visual culture. And the beneficiaries are much more – in my understanding - not for the blind people, they are much more for the non-blind people. Because they gain a lot out of this experience, they dialogue with themselves, they understand much more about the hidden potentials, they got a completely new spectrum beyond eyesight, and they really, really gain a lot out of this, and of course, I think, there is a huge transformation from fear to fun. When you enter this room, you are completely lost, but

at the end of the day, thanks to the beauty of our body, the beauty of our sense, I think we can tackle, and we can cope with this situation.

This picture what you can see here is from Mexico. Mexico, just next door, in Monterrey. It shows exactly what "Dialogue in the dark" is about: To unite two worlds which normally have no chance to exchange. I like it very much; you see this blind girl, and this sighted girl. The blind girl with a cane and there is this heart, which stands for love, and I would say for empathy and for understanding.

Well, if you in a way don't know in fact... If you cannot find your place in the universe, and I know, it took me really a long, long time, until I knew exactly what I have to do, and what I can do and where is my best place, I can only suggest: "Create your own.". You know, everybody will say it will never work, but believe me, I think it can work. But what is really important, is that you have to start now. Maybe you don't have a clear idea of what you gonna do, but if you have all these questions, if you have empathy, if you cannot understand why people are in such a bad shape, then you definitely have a chance to do it. If I succeeded with my darkness and my blind people, then I am sure you can do it much better. Thank you very much."