

Brooklyn Legends Inspirations IV – Am I Helpful?

Dear Readers,

Happy Sunday. I hope that you were able to enjoy this beautiful day.



In this month's issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, I came across the article that many in my circle are talking about – *20 Questions Every Woman Should Ask Herself*. I put off reading the it for a couple of days but, finally, curiosity overruled. So, with my iPad in hand, I settled in for the journey.

Halfway through the article, I had a real ah-ha moment. Who better to bring that about than Gloria Steinem. I have reproduced the article here for you to enjoy, but I wanted to share my takeaway with you, right up front.

I began by asking myself this question – am I helpful to others? Before I can make an impact, I must listen and hear the other person's problem and respect their point of view. The frame, or context if I use Gloria Steinem's word, is everything. Without this understanding, I do not have a clue as to what I am doing, or why I am doing it. The person with the problem instinctively knows what is needed. It always comes down to identifying proper resources. Over the years I have grown to learn solutions can come in the simplest forms. My job is to do whatever I can to be helpful, without judgement.

Question #10 – Am I Helpful?

Gloria Steinem, journalist, author, Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient and member of the steering committee of the women's activist fundraising platform.

A few years ago, after visiting Ghana for a conference on sex trafficking, I traveled to



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Zambia to stay with some friends who live on the Zambezi River. It's a rural place, full of big-game preserves and small villages where daily life is a struggle. When I arrived, villagers were mourning two women who had gone into Lusaka to prostitute themselves and support their families—and disappeared.

On a big tarpaulin laid out in a barren field, I sat with 30 or so village women in a circle. Talking circles are powerful things—they've given birth to countless activist movements, even revolutions. On this occasion, though, I thought our lives would be too different for us to connect. And at first, shyness did prevail. The language barrier made things difficult. But then the women sang a song, and my inability to carry a tune made them laugh. One of the English-speaking friends I was staying with sang "This Little Light of Mine," and others translated its lyrics. And then a woman from the village told a story. With tears in her eyes, she said she was a widow who only now felt safe enough to reveal that her husband had beaten her.

As is often the case, that one truth teller broke the spell. Other women began to talk about their lives. Many of their husbands worked in lodges where tourists came to see wildlife, but the lodges didn't hire women. These families couldn't meet the cost of living or cover what was to the women the most important expense: their children's school fees. Many wives contributed by farming, but as soon as their vegetable crops were near harvesting, elephants would eat them to the ground. And so with no other option available to them, some women sold their bodies.



The situation seemed hopeless. But when I asked what would help, the answer was surprising: an electrified fence to keep out the elephants. Back in New York, a few friends helped me raise the money to build one. I received updates from the villagers: [there] was a photo of the area the women had cleared, by hand, of rocks and stumps

and weeds; [there] was a photo of the finished product, fresh shoots of maize starting to take shape behind it.

When I went back the next year, the women had harvested a bumper crop of maize. They had food for a year, plus extra to sell to pay their children’s school fees. Before I spoke to them, if you’d asked me how to stop sex trafficking in this village, never would I have said, “Find a way to keep elephants out of their gardens.”

I call this story the parable of the fence, and these are its lessons: Helping begins with listening. Context is everything. People who experience a problem know best how to solve it. Big problems often have small solutions. And, finally, do whatever you can.

I’ve done what I thought were big things, like testifying before Congress, that had no impact at all. And I’ve done little things I don’t even remember doing, like introducing two people, that I would later discover had made an impact lasting decades. That night on the tarp beside the Zambezi, I had no idea what remarkable things would come of our talk. The art of being helpful is behaving as if everything we do matters—because we never know which things might.



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