
ANDREA:
Nothing

*Doing nothing is the great work.
Doing something is no big deal at all.*

KOAN

Andrea wanted to do some work to benefit refugees in the German city in which she lived. She didn't receive much support, but had a deep conviction that this was the right moment and the right place for her to start—only what? Listening deeply and carefully, she heard her heart say: *Mach' was draus! Make something of it.*

She now teaches German as a foreign language to refugees from all over the world in the city of Würzburg, where she lives. She says she learned this: *Da ist nichts—mach' was draus!*
There is nothing—make something of it!

REFLECTION

Isn't there a difference between getting up in the morning knowing exactly what to do, and waking up to face a wide-open day: no schedules, no appointments, no requirements? That's when we realize how much we identify with what we do: a busy manager, a mother of four children, an IT consultant, a college teacher, an artist. For many of us, who we are is what we do, isn't it? As much as we complain about the busyness of our lives, it gives us a sense of stability and belonging; it gives us the plan.

But it's the not-knowing that is infinitely more interesting, the home of creativity, magic, and potential. If there is one thing on our day's schedule, we often fixate on it in the same way that we fixate on the one dot on a blank page. Our eyes are automatically drawn to the dot and we miss the bigger space around it. But when there is no-thing, there can be everything.

We say that the reason we do anything—write a book, help refugees, build a house—is because we want to do it. But isn't the reason we do something as Andrea put it: *There is nothing—make something of it?* The nothing manifests as something all the time, according to karmic conditions.

Xuefeng, a ninth-century Chan master, said: "If you set up a single atom of dust, the nation flourishes; if you do not set up a single atom of dust, the nation perishes."²¹ Taking the initiative, creating or building anything, sets up a chain of events over which you have very little control. Good things happen, bad things happen. If you do nothing, then neither those good things nor those bad things will happen, but is that really what life is about?

Some of the most exciting things in my life have happened when I suddenly said I would do something with no forethought.

This book came into being when I was in the zendo listening to people describe home situations that plunged them into not-knowing, and without a thought I said aloud, "Let's put together a book on householder koans."

Bernie Glassman founded the Greyston Mandala to serve a poor area of southwest Yonkers in New York. One evening, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, he attended a presentation on HIV. Upon hearing that in the entire city of Yonkers there was no housing at all for people with HIV, he said without thinking: "Greyston will do it." When his own board of directors refused to take this on, he started a new organization to build that housing. Seven years and ten million dollars later, Greyston opened up the city's first apartments for people with HIV and a day center that was among the first in the nation to offer alternative therapies for people with AIDS.

Looking back on your own life, haven't you learned to trust that burst of spontaneity when you surprise yourself by saying, "I'll do that"? The response doesn't come out of plans or strategy, it seems to come out of nowhere, out of nothing.

"I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding," wrote the poet and philosopher John O'Donohue.²²

Overwhelmed by the suffering in the world—racism, refugees, lack of medical care, climate change, vanishing species—many people say they don't begin to know where to start. There's a lot that needs doing, and like Andrea, they want to do something, only what? Are you one of them? Do you withdraw into some personal cave with a large television screen, feeling as though you've failed without even trying? "I want to do so much, and instead I'm drowning," one student said.

If you begin with not-knowing, you don't have to know anything ahead of time. Isn't that a relief? Choose any situation—needy children, families lacking nutritious food or adequate shelter, political change—and let go of your fixed ideas and opinions about them. You can tell how fixed they are and how attached you feel to them by the strong emotion of anger, resentment, or frustration that is often there. You know you've begun to let go when you experience more calm and confidence inside.

Now watch and listen deeply. What to do begins to emerge by itself. Maybe it's a creative, big idea. Maybe it's organizing and coordinating services among different groups. Maybe it's going back to school to acquire more skills and knowledge. And maybe it's something small, targeted, and doable, which works well with other aspects of your life.

Instead of staying in your head, get out there. Drive undocumented workers to their work, play with their kids in the daycare centers. Your strong desire to fulfill your Bodhisattva vows makes for very fertile ground, don't underestimate it. Set up that single atom of dust. It's a creative time, don't stifle it with too much thinking and figuring out. Do something small that's right in front of you. Get your body-mind moving. This will generate energy and momentum, putting you in the world of action rather than in perplexity and inaction.

You don't have to know anything ahead of time. Bearing witness will tell you what to do. Trust it.

Is the planet overwhelmed, or is your mind? If it's either, neither, or both, always go back to basics.