

✦ — **CREATING** — ✦

ROOM TO READ

A Story of Hope in the Battle for Global Literacy



JOHN WOOD

Author of Leaving Microsoft to Change the World

ALSO BY JOHN WOOD

Leaving Microsoft to Change the World

FOR CHILDREN

Zak the Yak with Books on His Back

Zak the Yak and His New Friend Quack

Creating Room to Read

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*A Story of Hope
in the Battle for Global Literacy*

JOHN WOOD

VIKING



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*This book is dedicated to Amy,
with love and excitement for all of our future adventures together.*

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“Walk and move forward strongly. Your futures are in front of you.”

—Phuong Giang, librarian,
Ngu Hiep #1 Primary School, Tien Giang Province, Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Ten Years, Ten Thousand Libraries!

In the shadow of Machapuchare, a twenty-three-thousand-foot Himalayan peak, the only sound I hear is laughter. Hundreds of students fill the school yard. Each wears a uniform of dark blue pants or skirt and a sky blue shirt, in contrast to their jet black hair and gleaming white teeth. They range from tots to teens and are nearly evenly split between boys and girls. What they all have in common is what they hold in their hands: books.

The Shree Janakalyan Secondary School has more than six hundred students stuffed into a single-story school building. But until today they faced a problem familiar to millions of students here in Nepal: They had no access to books. There were fewer than twenty to share among the entire student population—a situation that is, depressingly, all too common across the developing world. Countless times I've met parents eager to have their children be educated. But when the young students get to the local school, they find it desperately lacking in the most basic educational resources. A classroom without paper, pencils, pens, or books is not much of a classroom.

That situation had now changed abruptly at the Shree Janakalyan School, in Kavresthali, near the town of Pokhara, Nepal. A deluge of local people have gathered to help celebrate the opening of the school's new library. I am one small part of a very large crowd, one small light in a bright and populated constellation. In addition to the hundreds of students, there are at least that many parents, along with teachers, the school's headmaster, grandparents, government officials, and residents of the village. Grandmothers with pierced noses and faces lined with the crevasses formed by harsh sun and fierce Himalayan winds clutch newborns. Fathers hold aloft their three-year-old daughters, little girls eager to get a better look, anticipating the day they'll be able to explore the library's treasures. The students' energy level could power a village.

We're all assembled in front of a freestanding building newly bathed in an electric blue coat of paint. It's a small but cozy structure, about three hundred square feet. Across the door is a taut red ribbon, ready to be snipped by as many rusty scissors as the village can muster. Above the door and running nearly the length of the building is a banner celebrating the opportunities that literacy will bring to the village. It proudly announces an event that is not only game changing for the community but also a milestone in my life:

WELCOME TO THE OPENING OF ROOM TO READ'S 10,000TH LIBRARY

As I watch residents of the village continue to stream into the open courtyard in front of the library, I contemplate that number—ten thousand! I recall how different things were just a decade ago, when a

tiny band of volunteers and I opened our first five libraries in rural Nepal. We had a tiny budget, no employees, and only a handful of advocates.

From a mere five to ten thousand, in a decade: This is the steepest growth curve I've ever been involved in, surpassing even my time in the technology industry. The number on that banner seems a bit surreal to me.

I feel a familiar hand on my shoulder. Turning around, I am greeted by my mother, Carolyn, a seventy-nine-year-old with a heart of gold, love of travel, and a crazed enthusiasm for the power of books. She is of hearty Norwegian stock and extremely healthy. Not many women of her age would insist upon flying halfway around the earth to the roof of the world to celebrate her seventy-ninth birthday. She attributes this love of nature, and of the cold, to having grown up in northern Minnesota.

Her eyes are as deep and blue as the many lakes of her native state: ten thousand lakes in Minnesota, ten thousand libraries around the developing world opened by her son and the organization he founded. I like the symmetry. She hugs me and holds me. Then she stammers through her tears: "I am so very, very proud of you."

"Me, too," interjects my eighty-four-year-old father, Woody, as he reaches out to shake my hand. Those two words are it for him. Like me, he is not one for overt displays of emotion; that short statement, piggybacked on my mother's expression of pride, is about as good as it gets with him. Knowing this makes his statement all the sweeter to me.

Pulled between the extremes of my two parents, I gravitate toward my loquacious mother. Her words and embrace have caused my eyes to mist up. Then I hug my father and share a thought I've had for a long time but haven't spoken: *None of this would have happened were it not for you two, who believed in my idea before the world did. You persuaded me to believe in this dream even during the tough times when it would have been easier to abandon it. We're only here today because of your faith in me.*

Most parents would not encourage their son to leave a lucrative corporate fast track at age thirty-five to devote himself to a highly improbable start-up charity venture. Parents are genetically programmed to do whatever it takes to help their children survive. Their dreams and aspirations for their offspring typically focus on a good job, the predictable place in society that comes with it, and financial security. Yet in 1999 when I told my parents that I planned to quit my executive position at Microsoft in order to focus "the rest of my adult life" on the quest for global literacy, they barely flinched.

I told them: "There aren't any charities building libraries across the developing world at a massive scale, so I'm going to try to start my own. I'll work for no salary for as long as I can, even if it means running down my savings. But don't worry; I'll never ask to move back in with you."

My mother laughed.

My decision could have fazed either, or both, of my parents. At the height of the Internet and technology booms, Woody and Carolyn went from telling people, "John is the director of business development for Microsoft's greater China region, has a full-time car and driver, and lives in a beautiful subsidized house," to telling them, "John delivers books on the backs of yaks to rural Himalayan villages." But their advice to me was as encouraging as it was succinct: "If that's what you want to do, then you should go do it—and do it well."

Woody told me: "I may be a little crazy, but you're not. You have your own wings, John, so fly."

As we open the ten thousandth Room to Read library, I ponder the fact that I lucked out in the parent lottery. Carolyn and Woody met in a bowling alley in Texas, where my dad was working for the Bureau of Public Roads. We were always middle class but lived in a home that was "rich in books."

These two believed in me, even when it looked like I was throwing away amazing opportunities to embrace a life full of risk and no financial upside. Their loyalty to me, and to my ambitious but risky dreams, is one of many reasons I pleaded with them to share this moment with me in Nepal on my mother's seventy-ninth birthday.

I knew they'd be proud of me at this pivotal point in the development of my now decade-old enterprise. Today, though, what's more important is to express how proud I am of *them*.

•••••

The courtyard at the Shree Janakalyan School is now teeming with hundreds of students bursting with excitement. They take turns peering in through the windows of their new library. Two dozen teachers are gathered. We hear the sound of snare drums as the band warms up, along with a wailing trumpet. Girls dressed in bright red saris, their eyes lined with charcoal, practice their ceremonial dance.

One of the teachers tells me that he and three others came from a village thirty miles away. "Are you here to help us to celebrate?" I ask.

"No, sir, we've come to petition you. We have over nine hundred students but no books. We would like a library in our school, too."

Hmm: Before we've even opened number ten thousand, we have a pipeline of projects to help get us started on the next ten thousand.

Standing next to these teachers is a smiling couple, both waiting patiently to hang a garland of marigolds around my neck. "It is an honor, sir, to have you here today. Please know that from the bottom of our hearts we parents so value this gift you have given to our children."

I want to explain that this community, with its outpouring of gratitude to us and love for its own children, is giving more to me than they realize. This is a grand bargain! Instead, I ask the father how he's gained such an impressive level of English proficiency.

"BBC Radio. I've listened to it since the age of nine! I still listen for an hour each evening. This is how I can not only improve my own mind but also encourage my children. It also helps the children who want to work in tourism; without English or other foreign languages, they can't have well-paid jobs like trekking guides or waiters."

I nod in the shared understanding that tourism is the biggest earner of foreign exchange in an otherwise dormant economy. Proudly he tells me and my parents of the roles community members have played in getting the library built. Three of the fathers helped to dig the foundation, while six mothers and fathers painted the exterior and interior walls. It feels quite awkward that they continue to thank me, given that they've done all the hard work.

This is part of Room to Read's "challenge grant" model. Rather than just sweeping in and handing local communities everything they need to get the school built or the library established, we ask them to meet us halfway. Our in-country teams start every introduction of Room to Read by saying in effect: *If you as a community are willing to put resources into the project, then we will do the same. But if you don't value the project enough to lobby the community to support it, and if the local people are not willing to pitch in with some of their resources, then this tells us that the motivation is not there to make it succeed.*

Today at Janakalyan School the offerings of gratitude are effusive. Our diligent translator lets us know that one mother "wishes to praise your team for allowing us to strive for greatness as we offer educational uplift to our children." I think of my own parents and their continual exhortations to study. This community reminds me that parents everywhere desire a better life for their children. It's

a near constant: They understand the importance of education and crave it for their children, even as they are well aware of the sacrifice they will have to make.

With young children in classrooms instead of helping out on the family's small plot of farmland, parents here will face hundreds of additional hours of backbreaking labor. Still, they know that education is the best—or perhaps only—long-term ticket out of poverty for their kids. “Go, go,” they tell their sons and daughters. “Without school, you’ll remain a poor farmer, just like every other generation of our family.”

Now it's time for the ceremony preceding the ribbon cutting. Few people enjoy speeches as much as the Nepalese. There seems to be no upper limit on the number of people taking the stage and commandeering the microphone. The crowd hears from the community's government leaders, the village elders, education ministry officials, the headmaster, teachers, parents, and anyone else who wants to take a turn. It doesn't seem to bother anyone that they all say basically the same thing. As the blazing sun traces a lazy arc across the sky, the speechifying enters a second and, I hope, final hour.

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With ample time for my mind to drift back to 1998, I replay my fateful first visit to Nepal. During the maiden Himalayan trek, a chance introduction to a headmaster who showed me a library without books set me on this trajectory. The school he heads is actually not far, in Bahundanda, no more than seventy-five miles away as the crow flies—as long as the crow can fly above twenty-four-thousand-foot peaks. A mere mortal, walking along the mountains' numerous donkey paths, would need a week to make the walk.

These two villages are so close, yet so far. This is also an apt description for my life today as compared with a time when I had no resources, no employees, and no donor base—only the conviction that helping children across the developing world gain access to books was the only meaningful thing I could do with my limited time on earth.

Room to Read is one of the fastest-growing and most award-winning charities of the last decade. Its rapid evolution and steep trajectory have been beyond my wildest fantasy. Though we started by focusing on libraries, we experienced mission creep—the good kind—when we realized that libraries without readable books were not much help and that books sat idle on shelves, without engaged readers, despite the impressive new rooms housing them.

In addition to opening more than ten thousand libraries, we now support (as of May 2012) seventeen thousand young scholars in our Girls' Education program and have constructed and staffed (with help from our host-country governments) more than sixteen hundred school blocks. To fill the libraries, we've self-published more than seven hundred titles in local languages by training hundreds of local authors and artists to write and illustrate the first brightly colored children's books the local children have ever seen. After starting with building and stocking libraries, we evolved rapidly to also become a children's book publisher on a massive scale. In addition, we've now embraced training teachers on enhanced literacy skills and ensuring that girls are empowered through not just education but also the life skills they will need to negotiate key life decisions.

The need is global, growing more urgent by the day. Every day we lose is a day we can't get back. So we've also expanded far beyond Nepal and now bring books and libraries to Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Vietnam, and Zambia. The morning of the ceremony at the Shree Janakalyan School, I told the local team that Room to Read had become one of Nepal's most important exports. The model we'd established there was now having a huge impact on

other parts of the developing world. Our role model, Andrew Carnegie, known as “the patron saint of libraries,” helped open more than 2,500 in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Only a decade in, Room to Read has opened four times that number.

I look up to take in the mass of students sitting on the ground in front of the stage. The opening of the library will change their lives. In helping create opportunities like these for students in so many places, my own life has been radically altered. During my Microsoft years my focus was on revenue, sales growth, and market share—all things that were ultimately going to help make rich people richer.

My focus was also on ways to enrich myself: “What kind of raise will I get this year? How many stock options? Can I remain posted overseas so that the company will continue to pay my rent?”

Today I measure quite differently: How many additional books can we get into the hands of eager young readers each year? How many kids are visiting our libraries? How many books are being checked out each month? I think about the size of our team: The more employees we have, the more communities we can help to bring education to their young people. With more than six hundred people all over the world now on the payroll, and with over 80 percent of them being local nationals who are “close to the customer,” Room to Read can accomplish quite a lot. The Nepalese team alone consists of sixty people. Thankfully, all of them are here today at the ribbon-cutting ceremony in Kavresthali, beaming with pride at how far they’ve come over the last ten years.

It’s been a volatile and unpredictable ride with many highs and lows. At any number of points along the way, the idea of hitting the ten-thousand-library milestone seemed the ultimate impossible dream. More than once I debated running back, tail between my legs, to the relative stability, predictability, and fat paychecks of the tech sector.

Perseverance paid off: Thankfully, the mission and the work are no longer a lonely pursuit. Bill Clinton endorsed our work on multiple occasions by inviting me to speak at his annual Clinton Global Initiative and later to join its advisory board. CEOs of major companies have joined Room to Read’s board. Volunteer fund-raising chapters have sprung up in fifty-six cities around the world. In our first ten years, more than seven thousand volunteers threw events that collectively raised over \$35 million fueling our rapid expansion.

One of the most exciting fund-raising campaigns happened totally out of the blue after Oprah Winfrey invited me on her show in 2007, when I published a book about the founding of Room to Read called *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*—a novice author’s dream come true.

Then lightning struck twice. Oprah got so excited about our work that she invited her millions of viewers to be part of “Oprah’s Book Drive” to benefit Room to Read. Some of the very books we printed with the three million dollars she helped raise are housed here in Nepal. But to me the most important figure in all these millions is six million, the number of children who now have access to libraries Room to Read created. We’ve come so far, so fast.

It’s difficult to process the difference between that first trip to Nepal and today’s ceremony in Kavresthali. We’ve gone from being a disorganized, ragtag band of volunteers to being a global movement involving millions of people. I remind myself that today is a day of celebration. This is a moment to revel in all that we’ve accomplished.

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As if on cue, the headmaster finishes his speech. Proudly he announces that it’s time to cut the red ribbon stretched tightly across the door. We will officially open a magical and colorful place where students can develop a love of books and reading. The walls are painted in a riot of colors, and more

than a thousand books are neatly nestled on the shelves, waiting to be picked up and loved.

~~The crowd charges toward the library as I look for my guests of honor. Grabbing my hand, my mother leads me as we walk together slowly. Each step is silent, but there are lots of *namastes* offered by the students: “The light in me bows down to the light in you.”~~

On this beautiful Himalayan morning our bond and our happiness are as strong as they’ve ever been. My mother grips my hand tightly as my father walks a step behind. “Did you ever think you’d see this day?” she asks.

The only smile broader than those of the students is my own.

Bold Goals Attract Bold People

I am sitting at “the most famous desk in journalism,” about to throw out an idea I’ve never dared express publicly. On the other side of the desk sits the one and only Charlie Rose, the best interviewer on television and a man who does not suffer fools gladly. He and his team do thorough research, resulting in questions that are pointed, concise, and challenging. This is the interview I’ve always wanted; yet here I sit with a look that can only be described as “deer caught in the headlights.”

I’m scared as hell. On the way in, one of my board members texted me, “Don’t screw this up!” We know that if I nail this interview, the results could be huge.

The intimidation factor is somewhat leavened by Charlie Rose’s courtly southern manner. Opinionated yet charming, he could be the well-read uncle you always wanted but never had. Dressed in a charcoal suit with bold pinstripes, Rose sports a powder blue tie that forms a bit of sky on the cloudlike starched white shirt. Not a hair on his head is out of place, nor is a single word in the question he’s just asked one I’d been anticipating.

The moment the call came that I was going to be on his show, and that he’d focus on my main messages in my book *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, I started pondering whether I’d dare to publicly declare a new goal I’ve been thinking about constantly.

“What do you really want?” he asks, leaning in the way he does, to suggest a measure of intimacy with his guest.

Gulp. Though I know what my answer will be, saying it in front of one of the world’s most influential audiences is a bit terrifying. But somehow I don’t miss a beat. I trust my gut and say without hesitation: “My goal is that *children everywhere* have access to literacy and books in their mother tongue from a young age.”

There, I said it: the big goal. Every child. My heart is pounding. Charlie’s gaze is fixed upon me intently, but in a very positive way. Both his silence and his eyes encourage me to expand upon my statement.

“I don’t see any reason why we can’t aim higher in an area of international development that is so critical to the escape from poverty, and to social stability. And I don’t think we should stop until we reach that goal. Maybe it sounds hubristic, or egomaniacal, but I honestly see no reason why we can’t get there.”

“Every child,” he repeats.

“Every one, without exception,” I reiterate.

I’ve finally dared to articulate my next BHAG. The BHAG, or “big, hairy, audacious goal,” is an

acronym borrowed from *Good to Great*, one of my favorite books. *Every child*: Is it even remotely possible? After all, we live in a world in which 780 million people lack basic literacy. Won't the illiterate, like the poor, always be with us? And can anyone have that significant an impact with limited resources?

From the beginning, one of our "big picture" goals at Room to Read has been to put international education on the world's agenda. Now I have a unique platform, one that will help me explain why literacy is as vital as food, security, limiting population growth, and control of the environment.

Education, after all, is the one issue that affects every other one. I think of it in the same way as dropping a pebble into a pond and getting a ripple effect. Educated people make more money and are more likely to escape poverty. Educated parents raise healthier children. When a woman has finished school, she is treated better by her community and is more likely to vote. The list goes on, just as the ripples in a body of water emanate outward. If we can solve this issue, we will solve many others at the same time.

I've run the numbers, as have a number of journalists such as the *New York Times*' Nicholas Kristof, and am convinced that the world can make a major dent in the link between poverty and illiteracy if we just get serious about it. Let me give just three examples.

The United States spent nine hundred billion dollars fighting seemingly unwinnable wars in Afghanistan and Iraq over a decade. If just 10 percent of the ninety-billion-dollar annual cost of those wars had been dedicated instead to building schools, the change would have been radical. With nine billion dollars, fast-moving groups like Room to Read could work with local communities to construct 272,000 schools, resulting in more than a million new classrooms. At twenty-five children per classroom, we've just impacted twenty-five million students. I'm not making up these numbers: This isn't magic, just simple arithmetic.

A second example: The European Union spends thirty-nine billion euros per year on farming subsidies. Literally 40 percent of the annual EU budget goes to programs that distort markets and subsidize a coddled middle class, all while making it impossible for hardworking farmers from the African nations on Europe's doorstep to compete in EU markets. Redirecting just 10 percent of this money for a single year would allow one million school libraries to be created, or five hundred million children to gain access to books for the first time. It seems incredible that such a small redirection could have such a big international effect. But again, it's not voodoo or magic, but simple arithmetic.

The third example focuses on girls, because two thirds of the illiterate people in the world are girls and women. Let's suppose that the ten countries with the highest gross national products decided to make a serious effort to educate girls across the developing world. Are you listening, America, China, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Spain, and Russia? Imagine a day when the leaders of these countries, surrounded by young schoolgirls from around the world, sign a declaration that they will divert one tenth of 1 percent of their gross national product to providing education to girls in the poorest parts of the world, where on average only one of four girls makes it past seventh grade. One tenth of 1 percent of GNP—surely this amount is too small to move the needle, right?

Were the funds to be distributed through a network of efficient social entrepreneurs, the effect would be earth shaking: Eighty-three million girls would be able to go to school. Eighty. Three. Million.

This might just be the biggest no-brainer in the history of philanthropy.

Of course, it's not just a philanthropic issue. Getting this right would also have a huge impact on the global economy. Girls and boys who are educated today become tomorrow's middle class. If a person scrapes by on only one or two dollars per day (as two billion people, nearly a third of earth's

population, do), he or she will never join the global economy. Higher-value products and services made in the developed economies will be completely irrelevant. Whether it's a computer or an iPad, an airline ticket or a hotel room, a savings account or a life insurance policy, it'll be useless to people living cruel, hand-to-mouth existences.

This might also be a much more logical way to defeat terrorism and the dark forces of nihilism that try to divide the world into "us" and "them." A young boy is quite unlikely to strap on a bomb and detonate it against a country that helped him to gain his education. I long for the day when people in the poorest parts of the world have proof that the developed world is serious about helping them educate their children.

Once a child is educated, he or she can start that crucial march from poverty to the middle class. It can happen in just one generation, all because of the power of the most wondrous device ever created—the human brain.

Within one generation a relatively small investment in basic human capital could more than pay for itself. A massively enhanced global middle class would accelerate worldwide economic growth. This would result in a higher tax base for governments and revenues that could be used to help grow budgets for education everywhere. It's such an obvious win-win situation, if only the world dared to be visionary and think long term.

Is this a pie-in-the-sky proposal? Is there proof that a big idea like this can actually work? I answer these questions with two examples: my father, Robert "Woody" Wood, and the tiger economies of Asia.

My father was one of millions of soldiers whose reward for serving in World War II was a university scholarship underwritten by the U.S. government. The GI Bill was one of the biggest influences on the creation of a mass middle class in U.S. history. By educating such a large swath of its youth population, the American government helped to create a generation of engineers, scientists, doctors, teachers, and other white-collar professionals who helped to move the American economy to the highest levels the world had ever seen. Without the GI Bill, our family wouldn't have been middle class.

Woody worked hard for forty years. He helped design helicopters as well as the wingspan for Boeing's 707 jet. He was head of product safety for the largest fire engine company in the world. Eventually he became CFO of a large natural gas company. He earned money, faithfully paid taxes, and volunteered in his community. Over his life, the taxes he has paid to the U.S. government have been at least a hundred times what was invested in his education. And he's the first to tell people that he's just "a simple guy from a small town."

Had our family not been middle class, it isn't likely I would have been the beneficiary of a great education. Nor would I have been able to be part of the building of a great company that created tens of billions of dollars of shareholder value. Economic progress does not otherwise happen; world-class companies like Apple, Boeing, Google, Starbucks, and Twitter could not have been created by illiterate people with a third-grade education.

The United States is, of course, not the only nation to have used education as a driver of long-term economic growth. The last fifty years have seen the rise of several "Asian tigers," which offer a modern-day equivalent of postwar U.S. government intervention. The leap these societies have made—all on the back of universalizing access to education for their citizens—is awe inspiring.

It's hard to believe that just four decades ago, Asia's advanced economies were dirt poor, with the average family living in soul-crushing poverty. From Hong Kong to South Korea, from Singapore to Taiwan, the average family lived a subsistence existence. Malnutrition rates were high, and families

lived in shacks in communities without sanitation or clean running water. Literacy rates were low, and school completion rates for girls were low. Many of those girls began having babies by the age of fifteen. The cycle of poverty was perpetuated generation after generation.

And then the smartest and best-run governments in Asia decided to break out of the stasis that kept them among the world's poorest nations. Education was made one of the top funding priorities. Given a choice between that and massive defense spending, smart governments thought long term and chose to invest in human capital. Kids who were eight or ten or thirteen several decades ago are now some of the most productive citizens of today's economy. Hong Kong has a higher GNP per capita than New Zealand; South Korea and Taiwan are among the forty wealthiest countries. Singapore is now in the top five. Having realized that the country had no natural resources, the government of founding father Lee Kuan Yew directed massive investment in human capital. Today the self-proclaimed Lion City has a higher income per person than Japan, France, Germany, or the UK. It even tops oil-rich and scarcely populated Kuwait.

Let's examine that fact. A tiny nation-state with *no natural resources* and a large number of people living in a relatively small physical space has managed to outearn a country with some of the largest oil deposits ever found. *That* is the power of investing in and nurturing young brains.

Education alone may not be enough to guarantee economic success: Just look at Cuba. There are other success factors that matter, like good governance, rule of law, and access to trading routes and partners. But if you were challenged to assemble a prosperous society from scratch, education would be the first building block you'd want to develop. After all, can you name a single uneducated society that has ever risen from poverty to widespread prosperity?

I can't either.

Ensuring that "every child" can read is no doubt a big and audacious goal. But I sincerely believe it is achievable. In today's world we see a lot of great companies being built. Why not, in a similar manner, build a global movement around literacy and gender equality in education?

The time is now: In fact, it was yesterday. As I write, my goal is as audacious as it was ten years ago: to create independent readers and lifelong learners. Our motto at Room to Read remains "World Change Starts with Educated Children."

A decade in, Room to Read can show results in ten countries that prove the effectiveness of our approach and the no less compelling urgency of the need for ever bigger and better outcomes. In twenty years I'd like to have grown to reach so many more children that the ten-thousand-library milestone will look tiny by comparison. Could we open one hundred thousand libraries? Reach fifty million children?

Our long-term goal will always be to reverse the notion that any child can be told that he or she was "born in the wrong place, at the wrong time, to the wrong parents" and hence will not be educated. That idea belongs on the scrap heap of human history.

CHAPTER TWO

A Kilogram of Gold

Half an hour before the sun rises, a young girl named Inkham, age eleven, wades along the shallow shore of the Mekong River bent over, staring into its halcyon waters. With no prior warning, her arm makes a lightning-fast strike, plunging into the river with empty hand and emerging clutching a silvery fish, which is then thrust into a small plastic bag tied to her loose white cloth belt. She does not take time to savor this victory, and less than a minute later she is holding a small crab—then another. She continues the hunt, fully engaged, not even noticing the small dugout canoes floating past or the sun rising over the horizon.

Within twenty minutes she has collected enough bounty to feed the family of five of which she is the youngest member. She knows her mother will be proud of her. They awoke, as they do every day, at 5:00 A.M. Together they stoked a small wood fire and put the rice on to boil. Her older brother packed up the thin blankets that had provided only marginal comfort against the night air. Part of the benefit of sleeping five to a bed, the only bed, is that proximity can be an antidote to a cold evening. Some of that chill still lingers in the predawn. But the family is up and about, sweeping with handmade straw brooms, collecting eggs from their three squawking chickens, and then bribing those angry birds with a few handfuls of corn kernels.

Inkham strides quickly and with a fierce determination away from the river and toward the family's straw hut. If she is fast, there will be time to study her homework prior to breakfast. If she can keep a *really* accelerated pace, there might even be an opportunity to read a few of the treasured Lao-language storybooks she has checked out of the school's small library. Greedy with intellectual anticipation, she makes double time along the dirt path. Inkham's face is lit with fierce concentration. Her goals are simple: first, ten minutes to review her Lao-language homework. *I will be the best student in the entire nation at the Lao language.* Then ten minutes to read aloud two storybooks to her mother. *She will cook, and I will share with her some good stories. And then we get to eat my favorite food—deep-fried crab.*

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Not many people would associate the joy and optimism felt by Inkham with her home country of Laos. As she happily skips home, she passes people walking along the side of the dusty road pushing small carts and riding rusty antique bicycles. These adults have not had many lucky breaks in their lives. Laos is landlocked and sits in the heart of one of the poorest regions on earth. It has long been isolated

from the rest of the world. Knowledge of English and other foreign languages is low, which means that most Lao people cannot communicate with 99 percent of the world. The country has few natural resources that could help it earn precious foreign currency. Even in the tourism department it can't compete against neighboring attractions like the beaches of Thailand, the temples of Cambodia, and the famous noodle soups of Vietnam.

As if that weren't enough, the country also suffers from damage done by the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. There are four words that, strung together, form the reason that the United States heavily bombed Laos on a daily basis for nearly eight years: Ho Chi Minh Trail. Because the United States controlled large parts of central Vietnam, the North Vietnamese weren't able to move soldiers or supplies from the north to the south without significant risk, at least not through their own country. Instead they took ingenious advantage of geography. Central Vietnam is the narrowest part of the country. If you drew a straight line from Hanoi to Saigon, it would pass through large parts of Laos.

So pass through the Vietnamese army did. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was an informal series of roads and jungle tracks that never appeared on a map. Some sections of the trail shifted over time. The United States eventually started to bomb the trail but, realizing that soldiers and armaments were still getting from north to south, it increased the geographic scope of its bombing. Since it's nearly impossible to accurately target a site for which there is no fixed set of coordinates, indiscriminate bombing became a key part of the escalation plan. The people of Laos, most of whom were rural, agrarian, peace-loving Buddhists, watched helplessly as buildings were destroyed, forests burned, and family members killed.

By the time it was over, a new record had been set: The United States had dropped more ordnance on Laos during the Vietnam War than had been dropped on all of Europe, by all parties, during World War II. This was all done despite the fact that the United States never made a formal declaration of war against the country it was punishing.

From 1964 to 1973, more than 270 million cluster bombs were dropped on Laos. By the time the war was over, the government of Laos decided that it wanted no part of this madness and sealed itself off from the outside world. Perhaps isolation would offer something more closely resembling peace.

Granted, the rebuilding would be difficult. The majority of the bombs dropped had not detonated, meaning there were tens of thousands of what were euphemistically called UXO, or unexploded ordnance. In addition, thousands of Lao's best and brightest had fled the country, seeking to avoid the postwar political struggle for power and the coming closure. Isolation is never a brilliant economic strategy, and as the country stagnated, the people of Laos found themselves in a familiar catch-22: They were too poor to afford education, but until they had education, they would remain poor.

The nation's fate could have been Inkham's. But thankfully we live in a world where fate does not always come wrapped in dark clothing. What if fate can actually be a positive thing? Rather than watching negative outcomes from the sidelines, can the world we live in change the word's meaning and tone? Inkham's auntie believes this is both desirable and entirely possible.

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Auntie Vankham looks in frequently to make sure that Inkham and her two brothers are doing well. Over the small wood fire, the family's only source of heat for comfort and cooking, Inkham's mother stirs the pot of rice. Observing the full bag of her daughter's river treasures, Inkham's mother smiles but says nothing. Instead she points to the books overflowing from Inkham's backpack, then signals toward her husband, indicating that they should form a small circle. Inkham's father smiles but is

silent as he stands close to his only daughter. After scanning the books before her, Inkham picks her favorite, one that she's checked out of her school's small library on numerous occasions. She beams as she opens to the first page of *The Happy Little Monkey*. She reads aloud in Lao: "The happy little monkey wakes up in the morning. He brushes his teeth."

With a look of intense concentration, she focuses on sounding out each phrase. "The happy little monkey eats his breakfast. He puts his books in his backpack to go to school."

With each page Inkham's parents beam with pride. Inkham continues, telling her hushed and attentive family that the happy little monkey is kind to his parents. He is a good student. He reads books before going to bed and then says his prayers every night; the End.

Though this is perhaps the fiftieth time Inkham has read the book, she still enjoys the look of victory as she quietly closes the book and places it gently, like a treasured object, on the shelf. Her auntie claps and praises Inkham for her reading skills. The youngster smiles modestly and then looks over to her parents.

Their faces tell her what their voices never will. They have taken in every word with stoic concentration; their eyes shine with happiness. They can, however, say nothing. Both were born, and remain, mute.

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Gainful employment opportunities in rural Laos are few and far between. For those who cannot speak the odds are even grimmer. Inkham's family lives on the small amount of vegetables they can grow on a tiny plot of land, the rice for which they can barter, and the fish and crabs the young girl catches each morning in the river.

With no cash income, the family could not afford the "luxuries" of a school uniform, a book bag, school supplies, or the small fees required to help subsidize the teachers' salaries and textbooks. Inkham was likely to become yet another statistic, a small rounding error in an indifferent world that sees—or rather chooses not to see—that two hundred million young girls and women wake up every day and don't go to school.

One of Inkham's best friends is a "social mobilizer" named Nipaphone. She is employed by the Laotian office of Room to Read. Her role is akin to that of a social worker—she looks out for several hundred girls like Inkham who are in our Girls' Education program, monitors their progress, encourages them to study hard, and steps in to help out when there are problems or obstacles. She is also perpetually on the lookout for ways Room to Read can reach more girls. Nipaphone heard from a local headmaster that Inkham had to drop out of school (we immediately checked to make sure this was not a school Room to Read had built) and went to investigate. After asking around the small village, Nipaphone was able to find the family and introduced herself. Neighbors helped to quickly locate Uncle Maita and Auntie Vankham to help the communication flow. As Nipaphone explained her goal of finding bright young girls for whom finances were the only barrier to education, the adults got excited about the opportunity to get their precocious Inkham back into the classroom.

"How grand it would only be," her auntie practically sang aloud, "for Inkham to be the first in our family to finish school!"

The girl herself was skeptical. Later she explained to our Laos team: "I must confess that when I first heard about Room to Read coming to our village, I did not pay much attention, because I was convinced I would never qualify for the program. I have parents who cannot speak and who have very little education. We have no books in our home. We are poor. Why would I be deserving of an

academic scholarship?”

Her status did not matter: All that did was the kinetic energy of her auntie and uncle, who regaled Nipaphone with stories about how Inkham awakens by 5:00 A.M. to help her mother with the household chores, followed by her daily expedition to the river. At which point Inkham interjected: “I love to catch crabs. They are my favorite food. I bring them home and my mother turns them into deep-fried crabs. When I used to go to school, she made sure that every day we had breakfast early, and were ready for school by 7:30 A.M. I love deep-fried crabs so much that sometimes I push my luck and see we can have it for all three meals!”

Nipaphone then inquired about Inkham’s love of reading. Had she previously brought books home to read after school?

“Yes. Despite this challenge my family is able to communicate well, for my brothers and I have learned to ‘read’ our parents’ expressions and hand movements. Even though they cannot speak, I know my parents are proud of me.

“They are also happy to have me read storybooks to them. Often while reading a book to them, I look at their faces and long for a magic wand to grant me a wish that would give my parents the ability to speak. Then we could talk about these stories and discuss them over our dinner. I wish I could hear their thoughts about the characters and the lessons. But maybe it doesn’t matter, because I still love them. I am proud that they are my parents.”

A week later, the family received the news. Inkham recalls: “Much to my surprise, I was picked! I remember one of my teachers telling me afterward that I should always expect good things and to be optimistic all the time. Now my favorite quote is ‘Expect the unexpected!’”

Her uncle and auntie’s intervention helped convince the Room to Read Laos team that Inkham was likely to succeed because she had four adults and two older brothers looking out for her. With her work ethic, her personality, her smarts, and this support structure, how could Room to Read not invest in Inkham?

Auntie Vankham was equally thrilled. “When I first heard that Inkham was selected by Room to Read, I could not sleep that night. It felt as if I had won a kilogram of gold!”

There are 35.27 ounces in a kilogram. As I write this in early 2012, the spot price of gold is \$1,600 per ounce. A kilogram of gold is therefore worth \$56,714.

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Room to Read established a library in Inkham’s school so that students would take books home. As always, we started with a challenge to the local community to pitch in. Early in the development of Room to Read, my founding partner, Erin Ganju, and I heard from our country directors that the best way to assist local communities was to help them help themselves, not to provide direct “charity.” Whether with “sweat equity” or small contributions that added up, the people in Inkham’s village staked a claim in providing books and education for their kids. If they’d lacked this motivation, the project might not have sustained itself over the long haul.

Just building a school or library won’t suffice. Our goal at Room to Read is also to monitor programs carefully and to follow through with the necessary resources for students’ ongoing success.

Nipaphone (the social mobilizer) and her team also provide Inkham (and others like her) with everything she needs for school. They pay the monthly school fees and have bought their young prodigy two school uniforms and two pairs of shoes. They make sure she has textbooks to read, notebooks to write in, and pencils and pens with which to fill them. She gets a small home library of

books to encourage literacy and the habit of reading. Nipaphone regularly checks in on her academic progress. Finally, Inkham regularly attends “life skills camps” run by Room to Read, at which she learns the skills she will need to make key life decisions as an independent and educated woman. These include financial management, self-confidence, communication skills, knowledge about her own health and body, and an understanding of the advantages of delaying marriage and having children until after she’s finished secondary school.

This integrated approach to girls’ education is one developed by Room to Read after extensive feedback from the field. Sunisha Ahuja, head of Room to Read India, reflects: “I think that our success has much to do with a holistic approach to the problems we encounter in each country in which we work. You can’t just build schools and fill libraries with books: You also have to examine the skills of the children reading those books and the lives they lead. Girls still face substantial barriers to education due to economic and social pressures, especially in the rural areas.”

Inkham now attends school every day.

“I study hard at school, especially in Lao-language class, my favorite subject. I want to have the highest grade on every test and be the best student of Lao—first at the level of the district, then the province, and then the entire country. I love reading books, which helps me improve my knowledge and vocabulary. I visit the school library regularly and check out books to read at home.”

These are big goals, but apparently not grand enough.

“I am also dreaming of graduating from high school with a Red Certificate, which means I have to score no less than ninety percent for all eight subjects. This will result in getting a scholarship and automatic enrollment in university either in Luang Prabang or Vientiane, so I can pursue my preferred choice of study, health science.” She pauses as her brown eyes look up to the sky. A wide smile crosses her face. “I know I can do it.”

Whenever I hear reports of Inkham’s progress and her self-confidence, I marvel at the changes we’ve seen in just three years. Back in 2008, she was convinced that because her family was poor, her parents mute and uneducated, and her home lacking in books, she would not qualify or be chosen for a scholarship. Today she expects to be number one not only in her class but in the entire nation.

To effect this radical change must be a very expensive proposition, yes?

The all-in cost of providing Inkham with everything that she needs to succeed academically, to be the first in her family to finish secondary school, and to have the life skills she will need to be an independent and educated young woman is \$250 per year. Yet to Inkham and her family, this is valued as highly as a kilogram of gold (more than \$50,000).

When I nervously proposed my “every child” goal to Charlie Rose, these numbers played a big role. Though the cost of our intervention is low, the value of education is insanely high. As long as we continue to raise funds to support girls like Inkham—whether it’s \$250 at a time or \$25,000 at a time—social mobilizers like Nipaphone can continue to recruit new girls to join our program. Today we employ more than one hundred of these talented mobilizers in countries across the developing world.

If they can support a million more Inkhams out there, then the future will be a much brighter place.

The Lottery of Life

From my elementary school library to the small but well-stocked community library in my hometown to the book stacks at the Norlin Library on the University of Colorado campus, the insides of libraries have always provided me a warm feeling of heaven on earth. If I have been blessed with this good fortune, shouldn't I strive to provide that same blessing to every child who has not yet experienced it?

It was not always this way. As a young MBA graduate, I focused on how much money I was making, what kind of car I drove, and how large a team I had reporting to me. As I look in the rearview mirror, that part of my past seems to belong to a different person. My highest priority today (indeed, it might be accurate to call it an obsession) is for children everywhere to have access to those magic portals to the wider world called libraries. I won't be satisfied until hundreds of millions more children have the same access I enjoyed while growing up, which I took for granted then.

At age forty-seven I am prosperous and healthy. I can reasonably expect (I'm painfully aware that I'm tempting fate by writing these words) to live for another forty years. What a deal! I've already had a really full life: read thousands of books, filled five passports, run a dozen marathons, and met a kinds of interesting people. I can envision working full time at my passion and traveling the world for two more decades, then maybe working ten more years at half-time pace, and then enjoying another ten or so "sunset" years in my rocking chair reading great books.

Thanks to the lottery of life, I was born in the right place at the right time. Life expectancy in the wealthiest parts of the world—Australia, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sweden, the United States—can be up to four decades longer than in the poorest parts of the world. You can double your time on earth if you're born in Switzerland rather than Swaziland, in Andorra rather than Angola, in Liechtenstein rather than Liberia.

Let's say instead that I live in Mozambique.

I'm dead.

Zimbabwe?

Ditto.

Malawi?

Same.

The Central African Republic?

D-E-A-D.

Pushing up daisies.

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