



Serving others to inspire community change around the globe: An interview with Balbir Mathur



Interviewer

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Interviewee

Balbir Mathur

Balbir Mathur, founder and president of Trees for Life International describes how his need to serve others and his love for our world has led him on an incredible journey, impacting millions of people across the globe.

Interview with Balbir Mathur

By Emily A. Grant B.A.

The work of Trees for Life (TFL) International started in the early 1980's with teaching villagers in India to plant and care for fruit trees. This initiative rapidly spread to many countries throughout the world. Since then, millions of lives around the globe have been touched by Trees for Life. Their challenge is to create and demonstrate models that, if successful, may inspire others to solve their own problems. Their focus is on developing and providing the tools of empowerment to local community leaders who create hope among others. Balbir Mathur, founder and president of Trees for Life, took some time to answer some questions about how Trees for Life came to be, the philosophies it holds and tools that others can use to mobilize communities globally.

What need were you trying to address when Trees for Life was first created?

First of all, I was not trying to create something. Trees for Life emerged as a byproduct; it was not the goal. In our society, often people believe there is something wrong with the world and that they can fix it. I come from a different point of view. I cannot even change the color of one hair on my head, so the idea of changing the world is something I don't comprehend.

The "need" was within me. I needed to find a way to serve others. Just like a candle can only fulfill its purpose by burning. That is how it is designed.

I had an internal need to express my love for the universe. When I give my wife a flower, it is not because I think she needs it, or that something is lacking. I do it to express my love. Trees for Life grew out of my desire to express myself and my love.

When I started doing that, it attracted other people who resonated with it. These people don't come saying, "I'm here because the world needs something." There is a big difference between a lover giving a flower to their beloved, and a

shopkeeper saying, “People need flowers, so I will sell flowers to them.” The flower is the same, but it means something very different. So, serving as an expression of your love, not because you think someone else needs it, is what the whole movement of TFL has been built around.

Can you tell me about some pivotal moments in TFL history which have made it what it is today?

When I first started, I had to give up a very successful business. I still needed to maintain my family and pay the bills, so I looked for a job where I could fulfill what was driving me from inside. But I could not find anything that really fit, so I took the risk and decided to do what I am designed to do – to serve people. My wife and I not only went through all the family savings, but we also went deep into debt. However, the urge or drive was so strong that there was no way I could give it up. Then volunteers started coming, because they were attracted to the idea and were not after money. After a couple years, David (the current executive director) showed up and started volunteering. One day, I realized he had quit his job and was at TFL all day, even though we had no money to pay him. He was going through the same cycle that I had



The spirit blossoms when diverse people focus on a common purpose, awakening their potential and strengthening the whole community.

gone through. There are very few places for people like us.

This event brought a major shift in my thinking. It dawned on me that my purpose was to create a platform for others to do their dance. My journey got defined: I was to create a platform so that these angels could dance.

Another pivotal moment took place in India. Someone gave us 40 acres of barren land to create a training center. I went there and did 5 days of fasting, prayer and silence. It was very hot during that time, ranging from 118 to 125 degrees. But I had to get permission from the land to serve it. After that, everything we did there was very successful. A movement started immediately. We had a community of people involved within 15-20 days. Each week, a couple hundred people would come to see us. All of a sudden, for them I was a holy person.

The riddle of how this happened was solved when I went out for a walk on one of those hot nights. It was about 10:00. I saw two people talking. When they saw me, one asked the other, “Who is this guy?” The other said, “He is an American.” The first exclaimed with amazement, “An American?!” He could not imagine an American leaving the comforts of an air conditioned home and all the luxury to be there in such primitive conditions and intense heat.

I realized that people who inspire others to action are those who make sacrifices for the betterment of their community. These people are considered to be holy. Sacrifice and sacredness are two sides of the same coin.

This was an “Ah-ha” moment for me. I did not have to become a holy person myself—I needed to become a servant of such holy people who are



Sacredness from sacrifice: People inspired to serve can transform a desert (above) and bring new hope and prosperity (below).



already serving their communities. I am a servant of those who are making sacrifices for their people. That is fundamentally what Trees for Life does.

Please tell me about the philosophies of Trees for Life

We spend a lot of time introspecting. We are constantly examining why we are doing what we do.

We see that our society spends enormous time and resources serving immediate needs and responding to emergencies – disaster relief efforts, etc. That is very good and the right thing to do. But we also need a few people focused on the long term. We fill that role.

How do we do that? To turn a huge ship, you have to move a small “trim tab,” which turns the rudder, which then turns the ship. So we believe that even a small group of people can make a major paradigm change if we can think long-term.

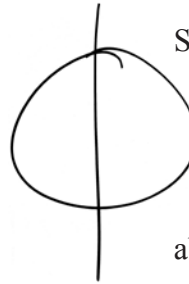
If our society were a tree, different groups or communities might be the flowers, the leaves, the branches, etc. We (TFL) would be roots. Flowers and fruits advertise themselves to the world, but the roots are deep down in the dark. People fertilize a tree to get more fruits, not for the roots. But the roots are working underground so that the fruits may blossom and grow. We made a conscious decision to become roots, working unseen and unrecognized for the health of the tree.

Long-term things, like turning a great ship, are not done by one person alone, but by a community. Such a community has to be made of people with a common purpose, but not people who are all the same. They need to come with different backgrounds, talents, disciplines, and ways of thinking. One can be a singer, one an artist, another a scientist — each playing a different part.

This diversity means we need to go beyond mere tolerance – we need to work on understanding those who are different from us. That means examining our concepts of “good” and “bad.” What is bad for me is not necessarily bad for the next person. In a community, we have to make our lines of good and bad very soft and pliable so that they do not create barriers between us. That is the most difficult concept, because we are constantly bombarded with other people’s ideas of what is good and bad. And in that we get stuck.

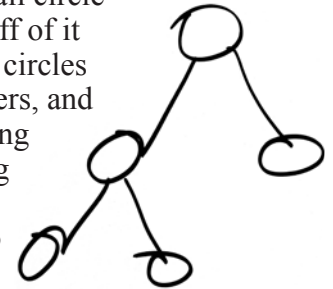
To illustrate these concepts, we often draw three diagrams with circles. The first one is a big circle

with many small circles inside it. We call it the “chocolate chip cookie.” This illustrates the wide variety of people in the community, and thus the need for understanding of other people and their different perspectives.



Second, we draw a big circle with a line down the middle, cutting it in half. This signifies that for any one idea or perspective, the exact opposite is just as valid. For our type of community to survive, I cannot be an extremist about my perspective of good and bad.

The third image is of a small circle with two lines branching off of it to two other circles. These circles each branch off to two others, and so on. This signifies teaching and learning, freely sharing knowledge with other people, and asking them to share it with others.



I think everything is enveloped by our belief in responsibility. I am writing the story of my life, and I am responsible for what I write. No one else is writing my story. I make my own decisions. Thus, I can no longer be a victim. I cannot say that the devil made me do it, or my political party, or my religion, or anything or anyone else. I have to say, “I chose to do it. I made a decision. I am responsible.” For us, this simple belief is a paradigm change. It encompasses everything we do.

From your experiences what can people do to help mobilize others for community change?

I cannot suggest that anyone else will be successful if they do what we have done. I can only speak of my experience and my limited perspective. But here are some tools they can use:

1. Whatever they are doing has to be more than just an activity—it has to be sacred for them. Remember, sacredness comes from sacrifice. A child is sacred because you make sacrifices from the time they are conceived. Things you will not do for anyone else, you will do for your child. There must be sacrifice on a daily basis, at every single moment, not just a one-time thing. But if it is truly sacred to you, you do not think of it as a sacrifice, it is just natural.

2. Although a community you are serving has a life of its own, and grows on its own, still you have to manage it for a long time. Again, it's just like raising a child. You have to teach a child how to eat, dress, study, swim, etc. You work at it on a daily basis.
3. You also must realize when the child becomes an adult. You have to know when to cut the apron strings so they can make decisions on their own.
4. To be an effective leader, more important than knowing how to do things is understanding who you are, what you are doing and why you are doing it. The most important thing is understanding who you are. You must answer that question on a daily basis, because the community changes, and so does the leader. If you understand who you are, the fundamental relationship with the community remains the same through all these changes.

The community itself must understand two things:
 1) Who they are—the aspect of their being that doesn't change, and permeates everything; and 2) What direction they are going.

Understanding these things will keep a community on track through all the changes, all the storms and upheavals that are bound to come. A community is not a static creation. It is a living body. You must understand how things emerge, come into being, and transform. Community change is like a journey. If you are traveling from here to New York, your direction does not change. But if you are traveling by car, you may get a flat tire and have to transfer

to another car, or take a bus or a train. All other things can change, but if the direction remains the same then you will make the journey.

For information on TFL and how you can get involved, please visit <http://www.treesforlife.org/>.

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 – Balbir Mathur*



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