Seize the day

A personal message to G8 leaders from Richard Curtis

Richard Curtis is the writer of films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually*, the combined box office earnings of which top US$1.5 billion. He is also co-founder of the UK charity, Comic Relief, which over the last 20 years has raised over US$600 million for people in intense need in Africa and the UK.

I gave up my job as a writer 18 months ago to work towards the G8 conference in Gleneagles, in the hope that I could do a tiny bit towards making it a breakthrough moment in the battle against extreme poverty. These were some of the reasons, and statistics, for that decision:

I discovered that in some countries of Africa now one in four children die before they are five years old – I have four children under 10 – which one would I choose to go down?

Also, I know that one in 13 women in poorer countries die during childbirth – my girl Emma had a very complicated first birth with our daughter Scarlett, but they are both alive and well.

In some parts of Africa, the average life expectancy is now 37, which was the average life expectancy in the UK about 500 AD.

I’m 48, my Mum’s 79, my Dad is 86. I was also encouraged by the group of men who’d be meeting to make the decisions in Gleneagles, amongst them Tony Blair, who had set up the Commission for Africa. George Bush, whose record in terms of money for the poor, particularly in the area of AIDS, far exceeds that of all recent American Presidents. Jaques Chirac, a man with a lifelong passion for all things African, from a country with the strongest of bonds with that great continent.

And speaking of AIDS, I was deeply aware of the terrible statistics there – 25 million dead of this terrible disease in Africa alone – many more than died in the Holocaust of the Second World War. A Holocaust all of our own. Every year. Recently a project in Malawi was set up to train nurses to fight the AIDS epidemic. They picked 300 students, 18-year-old girls. By the end of the three years, only 72 of the girls were still alive. There are parts of Africa where young women are almost an endangered species.

I kept thinking to myself – what are our children going to think about our generation? Will they go to Africa and lay wreaths upon the Tomb of the Unknown Child and turn to us and say – “Millions of people were dying, on your watch – and you just stood by. It was an urgent crisis of epic proportions and you treated it as business as usual.”

And I so I put down my pen – to a massive sigh of relief from the millions of people who deeply do not want to watch yet another film in which Hugh Grant once again gets the girl – and started to do whatever I could. The purpose was always, in one way or another, to try to convey the passions of ordinary people about this subject to the politicians who will be making the decisions at Gleneagles. Eight men in one room.
Bob Geldof once told me that he made more money for the poor during a short meeting with President Mitterrand than he did in the whole Band Aid/Live Aid extravaganza. The real power for massive change lies with politicians.

Over this year, I’ve seen extraordinary things. Nelson Mandela launching the Make Poverty History campaign in Trafalgar Square – an old man who knows what it means to fight injustice, and to win. I’ve attended meetings in South Africa with representatives of over 70 countries, all joining together for this cause. I’ve sat in rooms with the most bizarre collection of individuals, from the Mothers Union to the Trade Unions to the Boy Scouts – all determined that the time has come for a change. I’ve seen hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people from all around the world join websites and email their leaders. I’ve seen millions of people wearing the white band; the symbol of the campaign.

I’ve also been to Africa and sat in rooms with young, beautiful women dying of AIDS, with no medicines in sight. Given fresh vegetables if they were lucky. I’ve sat by as one young woman called Aberash, with a four-day-old child, decided not to breast feed her child because she might pass the AIDS virus on to her child. But she was too poor to buy baby milk. I’ve taken the call a few days later telling me that her child had died. Just one of the 30,000 children who died that day and will die unnecessarily every day until someone has the determination to change things once and for all.

And I absolutely know that this generation of politicians could make the definitive difference here. If on the Wednesday before the G8, 30,000 children died in London; if on the Thursday 30,000 died in Berlin; then 30,000 in Paris on Friday; 30,000 in Moscow on Saturday; 30,000 in Tokyo on Sunday; in Ottawa on Monday; in Washington on Tuesday; and in Rome on the Wednesday that the G8 leaders arrive, we all know in our hearts that the money would be found to stop the deaths on the walk from the front door to the reception desk. It can’t be impossible. It must be possible.

Politics is stupidly complicated – getting things right is impossibly hard – but I’ve never had a moment’s doubt that there is the money and the knowledge to halve extreme poverty by 2015. And now is the moment to do it. There is a tide in the affairs of men – and by the time of the G8 meeting, the whole world will be watching to hear the results on poverty. Thousands of people will be in Edinburgh. Millions will be waiting around the world, knowing that definitive progress is needed on cancelling debt, doubling aid, and making definite progress towards trade justice. Billions will have watched the Live 8 concerts. They will know about and understand the G8. A whole generation will be holding its breath to see whether their leaders will lead, to see whether the promises their countries made at the millennium will be kept, or broken.

Throughout history there have been great battles fought by members of the public and then by their elected representatives against great injustices – the battle against slavery, the battle against apartheid, the great American battle for Civil Rights. A whole generation will take its lead from this G8 Summit – a whole generation prays for a great and historic victory.

When I go back to work, I’ve decided to leave Hugh Grant still sitting on his yacht, and to try to write a book for my children, about the lives of great men and women. All history books now seem to be called Horrible Histories, The Terrible Tudors, The Gruesome Goths. But I can’t find on the shelves the books I used to love when I was a boy – short biographies about people like George Washington, Napoleon, Nelson. I’m going to write about men and women who have used their lives to change the world in some way – from William Wilberforce to Martin Luther King, from Marie Curie to Nelson Mandela. I know who I want the last chapter to be about. Eight men who saw that the world was crying out for justice, eight men who realised that suddenly the price of poverty had slipped out of control, eight men who arrived at a hotel in Scotland one day in July and made the greatest decision of our times. Berlusconi. Blair. Bush. Chirac. Koizumi. Martin. Putin. Schroeder. Debt. Aid. Trade.

I beg you. Seize the day.