

MELATI
WIJSEN

**CHANGE
STARTS
NOW**

100 LESSONS FROM A
FULL-TIME CHANGEMAKER

HarperCollins



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*This is for all 12-year-olds out there
who dare to do something different.
And for those a bit older and younger,
who are curious too.*

A few questions to make us wonder:

*Do you remember being 12 years old?
What were you like?
What were you curious about?
What made your heart beat so fast
it shook the ground beneath your feet?*

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ABOUT THIS CHANGEMAKER

Full name: Melati Riyanto Wijisen

Date of birth: 19th December, 2000

Job: Full-time changemaker

My definition of a changemaker: A changemaker is anybody who wakes up in the morning and thinks, “What can I do today to make the world around me better?”

Projects worked on: Bye Bye Plastic Bags, Mountain Mamas, One Island One Voice, Bali’s Biggest Clean Up, *Bigger Than Us* the movie, and YOUTHTOPIA

Nationality: I’m a mixed kid! My parents are Indonesian & Dutch

Home: Between Bali and Amsterdam

Biggest live audience: 9,000 people, Ziggo Dome, Amsterdam, 2023

Passion(s): Telling stories, listening to music, and going to thrift stores and markets

Diet: Vegetarian – yes, for environmental reasons

Star sign: Sagittarius

Fears: Heights, the dark, and disappointing people

Family: Isabel a.k.a. Bel (younger sister), Elvira (mama), Eko (papa)

The thing I’m most proud of: Being brave enough at 12 years old to take action. I have no clue where I would be, or who I would be, if it weren’t for the courage of my 12-year-old self. I thank her every day.

Saturday, 13-10-2012

I was 11 years old, moments before my life changed,
when I wrote this.

A Poem: Last Seed on Earth

If I had the last seed in my hands,
I would call a band
to play a song
while I run into the center of town
not to receive a crown
but to plant this seed in the ground,
from the tip of my forehead
I can feel the heavy drops of excitement
dripping
panting, panting, panting
I made it
pulling out my kit
I shove the shovel into the warm
silky soil
that has been waiting for this moment to happen,
gently placing the seed in its comfy new home
when suddenly everything looked
much much
more
green

FOREWORD

When a twelve-year-old girl from Bali decided she could no longer accept seeing her beautiful island drowning in plastic, she didn't wait for permission to act. She didn't wait for the "right time" or for someone else to solve the problem. Melati Wijsen simply began. This is exactly the kind of defiant optimism our world desperately needs right now.

I have spent decades working on climate action, including leading the Paris Agreement negotiations, and I can tell you with absolute certainty: the most powerful force for change today is not coming from conference rooms or corridors of power. It's coming from young leaders like Melati who combine vision with unstoppable determination.

What makes this book so vital is not so much that it is a story about youth activism, but rather that it is a practical blueprint for turning passion into impact.

Through 100 honest, hard-won lessons, Melati shows us that changemaking isn't about waiting for perfect conditions or having all the answers. It's about starting where you are, with what you have, right now.

When I look at Melati's journey – from organizing island-wide cleanups to speaking on global stages – I see the kind of leadership our climate emergency demands. This is not leadership that asks permission or waits for validation. This is leadership that springs

from a deep understanding that when we see something wrong in our world, we have not just the right, but the responsibility to act.

To the young person reading this book: you might feel overwhelmed by the scale of challenges we face. You might wonder if your actions can really make a difference in a world where we need to transform entire systems. I understand that, but I have learned that great transformation begins with someone refusing to accept the world as it is.

The beauty of Melati's approach – and what makes this book so powerful – is that she breaks down the journey of changemaking into actionable steps that anyone can follow.

Whether you're concerned about plastic pollution, climate change, social justice, or any other issue that keeps you up at night, these lessons provide a road map for turning that concern into meaningful action.

We are living in the decisive decade for humanity. The actions we take – or fail to take – in the coming years will determine the world that future generations will inherit. That's why we need more young leaders who understand that change starts with a decision: the decision to begin, to persist, to rise above setbacks, and to inspire others to join the journey.

This book is more than a guide – it's an invitation to join a growing global family of change leaders who believe in their power to shape the future. As you read Melati's story and absorb her lessons, you will realize that no one is too young, too inexperienced, or too anything to make a difference. The world cannot afford to wait for someone else to solve its problems. The time for action is now, and you – yes, you – are exactly who we've been waiting for.

Change starts now. Are you ready to begin?

Christiana Figueres,

Executive Secretary UN Climate Change Convention 2010-2016

INTRODUCTION

Some will call this book a coming-of-age story, some would call it a reflection of growth, and others will call it an inspiring life story. Well, this is my story, which, if I'm being honest, has become one of hundreds of thousands of young people's stories today. But I have what they call a track record. I've been a changemaker for more than half of my life. It is all I know to be.

It started when a brave 12-year-old girl from Bali had a vision to make her island home plastic bag free.

You see, when I started my first organization, Bye Bye Plastic Bags, there was this:

- Beauty of not caring what others thought
- Clarity of knowing what I wanted
- Absurd simplicity of doing the right thing for the right reason

It was as simple as that. Now, as I sit here, writing away, I'm not sure I have it in me anymore. I want everything to be perfect all the time. I don't know where that brave, little 12-year-old girl went. I sometimes forget that I used to be her.

So, I'll tell you what this book is. It's a project for me to find the 12-year-old Melati again. Through sharing my story with you, I hope that somewhere along the way, maybe we both can find what once used to be and reconnect with the courage we know we still

have and desperately need to create a world we believe in.

Each chapter consists of a few different elements. It's advised to read them in order, but some chapters are okay as standalone guides. Each chapter comes complete with:

- Real-life stories
- The lessons learned
- Questions to think about

I purposefully created the book in this way because I wanted to craft a learning journey for you while reading, but also create a space for you to reflect and take these lessons into your own everyday actions.

Whether you are someone like me, a young changemaker, or you are a business leader, high school teacher, or just someone interested in making change, this book is for you. It's a story of change, how to navigate it, make sense of it, and accelerate it.

As I began to write the book, one lesson came up after another. Today, what you are holding in your hands is a book with 100 lessons in total. It's a lot, it's chaotic, sometimes confrontational, but that is what the journey of a young changemaker is all about. And besides, the biggest lesson of all is that our lives are a constant learning journey. Even as I write the end of the introduction, I can think of 10 more lessons I could've added. But see this as a start: 100 lessons now, and at the end, start creating your own list. Implement what you learn. Put it into practice and share it loudly with others. We must learn from each other to accelerate change. Add your story to #ChangeStartsNow and be a part of a global community of like-minded people.

We do not have the luxury of time to waste. Change *must* start now.

Changemaking and young people taking action have become dinner table conversations in so many households today. Our generation is making waves, finding ways to be part of a better world. This book belongs in that category.

But I want to show you what it's like – what it takes. The building of that wave until the crash on the sand. The sunrise and sunset of every memorable and not so memorable day in the life of a changemaker – and even better, how to become one.

I also wanted to say thank you for being here, and thank you for picking up this book. This *book!!* Oh my, I still can't believe it's a real life, actual book! So yes, from deep in my heart, a massive thank you from me to you.

Most importantly, though, I want this story to be yours. I want you to read it and see yourself in these pages. Because not only is it possible, but it already is true. The fact that you have this book shows that you are hungry and ready for the truth, insights, the how, the why. All of it. And I will do my very best to tell you the truth as it has been for me, from when I started at 12 years old to this day.

This book holds 100 lessons from over a decade at the front lines of change. It's been one crazy adventure, and I can't wait to share it with you.

So let's get started.

With so much love,
Melati Riyanto Wijzen

CHAPTER ONE:

THE CURIOUS 12-YEAR-OLD

Lessons in this chapter:

#1: We are nature

#2: We protect what we love

#3: Balance between good and bad creates harmony

#4: Tri Hita Karana

#5: Feeling safe allows you to explore

#6: Always ask questions

#7: Role Models Matter

#8: Find your focus

#9: Change takes time

The early morning sun was soft and gently fell into our open living room which faced directly into our garden. Birds were waking up, and you could hear them start their songs. There was a gentle breeze from the ocean starting to pick up. There was a calmness at home, surrounded by green rice fields and a clear view of the Balinese heart, Mount Agung.

This was my favorite time of the day. Our family home has a high ceiling held up by long, white pillars. My mother always tells the story of when they built the house. She could barely speak the local language. So, in their meetings, she would use body language to say how she wanted a high ceiling to allow the natural light to fall in. She stood there, she said, motioning “up, up, up,” hoping they understood her crazy moves upwards. Luckily, they did. I always wish I could’ve seen that moment. It resulted in the house I love so much. To ensure the openness and natural light of our home, the entire front of the house is open. We never had a front door. It was as if our home had open, outstretched arms, inviting the rice fields into our living room. It fit the philosophy that our parents raised us with: we were one with nature.

Ancient, mismatched furniture filled each corner. Mama’s buddha shrine in one corner, Papa’s symbolic Islam star in the other. There was a TV that we never turned on. It was in front of the wooden bed that my parents cut in half to turn into our couch. The center of the house was our wooden dinner table, complete with its mismatched chairs around it. Every night, we would sit there for hours, exchanging stories and contemplating questions.

On the right side of the house, we have a veranda peering over our garden and directly next to it, the village temple stands next to

an ancient banyan tree. I sat crisscrossed in the morning crisp air, mesmerized by the magic of this big, living, breathing tree. It was so peaceful. It was so beautiful. It was so grounding. I remember thinking, “I want to be like you when I grow up, tree.”

I found a comfortable spot to sit on the veranda, admiring the tree in this golden morning light. I heard my sister come out of our room, and she joined me where I sat on the veranda. We both smiled widely as we looked at each other.

Our shirts were matching. Last night, the shirts for our campaign had arrived. We were so excited for the sun to come up to see them in this light. They looked better than we could have ever imagined.

“Ready?” I asked my 10-year-old sister.

She nodded, and we helped each other up as we heard our mum in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

“Girls, breakfast is ready! We have to be in the car in 20 minutes, otherwise you’ll be late for school.”

“Coming!”

We walked over proudly in our campaign shirts to show our parents just how good they looked.

“Look at you two!” our parents beamed.

After we finished breakfast, we grabbed our school bags, our homework from last night, and the lunch boxes that were waiting on the kitchen table and headed to the car.

“Wait!” I said. “Can you take a picture?”

I wanted to remember this moment forever.

My sister and I dropped our bags, ran to the temple in front of our magical tree, and proudly stood side by side. We puffed our

chests out, so anyone who ever looked back at this moment could see our mission clearly. Our shirts read: *Bye Bye Plastic Bags*.

This was day one of our mission, which entirely embodied our purpose. This was where it began. Right there. I felt so proud. I felt it bursting out of me. At 10 and 12 years old, we were ready to do the right thing.

There was no turning back now.

LESSON #1: WE ARE NATURE

To me, my parents are like superheroes. At first glance, my mother and I look nothing alike. She's blonde, I'm brunette; her blue eyes, my brown eyes. And yet, the longer you look, the stronger the similarities appear. And the longer you get to know us, you start to wonder if the saying "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree" was made to describe us.

My father was raised in Surabaya, the second largest city on the island of Java, and he is the eldest of seven siblings. So, he carries the weight and the responsibility of being the eldest sibling. At the same time, he was the best at playing games with us all day long as kids.

Our parents raised us so we were constantly surrounded by nature: at home we were around rice fields and had a big tree in our living room, at school we were in the middle of the jungle, or on holidays we would go on the ocean on my favorite boat.

The Ombak Putih is a traditional boat, complete with big, beautiful sails and a wide wooden deck. It was painted white and dark

blue, to match its name: Ombak putih translates to “white wave” in Indonesian. My parents met while working on the boat at the same time. My dad was the purser and took care of guest relations. My mother had a similar role, but she was more on the operations and planning side of things.

During my childhood, our family spent a lot of time sailing through the 17,000 islands of my home country. It wasn't all-year-long, although it sometimes felt like it as a kid. We would spend a couple of weeks at a time on the boat throughout the year. My sister's first steps were taken on a beach of a remote island. And one of my favorite things was falling asleep with the sound of waves softly lapping the sides of the boat. These sounds became the soundtrack and lullaby I think back to whenever I have trouble sleeping. Each day felt like a new adventure because every morning we would wake up in a different part of the country, meaning my sister and I would have new “worlds” to explore. We would race each other out of the cabins and climb up onto the deck, peering out to see what we could identify: trees, hills, people, and dolphins.

The ocean carried us through our childhood. Looking back, the time spent onboard the boat feels magical. Jumping off the deck and playing games from sunrise to sunset, our imagination was at its peak. We formed a deep love and understanding for the big blue. These adventures built the foundation for the explorer mindset my sister and I now have, as well as deepened our understanding of how interconnected we are to nature. We are not separate from it.

Every day, we would end our days at the beach watching the sun go down, and our parents would share the craziest stories and

myths. They would let us imagine how lakes came to be (the fairy-tale of Danau Toba), or why stealing from gardens is never a good idea (Kancil and the Timun). But most of all, they would mix in lessons that I still think about every day.

“Girls, take a deep breath,” we’d hear one day as the setting sun turned the sky pink and orange.

As my sister and I both took a few deep breaths in and out, my father asked: “Did you know that the ocean gives us oxygen?”

“Don’t trees in the rainforests give us oxygen?” we questioned, because that’s what we were taught in school. Trees and plants go through a cycle of photosynthesis, capture our CO₂, and in return provide oxygen.

“That is true,” my mum jumped in, “but 70% of oxygen comes from the ocean.” She went on to explain that these tiny little creatures on the surface of the ocean called phytoplankton produce oxygen for us to breathe. They are the leaves and trees of the ocean.

“70%? That’s so much!”

“Yes girls, it means that every other breath you take comes from the ocean. Always remember that. We must treat our oceans with care and respect.”

We never looked at the ocean the same again. From that point on, we felt connected to this large being of water that literally keeps us alive. We are nature.

EXPLORING. DISCOVERING. QUESTIONING.

I know a big reason for why I do what I do today is because of those very moments when my parents raised my awareness of how lucky,

how beautiful, and how special each and every breath of life is. I learned to protect what I love.

LESSON #2: WE PROTECT WHAT WE LOVE

The foundation of our love for nature was starting to build. It was strong. We loved the ocean, we loved the wind blowing through our hair while we sailed around the country. We loved the rain, the trees, and the pristine beaches. Sure, we were island kids running around the rice fields and climbing trees most days, but I could already feel a strong sense of self and connection to the natural beauty around me. When I would see a tree being cut down, I would cry. When I got the chance to learn and build a garden bed at school, I wished it was my real bed to sleep in.

Naturally, we protect what we love. We don't want to see it hurt, or sad, or destroyed. When we are clear about what we love, we know we will do everything in our power to protect it. It is so fundamental to create experiences and spaces where we allow ourselves to fall in love with nature.

LOVE. PROTECT. NURTURE.

Essentially, there are two reasons why I am this way. My parents and Bali. If I had grown up anywhere else in the world, I'm not sure I would have had the chance to explore with so much creativity, become the person I wanted to be, and envision the world I wanted to create.