

Our Day to End Poverty: 24 Ways You Can Make a Difference

Shannon Daley-Harris and Jeffrey Keenan, with Karen Speerstra; a Criterion Venture

How we created Our Day to End Poverty

by *Karen Speerstra*

Collective Authoring

Gilbert and Sullivan, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Peter, Paul and Mary...musicians seem to know how to collaborate, some artists, as I learned, can, but I'm not sure writers are always as successful. However, I continue to think book collaboration is a fine idea, and may very well be the new paradigm of publishing. After my own personal writing experiences as well as working professionally with authors in various corporate settings, I know how lonely, how often depressing, writing can be. We need a different way of collecting, refining, organizing, developing and finally writing down the words. Why wait until a first draft manuscript is complete, to get reviews, and have it picked apart? I pondered what collaborative writing, from its very inception would look like. Occasionally, as I managed various projects, I put author teams together. A few became pleasing partnerships. Some can best be described as mediocre marriages. I regret to report that a few dissolved into divorce and acrimony. What makes an author team *work*, I wondered?

Then, as so often happens when you seriously pose a question, I became involved in a project that taught me much more than I had ever learned about publishing by merely pushing paper around a desk.

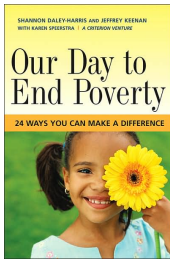
My friend Joy called me in October of 2005 and asked if I'd like to be a part of a book project. Given that my client-consulting schedule looked open enough to handle something like that, I said, "Sure. What's the book?"

"We're going to try to end poverty. Want to help?"

Well, if a book truly needed a vertiginous vision, a pregnant green germ powerful and important enough to result in something worth sacrificing trees for, this seemed to be it.

Helping people who are changing the world for the better is the vision behind my one woman consulting company, Sophia Serve, an editing and writing coaching service. As the name indicates, I try to honor the innate Divine Wisdom in writers. *Our Day to End Poverty*, the name we finally decided on for this co-authored book, promised to embody that mission to a "T."

Joy explained that she had met Jeff in Seattle - a man whose dream it was to write a practical action-filled book showing how people, together, could truly make a global difference in ending poverty. But he would need some help. Knowing Joy's business put people in touch with other



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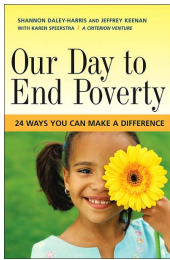
people who could come together to make dreams come true, he asked her to create a book team to bring his dream to fruition. My imagination was immediately piqued, so my heart totally agreed even as my brain scowled a bit. “How will this all work?” I wondered. Can the creative process *survive* five people working together? We weren’t sitting around a canvas consoling each other about underpainting, as my painting group did. We were living apart—far from a warm embrace and a smile to soften the “underpainting.” But I put my questions aside, because I was nearly as eager to discover how to co-create a new book, collaboratively, as I was to fight poverty.

Joy was the only one of the five of us who knew each of the others. The rest of us met by phone. It was obvious that Jeff was one of the most clear-headed, yet sensitive, people I had encountered for a while. Each of the others were true professionals. This could be fun!

After four months, not one word had been written, but we’d talked by phone at least a dozen times and shared numerous e-mails. While each of us thought we knew what our particular contributions might be, we spent hours learning each other’s strengths and potential weaknesses, trying to decide who would be primarily responsible for what. Shannon and I had both written and edited, but given her expertise in poverty areas, she was far more poised to be the key writer. I would assume more of the research and editorial functions, and, given my prior book publishing experience, would help steer the project toward a publisher. Joy and her business partner, Jackie, would lend their substantial networking, reviewing and marketing contacts to the mix, along with other project management details.

We agreed my roles would be forager, editor, publishing ‘expert’ but as the work progressed, I watched myself turn into shepherdess, elder, mentor, minister and even “mommy” on occasion. Collaborative work-roles, I learned, must not be so firmly cemented that they cannot evolve as the creative work, itself, evolves.

Given Jeff’s professional management of Global Supply Chain Operations for Adobe, he convinced us that up-front planning before launching into a new project would be key to its eventual success. And in retrospect, I admit, he was absolutely right. But after my free-for-all creative experience with painting, I wasn’t totally convinced. It smacked of control. It smelled like micro-management. But I, usually, kept my mouth shut. We spent hours deciding on how long the chapters should be, what content percentage should be devoted to global poverty issues and what percentage to national, local issues. We finally settled on 60/40. I had no idea a book could be created out of such a disciplined skill-set. We envisioned together what would appear in each of the, *finally* determined, 24 chapters. In my prior publishing days, we called this the chapter pedagogy. “Let’s get a format we can all live with,” Jeff encouraged us. He seemed to have all the time in the world. But most of us felt we weren’t moving nearly fast enough. Time was slipping by; other projects beckoned. And we still didn’t have even a first draft manuscript of any of the actual chapters. What should go at the end? What should wait for a website? How should we begin to put our panel of reviewers together?



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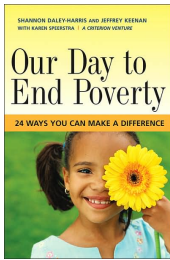
We hit our creative stride once we agreed to speak once a week—sometimes twice. Life interrupted; stalls happened. Day jobs intervened. Illness struck. Parents and children made demands. And egos at times flared, Capable people meeting to create a new life are a bit like male elks, thumping around and showing off their horns. Then everyone settles down and trust digs in. We expected a great deal from each other and in the process, we did not disappoint. And in the process, we shared deep heart stuff. We truly became friends.

Although we initially envisioned I would be conducting actual phone conversations with people, gathering information, it became increasingly clear that Joy and Jackie, with their extensive networks, knew some of the people who could best help and I didn't. They could get better information than my cold calling seemed to be doing. So I turned my efforts more towards on-line searches and published sources for information. I created files within our WIKKI shared software system and we filled them with "poverty stuff." But to do this, we needed a clearer outline. We had to decide what might be in our "chapter buckets." After numerous phone calls, we finally came to the joint decision to think of this as "our day to end poverty," which after numerous e mails among our publishing staff, their experts and our own "kitchen cabinets" became the final title. So we began creating a book structure that mirrored, to some degree at least, a day in each of our lives. Starting off with breakfast, we could speak of breaking the hunger "fast." And we worked our way through our common days, right through going to bed at night.

I had learned during my collaborative painting experiences that egos can widen and deepen, but they never completely disappear. They are always the underpainting. I watched our collective consciousness emerge and by the end of January, we began to feel our collective-cohesiveness. When one person became overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, another was ready to interject words of hope. We were convinced we were the right people with a passionate intention, and all we now had to do was trust the process. In a section we eventually called "About the Book Team" we said, "Operating within this book team was like learning a new dance. Although it wasn't always graceful, we were always surrounded by grace." Given the fact that all five of us were strong individuals, we, as you might guess, did struggle. Nevertheless, we set our goal: Shannon was to get the first 10 chapters into draft form by March 15. I agreed to draft the book proposal.

Draft versions swirled back and forth through cyber space. Getting people beyond our five to respond to various chapters and portions of chapters took concerted effort. We had to plan and target the right readers and encourage them to meet our deadlines. Joy and Jackie managed this portion of the efforts with great skill. Jeff wrote and edited portions. Finally, we were painting on the same canvas. We set a draft completion date for June; we needed to really push.

Over the months, we test-drove several templates, finally coming up with a chapter pattern calling for a couple of paragraphs to set the issue firmly in the reader's mind, followed by stories



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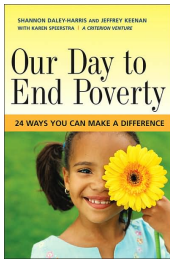
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in sidebars, quotations, an “Imagine This” “Actions Make A Difference”—all readable and appealing, to show the reader that together, we really *can* make positive things happen. We debated how much factual, statistical evidence about poverty to include and we tried to balance Jeff’s view that we don’t want to overwhelm the reader with data they have already seen, with the view that the last thing we want this book to be is “poverty light”; therefore, we argued: we can’t sugar-coat the information or pull punches.

It wasn’t until Shannon came north from Washington D.C. , I went south and the three of us met in Jackie’s Boston home that the book finally took shape. Jackie lined her dining room walls with paper, we spread out our computers and in a couple of hours we had come up with ways to organize and make the actions come alive. It was as if all the phone calls and bushels of e-mails could no longer push us forward; we needed to meet physically. We shared woman-talk. “Oh, you’re not the ‘elder’ woman I expected.” “I thought you’d be blonde.” “You’re much younger than I thought you’d be from you voice.” As a result of one day’s work, we knew how to best organize the actions in each chapter—actions to be done alone, by families, or by groups. They seemed to want to fall into four major categories. Following Jeff’s lead regarding how each chapter ideally should triage actions, beginning with the least intimidating, and moving on to the more challenging, we decided each chapter should start with “Learn”—read, watch, discuss poverty issues. Then, since giving seems relatively easy, “Contribute” came next—including more ways to give than “simply” writing a check—as important as money is. Then we moved on to “Serve” which seemed to us to be more collaborative a word than “help.” And finally, here comes the stretch: “Live.” We would include ways people might actually change their life-styles to make a difference in the world.

Intuitive thinking, by his own admission, was not Jeff’s forte, so as we women worked together, he backed off and began to rely more and more on our diffuse “feminine” skills to finish the job. He learned, against his quantitative, nature, how it was that we women might instinctively understand how to gather and arrange the material as well as where and how best to place important content. We continued to encourage each other to trust each of our unique skills brought to bear on this mammoth project.

In April, all five of us gathered at Shannon’s D.C. home to finalize our work, and sit around a speaker phone with an interested publisher. Finally. We had become a family, in more ways than one. With champagne toasts, we celebrated not just a job nearly finished, but deep appreciation for who we are—the *real* people beyond the careers, the *caring* people, beneath the causes, the *co-creating* people who joined, for the space of about a year and a half, with Sophia, to explore how a book’s vision might unfold. I am convinced that little book is blessed and will shine in ways we could not even imagine. It would not, could not have been co-created if Joy had not brought us together, if we five had not been willing to underpaint together a project worthier and more elegant than any of the five could have created individually. It was inspired. That’s Sophia’s forte.



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We found a publisher who shares our vision. One of our last co-creative acts was to designate five organizations listed in the book where our royalties would be placed. And how best to “seed” copies of the book with people whose networks can help get this book into the world. And the circles continue to expand through the co-creativity of each person who reads it. We five simply created the catalyst. Each individual who reads it, each family who undertakes some of the actions together, each group who notices how they can be more effective than working singly, joins Sophia’s efforts in devising real and effective ways to care for each other. Her wings fan our efforts; her blue robes wrap and cushion the globe as we begin to view each sister and brother as our own sisters and our own brothers. Our own parents. Our own children. *Our* family.

Karen Speerstra, a longtime publisher and owner of Sophia Serve, a writing and publishing coaching and consulting business, acted as editor and researcher for Our Day to End Poverty.