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In his speech entitled 'Lighting Your Way to a Better Future', Nelson Mandela famously stated, "Education is the most powerful weapon that you can use to change the world". I, for one, wholeheartedly agree.

Interestingly enough, Mandela, as a peace advocate, cites education as a "weapon". Yet one generally associates a weapon with an instrument of destruction, not with one used for positive change. A weapon used to force change is often indiscriminant and cares not for its victims. Its purpose is to bring about an end, to life, to cultures, or to governments.

Education on the other hand, stands in stark contrast to blunt brutality and violence inflicted by weaponry. While education is a weapon in the sense that it is necessary to combat injustice and rid the oppressed of their oppressors, it has quite the opposite effect of perpetrating devastation. It is the key to change without bloodshed, to uplifting developing nations, and to unifying human beings. It is targeted; when we educate youth and those in poorer countries, we give them the tools to support themselves and in turn, use their newfound knowledge to the benefit of society.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization contends education is "essential for sustainable development". Education holds the answers to world problems such as gender inequality, disease, poverty, environmental degradation, and war, allowing for communication and reason to prevail over violent rebellions or inspiring the next generation of female doctors who may one day find a cure to HIV and AIDS.

Most importantly, education is progressive. Unlike a weapon which brings an end to things, education's effect continues long past teacher and pupil. When we empower the uneducated with this command of knowledge, we are investing a better world both now and for the future, because today's youth will be the leaders of tomorrow in solving global afflictions, so long as they are put on a path where they have an opportunity to succeed.

Mandela's quote resonates also on a personal level. He says education is a weapon "you" can use; not people, not governments, not charities: you. You and I have the power to put our education to use and to pass along the privilege of knowledge. As individuals we can bring about positive progress. Not only do we possess this capability, but we have a responsibility to answer Mandela's call to action. As educated citizens, it is our duty to recognize the ability to learn as a blessing and therefore strive to pay it forward. Whether this constitutes establishing a shelter to help the homeless in one's local community get back on their feet, teaching farmers of developing nations sustainable agriculture practices, or even pursuing a career as an educator to inspire our country's next biologists, engineers, and lawyers; each and every act for the benefit of others brings progress for the human race. Because ultimately, the power we possess as individuals, combined, will change the world.