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Some Possible Themes To Carry Us Forward

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So much of what is important in life requires faith. It often requires believing in something before it comes true. If you don't have faith then you won't do any of the great things that need to be done, because you do not believe; you will not put yourself out there; you won't take a risk. We must be sincerely convinced within ourselves or we will defer committed action.

If there's anything that should spur us on to do great things it is seen in the inspiring and educational modelling of people that have pioneered; who have stepped out from their comfort zone. They have given us examples that tell us that we don't have to just be resigned to the way the world is; that we don't have to just take the crumbs from the table; that we can dream and hope for something better and that it can come true. There were no guarantees for any of these people; they took a step into the unknown. They had no knowledge that it would work out and sometimes it didn't. Yet, it is this willingness to risk for something worthwhile and bigger than ourselves that brings a kind of muscularity and robustness to the pledge to serve others. It also makes us have to rely on our principles and conviction more than the safe assurances that come when all that is accomplished is that which upholds convention.

We need to strengthen our faith so that we do not waste the opportunities that will come our way from time to time, nor the ones that might have been viable, were we to have the initiative to "make our breaks". One of the things that has always given me faith in this regard is the principle that exists in philosophy called "the principle of the white crow". Now white crows do not exist, as far as I know. However, in philosophical terms, if you can find a white crow, then it proves that all crows are not black. In other words, if you find a white crow the universe will never be the same again because you really have turned a corner. Something entirely new has begun with that small but momentous example. So, the import is not in the hugeness of a given step forward, but rather the deeper meaning and significance of doing what makes a difference and thereby knowing that this could be more widely possible some day.

It is the same with people's lives. They might possibly be the occasion for white crows to manifest. There are corners in their lives that can be turned for the better

that will reveal the true potential of their lives and of our communities. Once “better” has been achieved, however modest the example, we need never have to accept the argument again that better is not possible. We can know that in that instance, despite all of the so called “realistic” claims that had been made that this person was not a good candidate for “better”, that such pessimism was unwarranted. Knowing this, it also empowers us to question such negativity in the instances of others whose potential is similarly written off.

The transformations in the lives of people who have been doubted in this way have shown us that dramatic changes can be intentionally brought about, not through some extraordinary magical actions, but rather through the actual intervention of the appropriate people and values that act to make the world for them something it had never been. This principle of breaking new ground entirely is a very important one because there will be moments when we simply must move beyond “what is” to “what might be”. We need to remember that the pioneers we now praise had no guarantee that they would succeed, but they nonetheless changed the world they lived in. They had to enter into and survive uncertainty and in the process found that new life and opportunities might well exist, waiting on the other side of the frightening decision to leave ones comfort zone. Equally, pursuing an ideal can result in a failure, but even these can be instructive and developmental, if they are properly seen as being a kind of teaching for us.

It may well be that attempting to introduce change, “one person at a time”, may inhibit us from being more ambitious in terms of larger numbers. After all, what can be particularly harder than moving from supporting one person to two, and then two to three and so on. The point is that once you have turned the corner, to some extent, all subsequent acts are a kind of replication. If you can be successful with one you have turned an important corner. The question going forward is simply how will such a corner now be turned for the next person? The universe normally changes, not in a big ways but in small ones. If one person can do it, at some point it will eventually be possible for others. Small is small, but small can potentially be significant. A lot of what we have heard is both very significant but also strikingly small. The implication is clear. You do not have to do something big, just something which is significant in terms of “better”. We normally do not have to change the entire world; we simply have to do something significant with a tiny piece of it. This can be as small as one person at a time providing that what is “better” is authentically so.

What we have also learnt about is the power and necessity of inspiration. People may often worry unduly about laws, regulations, money, systems and technology when what may make the most crucial difference might ultimately be whether people act in inspired ways. Without inspiration you will probably not move mountains or make any significant difference because the vision and conviction that inspiration brings will be missing. Each of us typically has the capacity to become inspired because a significant part of us is the spirit that moves us. Inspiration is a bit like water. If we do not have water, after a while we will die. Inspiration is the water of life. It is that which enlivens us, it gives us life and causes us to shift and expand in creative ways.

One of my mentors was Professor Wolf Wolfensberger of Syracuse University. Wolf was once asked what do you do about burnt-out staff? He said in response, “well, I do not actually worry about burnt-out staff. I worry about the ones that never caught

fire in the first place!” I think he has a point. We need to catch fire and stay on fire. Inspiration can be sought out and cultivated. Fortunately, there is much in the world to inspire us. In so many ways, if you are looking for inspiration you can find it. On the other hand, if you are not looking for it you will never find it. You can walk right by seemingly unbelievable miracles and not appreciate them and not be moved and changed by them. In this way we can deprive ourselves of a source for life giving nourishment.

Another thing that we are trying to do is to discover new approaches and new solutions to the challenges we face. What happens when we try something new? We start out like babes in the wood with a lot to learn. Trying something new presents many possibilities, but also many risks and hazards, so we need to be both inspired and careful, because after all we are dealing with people’s lives. We have to be careful with life. Treat what you do with care, treat it with caution, because the closer you get to what is really important about people, the more you have to be responsible about their vulnerability, because if we are not careful, we can hurt people rather than heal them. Nonetheless, there will be no learning if we do not leave our comfort zone.

Many have spoken about the power and the role of values and vision. What we believe in, what we care about, in other words, our values and how we can impact the world we live in for better or for worse. When our values are weak our conduct is weak, our vision is weak and we don’t realise our potential. Our vision and values are central to what we can eventually accomplish or not accomplish as the case may be. Vision can be built and renewed as each challenge is met and overcome or not. Vision grows from hardships as much as successes because it pushes us to reach for better.

Underneath all this it is also very important not to lose sight of just how determined the people who have been mentioned as examples have been and the conviction they have had. How much perseverance and determination did it take for Chantelle’s friends to stand by her for 25 years? Having the will to stick with something until it is done is very important. And it takes an effort of will and determination not to throw in the towel when the going gets tough. Even when your determination weakens you can strengthen it. You can get it back even if you lose it. Determination makes it possible to stay out there on the edge. Leadership is about being willing to go into the unknown and to make it happen even when you have no idea how it’s all going to work out.

I would also like to add courage to determination, because it takes a lot of courage to risk making yourself look a fool and to fall on your face. And when you stick your neck out, you’ll look like a fool at least some of the time. On the other hand, it also means you will learn, grow, deepen, expand and gain mastery of what is at stake.

Lastly, one of the things that I just want to briefly address at is the role of complacency, comfort, ease and expedience. If you want to do the easy, the expedient, the safe, the comfortable, then there are plenty of opportunities. But what do you get from comfort? What do you get from ease and expedience? What do you get from a lack of struggle and a lack of challenge? You’ll never taste the great things in life. You will be safe, you will be comfortable, you will not have great burdens, but you will also never savour what it means to have your struggles rewarded.

Accomplishment is not an entitlement; it is within our means, but only if we do the things that genuine accomplishment will inherently require of us. We can make a difference if we have the commitment that will not be possible if we remain on the fence. So, decide where you will stand relative to where people's lives could potentially lead if we do a few important things right.