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Be the Change

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

- Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi led the Indian nationalist movement, which overthrew British colonial rule through nonviolence, leading to the creation of a sovereign Indian nation in 1947.

As a change agent, he lived his life based on the principles of courage, non-violence, and truth. Much of his power drew from his commitment to embodying these principles in his own life. Gandhi believed that there were three routes to social change: the ballot (the process of voting and elections), the jail (by which he meant civil disobedience – being willing to give up your personal freedom to protest an unjust law or society), and the spinning wheel (which represented self-sustainability, nonparticipation in economic oppression, and simplicity.)

He embodied his commitment to these pathways of change by living a simple life, renouncing personal belongings. Gandhi spun the thread to make his own clothing, thus making the symbol of the spinning wheel a reality in his own life. Additionally, he led thousands of people in non-violent civil disobedience, or ‘Satyagraha,’ for which he was arrested many times throughout his life.

Perhaps the most famous example of ‘Satyagraha’ – and being the change he wished to see in the world – was the Salt March of 1930, a march to protest the British salt tax that had legalized starvation-level taxation for many Indians. The attention of the world was galvanized as Gandhi and his fellow marchers, which began as a group of 79 and grew to thousands, marched 240 miles to the coast. Scooping up handfuls of mud and salt, Gandhi announced to the crowd: “With this salt I am shaking the foundations of an empire.”

Gandhi’s life is a powerful example of what can be accomplished through living the change you wish to see in the world.

Be the Change is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Beloved Community

Desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the ultimate goal which we seek to realize. Desegregation will break down legal barriers, and bring men together physically. But something must happen so as to touch the hearts and souls of men that they will come together, not because the law says it, but because it is natural and right. In other words, our ultimate goal is integration which is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living.

Only through nonviolence can this goal be attained, for the aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1958

I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end or that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., July 13, 1966

*The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption;
the end is the creation of the beloved community.*

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., December 3, 1956

Among Dr. King's most compelling visions is that of a Beloved Community – a community in which people of different backgrounds recognize that we are all interconnected and that our individual well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of others. Dr. King knew that the goal of social change is not tolerance alone, or even the recognition or enforcement of human or civil rights, or an improved economic condition. These are necessary but not sufficient steps in the path to human progress. We cannot rest until we have bridged the divides of prejudice and mistrust that lie within the human head and heart. Invariably, these final, resilient divisions are social and personal. Dr. King reminds us that reconciliation is both a process and a final destination. The road to the Beloved Community is the difficult road of reconciliation among people who have been in conflict and negotiation. The Beloved Community is reconciliation achieved – a profound human connectedness, a transcendent harmony and love among all people.

The Beloved Community is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Bridge Builder

An old man, going a lone highway,
Came at the evening, cold and gray,
To chasm, vast and deep and wide,
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim;
The sullen stream had no fears for him;
But he turned when safe on the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.
“Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim near,
“You are wasting strength with building here;
Your journey will end with the ending day;
You never again must pass this way;
You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide –
Why build you the bridge at the eventide?”

The builder lifted his old gray head:
“Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said,
“There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm that has been naught to me
To that fair-haired youth may a pit-fall be,
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;
Good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”
- Will Allen Dromgoole

Bridge building is a powerful metaphor, and tool, for social change. Seeing and making connections – whether among people or ideas – is a hallmark of bridge builders, whose lives are rooted in values and who dedicate their time and energy to causes larger than themselves.

For perhaps every societal breakthrough, there was some one who came before, who mentored others or offered the world a new idea. Bridge builders bring out the best in others by connecting resources and talents to great and worthy causes, especially anticipating the needs of future generations. Bridge builders use the wisdom and experience they have gleaned for the benefit of others, even those whom they may never meet. Seek to encourage, to connect, to strategize, and to share a vision with those who will come after.

The Bridge Builder is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

Cathedral Building

There once was a traveler who journeyed all over the globe in search of wisdom and enlightenment. In the midst of one village, he came upon a great deal of noise, dust, and commotion. He approached the nearest laborer and asked, "Excuse me, I'm not from this village. May I ask what's going on here?" The laborer replied curtly, "Can't you see? I'm busting rocks."

The traveler approached a second laborer doing the same thing and asked the same question. The second laborer replied, "Can't you see? I'm earning a living to support my family."

The traveler then approached a third laborer who was also breaking up rocks and posed the question a third time. With a broad smile and a gleam in his eye, the third laborer replied with great pride: "Can't you see? We're building a cathedral."

- Author unknown: adapted from "The Cathedral Within" by Bill Shore

It often took several generations and thousands of laborers to build a single cathedral. Many would work their entire lives knowing that they would never see the cathedral's completion. We may have the opportunity in our lives to contribute to the creation of something great, something larger than ourselves. Our specific role may at times seem minor relative to the larger effort, but each role, each activity, contributes in some way toward the larger goal. To be effective in social change, to maintain one's focus and motivation, it is important to retain perspective by inspiring ourselves and others with the ideas that fuel our civic imagination and remind us of the "cathedral" we are building together.

Cathedral Building is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Everybody can be Great

Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
"The Drum Major Instinct"

Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 1968

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of greatness is neither elitist nor exclusive. Yet, at the same time, everyone is not automatically great. Rather, each person has the potential to achieve greatness because every person has something to offer and to contribute through service. Greatness is available to all through unselfish action fueled by unselfish motivation. Dr. King sees the inherent dignity that every human being can achieve through service, a common

meeting ground that requires no worldly credentials to enter. Service is a great equalizer that eliminates social division. If we truly believe that everyone can be great, then we must always remember to put this ideal into practice by assuming, finding, and appealing to the greatness in everyone. Everyone has something to offer, something to contribute, even if at first they do not know it, or we cannot see it.

Everybody can be Great is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

It Takes a Village

**It takes a whole village to raise a child.
- Igbo (Nigeria) Proverb**

It takes a whole village to raise a child because a child is an active social being who interacts with people who are not his or her parents. With each interaction, it is imperative that the child receive the same messages as to what is right and wrong, what is valued and what is to be rejected, and what is safe. It is the shared values of the village, the shared commitment to each child as a loved individual and future citizen of the village, and the shared sense of collective responsibility that underscore the truth of why it takes a whole village to raise a child. If the village does not support the proper raising of a child, then a parent has a difficult road indeed, and the child is at risk. It also takes a whole village to raise a child because a village is comprised of a diverse array of people of all ages and experiences, each of whom has something to teach a child. Similarly, "it takes a village" to achieve any large civic goal. It takes a shared vision, a set of shared values, and a shared sense of collective responsibility for the common good.

It takes a Village is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

It's in Your Hands

There once lived a wise elderly woman. She had lived in the same house her entire life. Everyday when she woke, she would say "Good morning" to her beautiful parakeet, Agape. The woman would put Agape in the window so she could enjoy the sun and the fresh air, and the elderly woman would then go about her daily chores. All of the people who lived in the neighborhood knew about the elderly woman and her bird, Agape. One day, two young men decided that they were going to break into the elderly woman's house while she was away and steal her bird. They decided that when she returned they would approach her and say, "Old woman, we have your bird. Is it dead or alive?" If the old woman replied "dead," the young men decided that they would open their hands and let Agape fly away. If the old woman replied "alive," they would crush Agape dead and drop her at the feet of the elderly woman.

Just as they had planned, the two boys waited for the elderly woman to leave her house to do her daily chores. When the elderly woman left, they broke into the house and stole Agape. When she returned, she found that her house had been broken into and Agape's empty cage was on the floor.

Just as the two boys had planned, they approached the elderly woman and said, "Old woman, we have your bird. Is it dead or alive?" The wise, elderly woman paused a moment and looked at the ground. Then, with caring in her eyes, she looked at the boys and slowly answered, "I don't know... it's in your hands."

- Popularized by Toni Morrison and often quoted as an indigenous tale

Agape is a Greek word for selfless, spiritual love for humanity. We hold in our hands not only the consequences of our own decisions, but also the effect we can have on the actions of others – and even on the state of the world as we find it.

When we make good choices, and take responsibility for the poor choices we have made – and regain power over our own actions – we ennoble ourselves by directly enhancing humanity.

When we offer others the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions and to make good choices, we offer pathways to empowerment and dignity. Similarly, when we realize that the problems of our day, perhaps through no direct fault of our own, are in our hands, we realize that knowledge of pain, suffering or injustice equals responsibility to act.

It's in Your Hands is one of the 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Lighthouse

On a dark, foggy night, a ship came upon the light of another vessel. The captain radioed his counterpart— “Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.” Through the crackly radio came the reply: “Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.”

The captain stood his ground. He radioed: “This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.” And again came the reply: “No, I say again, you divert YOUR course.”

Outraged, the captain spoke loudly into the radio: “THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES’ ATLANTIC FLEET. WE ARE ACCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH. THAT’S ONE-FIVE DEGREES NORTH.”

And came the reply: “This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

In a world constantly in need of improvement and change, humility is a critical and powerful virtue. As idealists and change makers, we are eager to see transformation and excited by the opportunity to make a difference, yet we may find our humility diminished by a competing value, to make change happen now. We feel our good ideas gaining momentum, our passion for change is fueled by the injustice and inequality all around, our drive and commitment grows stronger, and soon, perhaps without self-knowledge or intention, our humility wanes.

As humility is lost, so is our effectiveness. Vanity and self-importance cloud our judgment and rightly put off those who otherwise may want to follow, or better yet, lead, in the area of our deepest concern. Humility is not only a force multiplier, but an idealist’s paradox: to care so deeply about a cause larger than self, one needs, as has been often noted, to lose oneself. To be effective in social change, we must practice selflessness, to seek not so much to be “right” as to be effective, and to develop humility not only as an admired character trait, but as a skill. Can we see ourselves as others may see us, hear ourselves as others may hear us, and view our actions as others may perceive them? Can we have strong values and beliefs, but always stand ready to learn, realize, or even assume that we may not be right after all? By asking others, “What do you think?” and making no assumptions as to who may have an inspired, breakthrough contribution, we can effectively lead positive change, and avert disaster along the way.

The Lighthouse is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

The Long Walk

During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if need be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

- Nelson Mandela, April 20, 1964, Rivonia trial

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.

- Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994

Nelson Mandela sacrificed 27 years in jail for his country, a country founded upon his dedication and leadership. He is the very embodiment of what it means to commit oneself to a larger movement, and to make great personal sacrifices for that commitment. Indeed, he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for his ideal of a non-racial democracy, and he spoke forthrightly about his convictions at the Rivonia trial, where he was sentenced to life in prison for his role in upholding the rights of all South Africans.

His metaphor, that his personal path and that of his country is a "Long Walk," underscores an important point: while there are often successes to look back upon with pride, and rest is important and understandable, ultimate success is often further away than one thinks. Great leaders never stop feeling a deep sense of responsibility, not only for achieving success but also for making that success work in the long run. For Nelson Mandela, the goals of "freedom" for himself and for his country have been achieved. But the "long walk" continues because freedom brought with it the "responsibilities" of democracy and self-government for a new nation, as well as the difficult task of reconciliation.

The Long Walk is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

Love and Joy

Love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action, and that action is service.

**I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy. I woke and I saw that life is all service.
I served and I saw that service is joy.
- Mother Teresa**

For more than 45 years, Mother Teresa comforted the poor, the dying, and the unwanted around the world. Over the years, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity grew from 12 to thousands, serving the "poorest of the poor" in 450 centers world-wide. She rescued homeless and dying people from the gutters and garbage dumps in Calcutta. Her work spread from Calcutta to New York to Albania, and she was one of the pioneers of establishing homes for people with AIDS.

Through her work, Mother Teresa was a living example of her belief that love is embodied, or given true form, through service. At its most powerful, service is an expression of selfless love, care, empathy, and concern for others. Although Mother Teresa encountered pain, sickness, and extreme poverty on a daily basis, she also taught that the path of service is the path of joy. Joy emerges from new experiences and new relationships that are built through service, from acknowledging the human dignity in all people, from feeling personally useful in the world, and from engaging in service as an act of love.

Love and Joy is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Moccasins

Oh Great Spirit, grant that I may never criticize my brother or my sister until I have walked the trail of life in their moccasins.

- Adapted from a Cherokee prayer

Empathy, understanding, and an aggressively non-judgmental world outlook are essential attributes to leading social change. The metaphor of walking in the moccasins of another person before offering criticism is a remarkably useful leadership tool, as well as a moral imperative. As Robert F. Kennedy noted, “The task of leadership, the first task of concerned people, is not to condemn or castigate or deplore; it is to search out the reason for disillusionment and alienation, the rationale of protest and dissent — perhaps, indeed, to learn from it.”

Service is a common ground on which all people can come together to begin the work of building a more just society — work that depends on striving to truly understand one another. Service also is a powerful pathway for having our “moccasins” prayer answered: through the common ground of service, we can all walk in each other’s moccasins, and once exposed to the experiences of others, we are more likely to understand perspectives and points of view that are different, foreign, or even hostile to our own. It is essential that we learn to “moccasin” the world we encounter, to seek a broad inclusiveness in all endeavors, and to nurture a deep empathy within ourselves. Doing so generates wisdom, reconciliation, and social trust – vital elements for achieving human progress and lasting, positive social change.

Moccasins is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Never Doubt

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead

Each component of Margaret Mead's compelling formula for changing the world is an essential element. Her command to "never doubt" tells skeptics that they are wrong – you really can change the world – and also underscores the transformative power that belief plays for those who have successfully sought to change the world. History, indeed, has demonstrated that small teams of thoughtful committed people have achieved extraordinary things. The Civil Rights Movement began as a series of small groups carrying out small actions, such as sitting down at a segregated lunch counter. India's historic independence from Great Britain began as a series of small strategic actions from a dedicated few. Habitat for Humanity began with a few people building houses for the poor in a small town in Georgia and has since built more than 175,000 houses in countries around the world.

A "small group" underscores the remarkable power of teamwork to transform, to inspire, and to succeed. Teams can accomplish amazing and seemingly impossible things because they have the ability to generate new energies. Just as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts because the whole includes the connections between each part, high achieving teams generate more energy, will, passion, and ideas than the sum of what their individual members alone could muster.

To be successful, a team must also be "thoughtful," constantly generating strategies, tactics, and analyses for success.

But the critical component for success is "commitment." Those who succeed in world-changing activities have an unwavering, passionate, almost irrational commitment to their cause. Any of us can choose to use this formula, to find a cause we are passionately committed to, to recruit a team as passionate as ourselves, to generate ideas and strategies, and to stay the course, to be committed, fundamentally committed, until success is achieved.

Night into Day

It was dusk on the bank of a river that curved from the sea to the mountain. There, perched in the deep bend of a branch of an oak tree, sat a rabbi, and at his feet were students from nations near and far. As the evening slowly reached up from the horizon and spread across the vast expanse of the sky, the rabbi and his students spoke of the great issues of the day. As they did each night, they spoke of issues of the heart, of humanity, and of hope.

The rabbi peered into the distance and turned to his students to ask, "Tell me – if you can – how we will know when the night is over and the day has begun?"

The students sat back for a minute and gazed at the horizon and witnessed as the deep blue of evening began to blend with the golden canvas of sunset. And they knew that the rabbi spoke neither of timetables nor of the earth's rotation on its axis. No, the rabbi spoke of larger things.

After regarding the question for a while, one of the students raised his hand and said, "Rabbi, we will know that the night is over and the day has begun when we can see the difference between a goat and a lamb."

The rabbi shook his head and said, "No, you have made a thoughtful effort, but that is not it either."

The rabbi paused and said, "No, that is a good answer, but I don't think that is it."

Soon, another student offered her hand and said, "Rabbi, I think the night is over and the day has begun when we can see the difference between a fig tree and an olive tree."

The students seemed confused and were discouraged. Quietly, they gazed upwards where scattered stars and a full moon replaced the sun and brightened the deep dark of the endless sky.

After a moment, a soft voice could be heard from the bank closest to the river. It came from one of the Rabbi's most reluctant students. Shy and somewhat hesitant, she began . . .

"Rabbi, I think we will know that the night is over and the day has begun when we can see a rich man and a poor man and hear them say, 'He is my brother.'"

The student continued, her voice growing stronger.

"When we see a black woman and a white woman and hear them say, 'She is my sister.' It will be then when we know that the night is over and the day has begun."

The rabbi nodded his head, pleased with the wisdom of his student and said, "That is right."
- Masechet Berachot of the Babylonian Talmud

Within the long history of the human spirit and condition, there is an ancient competition between the dark night of prejudice, racism, and bias, and the daylight of community, inclusiveness, brotherhood, and sisterhood. It is a struggle that we must ensure is won finally and fully by the light of day. We must be deliberate and assertive in forming bonds of friendship, partnership, and common purpose among people who, on the surface, seem different than

ourselves. We must take personal, professional, and social risks to do so. We must be the willful force that turns night into day.

Night into Day is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Rabbi's Gift

Once a great order, a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time. The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the tree tops. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their faiths. The time came when the Abbot had to leave. "It has been a wonderful visit," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?" "The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, "is that the Messiah is among you."

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "What did the Rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the Abbot answered. "The only thing he did say, as I was leaving was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean."

In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words: The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery. Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

– author unknown; adapted from the different drum: community making and peace by dr. m. scott peck

By assuming the specialness of every person, we build a culture of respect that generates energy, creativity, and magnetism – something that people can sense and feel, and to which they are drawn. Highly respectful cultures treat every person with courtesy and interest, and

convey the understanding that every member of the community is valued. By treating every person with the utmost respect, we develop a culture in which everyone wants to give their best to others, and expects to receive the best from others in return. It is the type of culture everyone deserves, and it is up to us to make it happen. In our daily lives, we can create a culture of respect with every personal interaction we have, whether it is with a store clerk, a dignitary, or a colleague.

The Rabbi's Gift is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Ripples

Few will have the greatness to bend history; but each of us can work to change a small portion of the events, and in the total of all these acts will be written the history of this generation. . . .It is from numberless diverse acts of courage . . . [and] . . . belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

- Robert F. Kennedy, Day of Affirmation Address
University of Capetown
Capetown, South Africa
June 6, 1966

In 1966, Robert F. Kennedy was invited by the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), an antiapartheid organization, to speak at the annual Day of Affirmation. During RFK's four-day tour, he spoke to numerous groups — energizing and inspiring people of all races with his words of conviction and belief. Copies of his speeches were passed hand-to-hand in the townships. People lined the streets to see him and shake his hand. The English language papers covered his every move. Robert Kennedy's words proved to be prophetic, and the ripples he and countless others created did in fact form a mighty current of change. White minority rule in South Africa finally ended in 1994, with the election of the former political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, as the first President of a new, democratic, and non-racial South Africa.

The idea that many distinct acts of courage and belief create ripples that turn into currents of justice is a powerful concept, for it tells us that our idealistic actions are not isolated, and that a cumulative effect of the work of many committed people and institutions can have a dramatic impact. Similarly, sharing stories of acts of courage and belief — “ripples” — is a powerful way to inspire ourselves and others in the midst of difficult work, and to help generate more acts of courage and belief.

Ripples is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

Sand into Diamonds

Once upon a time, there lived a brave young pilot. This pilot flew all over the world to interesting lands, meeting interesting people. One night, as the pilot was flying high above the Sahara Desert, the engine of her plane suddenly stalled. Amazingly, she was able to eject from the plane and parachute to the ground.

As the pilot awoke the next day, she tried to remember what had happened the night before. As she regained her bearings, it dawned on her that she had no idea where she was, no idea where the closest village or human habitation was located. She could be hundreds of miles from the nearest desert village or it could be just around the nearest hill. She fought off the despair and gloom and tried to summon her usual resolve and courage. She knew one thing for certain: she had to get going in some direction, any direction. If she just stayed, she would surely die.

And so she started. Mile after mile. The brilliant desert sun was glaring down on her and reflecting off the searing sand. And she continued on.

Eventually, the sun went down and she continued to walk through the night. She went as far as she could before resting. Soon, she woke to the morning sun once again. Her throat was parched. Her skin was dry and burnt. But she continued on. No food or drink. No water in sight. By noon she could continue no longer and collapsed. But no sooner had she fallen to the ground than a vision appeared before her.

At first she thought she was just delirious. But the image was so clear, so vivid, so real. And as it became clearer she realized it was a genie. And the genie spoke.

“I will only say this once. Do not despair. Do not give up hope. Just listen and do as I say and you will survive. In the end, you will be both happy and sad. But first, reach down and pick up some sand. Heed my words and continue on.”

The genie disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. It must have been a mirage, thought the pilot. But it seemed so real. So vivid. And although the genie had spoken only briefly, the pilot remembered every word. It brought her a new sense of energy and hope.

She reached down and picked up a handful of sand and continued on. Mile after mile. The hot desert sun was ablaze in the sky. The heavy dry wind ripped over the land. She continued on. And when she once again reached the point where she could go no more, at the top of a dune, she fell and tumbled down the other side.

Lo and behold, she stumbled upon a village in an oasis. Upon seeing the condition of this unusual stranger emerging out of the desert, the people came out to help her. They gave her water and rest and food. She had made it. She had survived.

Now that she was replenished, her thoughts drifted back to the mysterious vision from the night before. Was it real? She reached into her pocket to pull out the sand. To her great surprise the sand had turned to diamonds. As she thoughts back to the words of the genie, a smile crossed her face.

“In the end you will be both happy and sad.”

Yes, she was happy. She had survived. And she had a handful of diamonds. Yet she was sad, because she had not picked up more sand.

-Author unknown, adapted from “the parable of the pebbles”

Diamonds are made of pure carbon, an element that is fundamental to all life. Carbon is a common substance, yet diamonds are rare, precious, indestructible – the hardest substance on earth. This story of sand turning into diamonds exemplifies the way in which ordinary, everyday experiences become, over time, the source of our knowledge and strength.

The idealistic path is fraught with setbacks and frustrations. But every experience along the way, every struggle, even every mundane moment, provides us with a treasure trove of wisdom, ideas, and experience to draw upon further down the road. Invariably, there is little opportunity for perspective at the time of each experience, and little to which we can compare. For this reason, it is best to take in as much as possible from each experience and opportunity, to fill up your pockets with the “sand” of idealism, and to keep moving forward. Time and perspective will turn those experiences into a valued asset as you take on the difficult paths ahead.

Sand into Diamonds is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Seven Generations

In every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.

-Iroquois proverb

The Iroquois nation, a confederation of Native American peoples, wrote in their constitution more than 500 years ago that leaders must “Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations” and that “the thickness of their skin shall be seven spans” to protect against “anger, offensive actions, and criticism” from affecting their making the best decisions.

These commitments of stewardship for future generations and moral toughness are a profound formula for ensuring intergenerational responsibility by considering the well-being of those who do not yet have a voice, but who may nonetheless be affected by our decisions today. As one commentator has observed,

“The point [of considering seven generations] is to remove individual self-interests from public decision-making. Seven generations is about the longest period of time that we can grasp subjectively. Some of us had great grandparents when we were born. We have known our grandparents, our parents, and ourselves. We may also know our children, our grandchildren, and possibly our great grandchildren. These seven generations are a yard stick of human experience.”

Seven Generations is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Shoulders of Giants

If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.

– Isaac Newton

Isaac Newton is one of the great figures in the history of human thought. He was responsible for, among other things, formulating a theory of physics that his contemporaries considered to have all but solved the problems of describing the movements of physical objects, from planets to apples. It would have been all too easy for Newton to have taken all the credit for his discoveries. However, he was well aware of how much he built on the foundations laid by previous generations of scholars and the efforts of those around him, including his colleagues at his university and in the Royal Society.

Recognition of the debt our achievements owe to the work of others reminds us all, whether we are the ones offering thanks or being thanked, how important all the elements of service are, not just the ones that grab headlines. We can't all be the great figures whose names will live in history, but Newton reminds us that all the behind-the-scenes work done by dedicated individuals away from the limelight can add up to a giant, on whose shoulders the famous few stand to push their heads into view.

Newton was also aware of how much more remained to be done. Perhaps he considered himself one of the quiet contributors to a later giant, when he said, "To myself I am only a child, playing on the beach, while vast oceans of truth lie undiscovered before me."

The Starfish Story

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean.

People watched her with amusement.

She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, "Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can't save all these starfish. You can't begin to make a difference!"

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man and replied...

Well, I made a difference to that one!

The old man looked at the girl inquisitively and thought about what she had done and said. Inspired, he joined the little girl in throwing starfish back into the sea. Soon others joined, and all the starfish were saved.

adapted from the star thrower by loren c. eiseley

The Starfish Story is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Stone Soup

There once was a traveler who came to a small village, tired and weary from his long journey. The traveler did not have anything to eat and hoped that a friendly villager would be able to feed him. He came to the first house and knocked on the door. He asked the woman who answered if she could spare just a small bit of food as he had traveled a long journey and was very hungry. The woman replied, "I'm sorry I have nothing to give you. I can barely feed my own family."

So the traveler went to another door and asked again. The answer was the same: "I have nothing to give you." He went from door to door and each time was turned away.

Undaunted, the traveler went to the village square, took a small tin cooking pot from his bag, filled it with water, started a fire and dropped a stone in the pot. As he boiled the water, a passing villager stopped and asked him what he was doing. The traveler replied, "I'm making stone soup. Would you like to join me?" The villager said yes, and he asked if carrots were good in stone soup. "Sure," said the traveler. The villager went home and returned with carrots from his garden to add to the boiling water.

Soon, another curious villager came by and was invited to join them. She went home and returned with some potatoes. A young boy passed by and soon joined the group, bringing his mother and dinner plates from their home.

In time, a crowd gathered with everyone offering their own favorite ingredient: mushrooms, onions, salt, black pepper, acorn, squash. Everyone wanted to be part of the creation.

Finally, the traveler removed the stone and declared, "The stone soup is ready!" And the whole community joined in a feast where there was none before.

-Adapted from a Swedish folktale and from Marcia Brown's retelling of the fable in her book stone soup.

The Stone Soup folktale celebrates, and provides a powerful technique, for engaging and organizing resources for the common good. The pot is a wonderful metaphor for the untapped resources of community wealth that can be organized for the common good. The Stone Soup tale provides a tested recipe for leading social change by creating a public square to meet social needs: identify a need (hunger), and provide a structured way for people to participate in meeting that need (filling the pot), an initial resource (the water), a sense of excitement (the stone), and then add your own leadership. Stone Soup reminds us that when we know others are participating in a public endeavor, and when we ourselves are included in both the process and the outcome, we are more likely to act on our idealism, generosity, sense of adventure, and the universal desire for a sense of community and connectedness. Stone Soup also celebrates the power of human resilience and ingenuity – the ability to change one's circumstances, even upon the heels of rejection, by bringing out the best instincts of people, rather than appealing to, or condemning them for, their worst.

Stone Soup is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

The Traveler

There was once an elderly and wise gentleman who lived in a village. He would often spend his days sitting in the shade of a big tree in the center of the village, reading books and talking to passersby. One day, a traveler came upon his village and stopped and said,

“Old man, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?”

The elderly gentleman looked up at him and replied,

“Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found on your travels.”

The traveler scowled and said,

“Old man, I have met people who cheat, steal, and aren’t kind to strangers, and people who don’t look out for one another.”

The elderly gentleman looked up and, with a faint look of sadness in his eyes, said,

“Oh my friend, those are the people you will find in my village.”

The traveler kicked the dirt under his feet, scoffed, and marched off towards the village.

By and by, as the elderly gentleman continued to enjoy his day, another traveler came walking through the village. Once again, the traveler stopped and asked,

“Please kind sir, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?”

The elderly gentleman said,

“Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found in your travels.”

The traveler replied,

“I have found people who are kind and welcoming of strangers, people who care for one another, and people who love. These are the people I have met in my travels.”

The elderly gentleman looked up and, with the faintest smile in his eyes, said,

“My friend, those are the people you will find in my village.”

-West African Folk Tale

Social change is an adventure, a journey, and we meet many people along the way. We are all Travelers. Attitude colors every experience – it is the lens through which we see the world. If we

expect the best from people, we will tend to find the best in people. Similarly, we must not allow negative experiences to taint future expectations, especially in relation to people we have never met. A positive attitude toward the next adventure in social change and toward the people we encounter along the way is essential to success.

The Traveler is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

Ubuntu

Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu.

I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.

- Zulu proverb

“Ubuntu” (oo-buun-tu) is a shortened version of a Zulu proverb, “Umuntu ngumuntu ngamantu,” which means: “I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.”

The spiritual foundation of South African society, Ubuntu involves a belief in a universal bond of sharing and respect that connects all of humanity. Ubuntu is a concept formally recognized by the 1996 South African Governmental White Paper on Welfare as, “The principle of caring for each other’s well-being...and a spirit of mutual support... Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual’s humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.”

Ubuntu also conveys the idea that a person cannot be complete if others do not enjoy full humanity. The spirit of Ubuntu resonates so strongly that if one group within society is denied its humanity, then no individual in that society can fully realize his or her own humanity. The urgency to change this injustice becomes paramount.

We can put the spirit of Ubuntu – respect, human dignity, compassion, and community – to work in our daily lives through our interactions with others, from greeting others as we pass them in hallways or on the street, to ensuring that all segments of society are included in social welfare policies so that each person has the means to lead a life of dignity. Ubuntu has the power to help us build an inclusive, respectful, and vibrant community, nation and world.

Ubuntu is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#).

Up the River

There once were two villages built on the banks of a wide river. Over the years, the villages grew in size and became known as Upriver village and Downriver village.

One day, the people of Downriver village saw a man from Upriver village drifting down the river, calling out for help. Quickly, two of them jumped in and saved him. The next day, three more people from Upriver came floating by, and the Downriverites again dove in and saved the three floundering people. These incidents began to occur every day.

Finally, enterprising members of Downriver village organized a rescue service. The rescued Upriverites were always happy to pay the Downriverites for their efforts. Soon, the rescue service became a thriving industry in the village.

One afternoon, a young boy whose family was new in Downriver asked a question no one in town had wanted to raise: "How come people from Upriver are always falling in the river and almost drowning?" He asked one of the Upriverites, who had just been saved by the Downriver people.

"Our town is built along a cliff," the Upriverite answered, "and whenever it rains, lots of people slip into the river. Only a few children and none of the adults in town know how to swim, but we are grateful for the way people in this village save us."

The boy went to a town leader. "Why don't we help the people of Upriver build a fence along their cliff so they don't fall in?" he asked.

The leader told the boy to be quiet and not to worry. "We know how to rescue people, but we aren't expert fence-builders. What happens if we don't do a good job building the fence and someone falls through it? We would be responsible. This system works, everyone is happy with it and no one is drowning. It is better to leave well enough alone."

So the boy went to a worker at the Downriver Village Rescue Service. "Why don't we teach the people in the village of Upriver how to swim?" he asked.

The worker shook his head. "That's not our job. Our job is to rescue people from the water. Our people are trained to rescue people, not teach people how to swim. What if we don't teach them properly – someone might drown and there will be no one to rescue them."

The boy felt a bit discouraged. He thought his plans had been good, but there were no adults who would listen to his ideas. He sat down on the riverbank and put his head in his hand, staring into the current. Then a voice asked, "Why do you look so sad?"

A girl from Upriver village stood nearby. The boy explained that he was sad because people kept falling in the river, but no one in his town would do anything to solve the problem.

The girl listened carefully, and then said, "Well, I'm a good swimmer and I've seen you swimming in the river. Why don't we start some swimming lessons, ourselves?" At this, the boy grew excited. He ran around Downriver village, collecting all his friends, and the girl went to Upriver village and brought together her friends. They began to teach their friends how to swim.

Soon, the children of Upriver and Downriver were excitedly telling their parents about the swimming lessons they had started. More and more children joined in each day, and one day, some adults came by and they joined in the lessons, as well. Soon, many of the people falling into the river could swim to safety, but the boy and girl felt that as long as people were falling into the river, there was more work to be done.

So the children went up the river and asked their friends and families to come and help build a fence along the edge of the cliff. They built a strong fence that stood as a barrier between the village and the river.

From that day forward, very few people fell in the river, and those who did almost all knew how to swim.

-Author unknown, adapted from a retelling by Erie Chapman

Direct response to crisis and need is an essential task and an urgent human responsibility, as it changes and even saves lives. But “down river” interventions require a significant commitment of resources, often create new problems to solve, and do not reach, much less cure, root causes of problems and conditions. It is important, therefore, to go “up the river” – to think critically and systemically about the problems we encounter, and to focus on prevention and root causes, even as we meet the challenges of the day. We must be prepared to face challenges to new ideas and creative problem-solving, as existing systems are resistant to change. People are often so embedded in the current systems in which they work that it is difficult for them to accept creative thinking or a systemic approach, particularly when it comes from young people. Nevertheless, critical thinking is essential to the work of social change. Systemic solutions may be difficult to identify and harder still to implement – and it may take time to see the results we seek – but they are the only way to enact true and lasting change.

Up the River is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)

Water

The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Tao.

In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present
When you are content to be simply yourself
and don't compare or compete,
everybody will respect you.

From the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu, as translated by Stephen Mitchell

Water is a powerful metaphor for social change, seeking the lowest level and therefore touching and connecting all things, flowing around what it cannot move, making good things grow, acting as a solvent on things that are stuck, and putting out fire- such as the anger that can too easily consume change agents and the causes they are passionate about. Water is also the ideal metaphor for an idea coined by Robert Greenleaf, the "servant leader," who leads through service, example, and assistance rather than through power and authority. Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher (circa 600 B.C.) has provided us with a metaphor- and a blueprint to improve the world and live as a servant leader: Simplicity. Fairness. Generosity. Flexibility. Presence. And above all: equanimity- an unshakable sense of security in one's self. When we have mastered these skills, breaking down social barriers, building community, and effecting meaningful change will follow.

Water is one of 23 [City Year Founding Stories](#)