

## “People Magic”

Margaret Keip • for UUGP • September 17, 2017

— May it be that each one of us has known *people magic* — people who have illuminated your life, given you intangible gifts of hope and vision, affirmed your dreams, said YES to you, to your very being. A teacher, a mentor, a wise one who, in subtle ways or large, transformed your life. In our larger lives there are great ones, whose courage and conviction and endurance altered the course of history. Three come to my mind: MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr. — and MAHATMA GANDHI, whose vision inspired King, and JESUS, on whose life Gandhi his own faith was grounded. — Lives devoted to non-violence in dangerous times.

King knew, as did Gandhi and Jesus, that they might be killed as a consequence. But that did not deter them. Nor did death defeat them.

“In the folded and quiet yesterdays, how many times has it happened?” poet Carl Sandburg envisions:

“You may burn my flesh and bones  
and throw the ashes to the four winds,”

smiles one of them,

“Yet my voice shall linger on  
and in the years yet to come  
the young shall ask what was the idea  
for which you gave me death  
and what was I saying  
that I must die for what I said?”

Sandburg was a Universalist, one of us.

*I own no enemy on earth, Gandhi wrote; That is my creed.*

And King: from his ‘Sermon for Peace’ on Christmas Eve, 1967, four months before his assassination:

*I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, ...hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure... We will meet your physical force with soul force. **Do to us what you will and we will still love you...** and we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will appeal to your heart and conscience [and] we will win you in the process...*

Win *us*. That’s what they lived and died for. Jesus, Gandhi, King — each of them was responding to something that was deeply wrong, and envisioning a different world, a different human way.

A different way. Can I bring this home to my own life, too?—and you to yours? Every day? Things go wrong. That’s familiar. Stuff goes awry between *people*, rather often. Suppose someone has distressed, frustrated or irritated me, ignored or offended me. What do I do? What do you do? It’s a significant question; it impacts our lives. Ask a group of children that same question and pretty soon someone will say, “I get even.” As grown-ups few of us react quite that way anymore, consciously, though we may feel the urge. What do **we do**?

For myself, sometimes I just let it be. Often the matter is not very important. Or I recognize that it's mostly *my* problem, not anyone else's. I may pay attention to what's bugging me and discover something useful, let a little light in to my life.

But suppose it's more troubling than that. It's unsettled me, perhaps wounded or angered me. I'm obsessing it, wanting to understand, make some sense of it, figure out what to do. And I may talk with someone I trust to help me think it through — like an animal licking a wound, instinctively cleaning it so it can heal. But if I keep on licking at it, it stays raw; it won't heal. The person I most need to talk with is the one who distressed me. Why am I not doing that? Well — in talking instead with someone else, perhaps I'm just venting steam, cooling down, and then letting it go and getting on with better things. And that's good. — Or perhaps I'm seeking wisdom and guidance, reality-testing, trying to figure out what was going on. And this, too, is good and useful. — Or it may be that I learned to avoid direct and candid encounter growing up. Or perhaps the person who distressed me has greater power than I do, and it doesn't feel safe. But I risk creating a gossip brushfire when I share the weight of my angst and my incomplete story — incomplete because it's only *my* story — with someone else. There is **me** talking to **you** about someone who's not present, who cannot respond, explain, illuminate, mend or change the situation.

Conflict festers and grows toxic when problems arise between us and we don't talk directly with each other. We've all experienced that, and been wounded by it, and wounded others. We emerge from such miseries conflict averse. But in our reactivity we misunderstand.

In essence, conflict is *friction*—which is essential to movement, to going somewhere, changing things. Without friction — of skin against surface; tire against road — we'd slip-slide uncontrollably, and never get anywhere, anywhere at all. This is true not only for our bodies; it is also true for our minds.

"To think is to differ," Clarence Darrow observed, when defending John Scopes for teaching evolution in the Tennessee public schools in that famous 1925 trial. *To think is to differ.* And we do! We *think*, and perceive things in different ways. When one idea rubs up against another point of view, *creative growth* and *change* are possible. **Life** is possible. It's a biological truth: **where there is no change, there is no life.** It's a sociological reality, too. Where there is change, there will be difference. Where there is diversity, there will be difference, and hidden gifts, seeds of opportunity.

Conflicts begin as **problems to solve**, problems arising between people who have differing desires, different goals, and diverging points of view.

Fred contends that a problem can't exist without a solution. The challenge at the center of everyday living is to find the solutions.

Whenever some item would get lost at our house, Fred would don an imaginary cape, rise tall, proclaim "I am The Finder" — and then set out to prove it true. Our kids loved this while they were growing up.

Finding solutions to **problems** is even more zestful.

Life abounds in problems to solve, and if it's a problem between people, the best way to solve it is with each other.

Why not try? Well, perhaps the situation feels dangerous, and the risk too high. Or it really *is* my own problem, and I know that and take responsibility for it myself. Or I was burned last time I tried, and haven't figured out safe ways yet. And I haven't the courage of a Martin Luther King.

But if I turn and take a side road, the air grows chilly as I walk away. The person I am not talking to grows increasingly alien to me, someone I cease to understand or even *know* anymore. Someone I banish to a Siberia in my heart.

In my junior and senior years of high school, when our English classes studied American and British literature, each of us was required each week to choose and memorize a passage or poem from the authors we were studying at the moment. It was a blessing of an assignment for those blooming years of life. Among the ones I chose was this one by Robert Frost:

*Some say the world will end in fire,*

*Some say in ice.*

*From what I've tasted of desire*

*I hold with those who favor fire.*

*But if it had to perish twice,*

*I think I know enough of hate*

*To say that for destruction ice*

*Is also great*

*And would suffice*

"Fire and Ice"; *desire* and *hate*. The fire of hell; the icebergs of hate. Both begin here, in the heart.

If we can afford enemies, we make friends into enemies.

— *wrote eloquent Unitarian humanist, Kenneth Patton,*

Trust them who love humanity, who have no Siberia in their hearts awaiting our exile.

A vast region of Russia, Siberia encompasses the northernmost stretch of the continent of Asia. Notorious for the length and severity of its frigid winters, Siberia was a land of exile for criminals and political prisoners, consigned to forced labor camps long years before the Russian revolution. When Soviets took over power they built more of them. The *GULAG*, they called it, an acronym for corrective labor camps, run by Stalin's secret police. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great author, who was eventually released from them, called it the GULAG archipelago, with the camps dotted across Siberia like a string of islands. Over 5 million people were imprisoned in the GULAG at any given time. Each year many perished, but more would arrive in surging waves, with each of Stalin's purges.

*Trust them who love humanity, who have no Siberia in their hearts awaiting our exile.*

Loving humanity doesn't mean always *liking* everyone, agreeing with everyone or going silent.

It means affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. It means refusing to violate the integrity of something living. — which was Gandhi's definition of violence.

It includes all the "assaults on the human spirit so endemic to our lives that we may not even recognize them as acts of violence," reflects master teacher and author, Parker Palmer:

*Violence is done when parents insult children, when teachers demean students, when supervisors treat employees as disposable means to economic ends, when physicians treat patients as objects, when people condemn gays and lesbians "in the name of God," when racists live by the belief that people with a different skin color are less than human. Just as physical violence may lead to bodily death, spiritual violence causes death in other guises—the death of a sense of self, of trust in others, of risk-taking on behalf of creativity, of commitment to the common good. If obituaries were written for deaths of this kind, every daily newspaper would be a tome.*

Echoing Gandhi, Palmer defines **violence** as "*any way we have of violating the identity or integrity of another person.*"

It's a Gandhian principle as well that if I you and I disagree and I can't describe your view in a way that's true for you then I've got insufficient, incomplete, half-asked information. — Which means that we need to talk with each other, and truly *hear* each other, **understand** each other. And it means you and I will do this, insofar as humanly possible, live and in person — where all our senses are immediately engaged, and we are least likely to blindly injure one another. The principles we covenant together to affirm and promote ask this of us.

No one of us lives true all the time. To muddle through just trying to do our best to make it through a day is often challenge enough. So when we violate our principles we need companions to turn us around, good companions who aren't mired in our own muck of the moment. We can *all* become trustworthy listeners for each other.

It was ever so helpful when Fred clarified for me long ago that when he comes to spill frustration about something that's happened, what he simply wants in the immediate moment is empathy. A listening ear, "poor sweet baby" and a hug. He wants safe, loving space to cycle through his feelings and be free of them. Afterward comes time to ponder what, if anything, to do next. Sometimes the problem involves another person, and both of us learned how to help each other navigate this from a friend with no Siberia in his heart: Speed Leas, long retired now, as are we. He's the grandfather of conflict management in congregations, and taught a three-step response to such a dilemma – three questions to pose:

1: *Have you spoken with him?*

2: *Will it help if I go with you?*

3: *May I tell him you have this concern?*

You are serving as a safe and caring friend in posing those questions. You are hearing me without taking on my distress. You are a 'non-anxious presence'—non-anxious and present, and you are offering me courage, and lending me your strength — building a bridge across a chasm between people. If you go with me you will help us both hear each other. How ever I respond to your invitations, you have shown me a pathway home, into the sunshine and fresh air of wholeness.

Conflicts are inherent in living, and essential to growth and change — opportunities for "people magic". Engaged, they spark creativity and potential, embracing diversity and strengthening community.

But avoided, refused, repressed, conflict festers and escalates far beyond what once began as a problem to solve. Persons caught in an entangled knot of anger and anguish lose faith in each other, and no longer speak directly with each other, if once they did. Even people who once loved each other create little wars this way — and are consumed in the fire, entombed in the ice, that devastate relationship.

I suppose most of us, by the time we've grown up, have internalized that grandmotherly caution that "if you can't say something nice about someone, say nothing at all." As a grandma myself, I say there's a little syllable missing: nice*ly*. That "ly" transforms the adage into honoring the other person's worth and dignity. It comes 'round to the *leeward* side of the human islands that people are.

Geographically, islands are connected to each other — we know that but don't perceive it because the connection is hidden under water. Building bridges across sometimes raging water, we encourage deeper knowing to happen. And even if merely right here, in the present,

where we are, we can help render this world a less dangerous place. Is there any other place to begin?

When we open ourselves to the humanity and the possibility and the hope in any situation, even the tough encounters, *especially* the tough ones, then we catch glimpses of who we are and who others are. And we can taste what it means to be alive. *Alive!*

“True” becomes something to **be** rather than something to know.