

Founding Stories

At the centre of City Year's idealistic culture is a growing collection of stories and quotations from many cultures, which we call founding stories because they are woven into the fabric of the organisation and are a foundation for our work. Each story conveys a civic value that guides us, or sets us thinking about service. We refer to these stories when we want to illustrate a point, we apply them to our work each day, and we are always for looking for more.



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Be the change

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

Mahatma Gandhi

Mohandas K Gandhi (sometimes known as ‘Mahatma’) led the Indian nationalist movement, which aimed to end British colonial rule through non-violence, leading to the creation of an independent India in 1947. He based his campaign for change on the principles of courage, nonviolence, and love for people of all backgrounds. Much of his power came 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, non-participation in economic oppression, and simplicity.) While all his ideas influence us, City Year isn’t about the ballot or the jail—we’ve chosen to focus on the third path, changing oneself and those who are prepared to work with you through service— and ‘being the change’ says it best.

The beloved community

“Desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the ultimate goal which we seek to realise.

"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.

Martin Luther King, like Gandhi, 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 for social justice. A truly great society bridges the divides of prejudice and mistrust that lie within the human head and heart. The ideas that sustain these divides are resilient and personal, and we need to change ourselves, and at the same time others, through civic power, to change those ideas. King reminds us that reconciliation is both a process and a final destination.

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 for social change. Seeing and making connections—whether among people or ideas—is a hallmark of people who dedicate their time and energy to causes larger than themselves. And for every great movement of change and justice, there were predecessors, preparing the way for that movement, perhaps by quiet unsung work, or by working out a new idea. Every movement needs bridge builders.

Cathedral building

Once upon a time a traveller from a distant land arrived in a small town. He came upon a great crowd of people making a great deal of noise, dust, and commotion. He approached the nearest labourer and said, "I've travelled from afar and seen many labours for many purposes. What are you labouring at here?" The labourer replied curtly, "Can't you see? I'm digging a hole." The traveller approached a second labourer and asked the same question. The man replied gruffly, "Can't you see? I'm shaping stones." The traveller was baffled. He approached a third labourer and posed the question a final time. This time his interlocutor looked up with a beaming face full of pride and said, "Can't you see? We're building a cathedral."

*Adapted from *The Cathedral Within* by Bill Shore*

In the Middle Ages great soaring structures of stone grew out of tiny and humble towns across Europe, often requiring several generations and thousands of labourers to complete. Many would work their entire lives knowing that they would never see the cathedral's completion. Everyone at City Year has the opportunity to contribute to the creation of something larger than ourselves. Our own role may at times seem small when set against the final goal, but every activity contributes in some way toward the eventual achievement. If we keep our eye on the bigger picture, like the third labourer, we will take greater pride in our work and enjoy it all the more.

Dick Whittington's cat

Dick Whittington was a young man from a small village who left home to seek his fortune in London, where he had been told the streets were paved with gold. When he arrived he was cruelly disappointed. Homeless and hungry, he was taken in as a scullery boy by a rich merchant, Mr FitzWarren, despite the protests of his unkind cook. Even in the FitzWarrens' house Dick's life was miserable. The cook bullied him and his tiny garret was overrun by rats

that kept him awake at night. But Dick worked hard and saved up and eventually bought a cat. She killed the rats and provided him with solace after the cook's beatings.

One day Mr FitzWarren asked everyone in his household to contribute something to a trade venture he was undertaking to the rich kingdoms of the African coast. "You'll make it back twice over," said the confident merchant. All his family and servants gave him something to sell, except Dick.

"What, nothing from you, young man?" his employer cried when he saw the lad with his hands still in his pockets.

"I am afraid I have nothing to trade, master," the poor boy replied.

"He has a cat," said the spiteful cook. "He could send that to Africa to sell." Dick was distraught at the thought of losing his only comfort in the world, but before he could protest Mr FitzWarren had already given orders for the cat to be carried on board ship, and before he knew it Dick was left more alone than ever.

Dick's life grew worse and worse while the household waited for the merchant to return. The rats came back and the cook was more horrible than ever. With a heavy heart, Dick decided to run away, and one night he crept out into the street and made his way towards the gates of the city. As dawn broke he was passing Bow church, and the bells began to ring. Dick almost thought he heard words in the tune, speaking to him. "Turn again Whittington, Lord Mayor of London," the bells seemed to say. Dick decided to retrace his steps and give life at Mr FitzWarren's house one last chance. To his surprise, just as he reached the door the merchant himself returned, laden with the bullion from his successful trade mission.

The entire household was summoned to receive their share of the profits. One by one they held out their hands for a few shiny coins, but an enormous pile of gold still remained undistributed. Finally, Mr Fitzwarren turned to Dick.

"You know," he said, "the kingdom we visited was terribly plagued by rats. The queen was quite at her wits' end, and the king offered half his fortune for anything that would solve his problem. Well boy, I sold him your cat. This pile," he said, waving at the unimaginable heap of riches glistening behind him, "is all yours."

Traditional English folk tale

Richard Whittington was a real person. We can't be sure that the story above is all true, but he did become Lord Mayor of London (no fewer than four times) in the fourteenth century and he made a great fortune. He gave most of it away, earning himself a kind of immortality in the story of his life told to this day. His charity still exists, making grants to the city's poor.

What has made Dick's tale so appealing for so many centuries is the message that complete commitment, putting in all you have and never giving up, is ultimately rewarded. Dick gave up *everything* he owned, and even though it wasn't much, it came back to him a thousand-fold and more. Whenever we embark on our own Hero's Journey we, like Dick, may be tempted to hold back, to resist the call, and even, during the dark times, to quit. But if we stick with it, it will be worth it in the end.

The village

"It takes a whole village to raise a child."

Igbo proverb from Nigeria

"No man is an island," said the Elizabethan poet John Donne. Children don't grow up in isolation; not even their parents and home life are completely responsible for how and what they learn, or who they become. Children take their cues from the society around them, and need to interact with people of all ages and backgrounds to be complete person themselves. Communities are responsible for raising children, and at City Year we take the responsibility seriously and literally.

It's in your hands

Once upon a time an elderly woman lived with her parrot, Agape. They had lived in the same house for many years, and every day when she woke, she would say, "Good morning" to the bird. One day, two cowardly young men who were bored and who wished to amuse themselves decided that they would break into the elderly woman's house while she was away and steal her bird. 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.

The two boys did just as they had planned, breaking into the house and taking Agape while the woman was out. She returned to find Agape's empty cage on the floor. The two boys saw her come back, and approached her and asked, "Old woman, we have your bird. Is it dead or alive?" The shrewd woman paused and looked at the ground. She looked at the boys with neither malice nor hate, but with hope and understanding, and slowly answered, "I don't know. It's in your hands."

Traditional folk tale popularised by Toni Morrison in her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature

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 those decisions have on the actions of others and even on the state of the world. When we make good choices, and take responsibility for the poor choices we have made, we are fully human. Sometimes, we are afraid to take responsibility and construct elaborate narratives that seem to make our choices the responsibility of other people. When we do that we are we betray ourselves and others.

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 fifteen degrees to the north to avoid a collision." Through the crackly radio came the reply, "Recommend you divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision." The captain stood his ground. He radioed back, "This is the captain of a Royal 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 HMS Ark Royal, the largest ship in Her Majesty's fleet. I demand that you change your course." After a pause he heard the softly spoken reply. "It's up to you. But we're a lighthouse."

Old joke

Humility is a virtue. As idealists we are eager to see transformation and excited by the opportunity to make a difference. We feel our good ideas gaining momentum, our passion for change is fuelled by the injustice and inequality all around, our drive and commitment grows stronger, and soon, perhaps without self-knowledge or intention, our humility is replaced by a sense of finally knowing what's wrong and how to fix it, perhaps even better than others. But as humility is lost, so is our effectiveness. We may put off those who otherwise would want to follow. Even worse, our hubris may lead us to make a terrible mistake. Look out for your lighthouse.

The long walk

“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.”

The Long Walk to Freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela sacrificed nearly thirty years of his life in jail for his fellow South Africans as part of his commitment to ending apartheid. 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 to do so is important and understandable, the process of creating a better society is never complete, and idealists will always find new tasks required of them at every stage of history. Nelson Mandela ended apartheid, but the long walk continues as South Africa works towards reconciliation and economic justice for all.

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 of Calcutta

For more than forty years Mother Teresa comforted the poor, the sick, and the outcast around the world, from Calcutta to New York to Albania. She was a living example of her belief that love is embodied in 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 knew that the path of service is the path of joy, because it is the path of love.

Moccasins

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

Adapted from a Cherokee prayer

Service is a common ground on which all people can come together to build a more just society. That justice depends on understanding one another. But our work is a powerful ‘moccasin’ itself; through service, we can all walk in each other's shoes. Once we've shared the experiences of others we are more likely to understand points of view that are different or even hostile to our own. We may then either be able to successfully change, learn to tolerate or live alongside them, or even embrace them ourselves.

The rabbi's gift

A decaying monastery had only five monks left. In the woods surrounding the great empty stone vaults of the abbey, there was a little hut used from time to time by a rabbi from a nearby town. One day, as the abbot agonised over the 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 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 his fellow monks 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. I do not know what that means." In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's parting words. Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah was one of the monks here at the monastery? Which one? Could he have meant the abbot? Probably. But perhaps he meant Brother Adolphus. That's possible. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. Did he? 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. The change in mood affected the few visitors who still came, and word of the monastery's aura spread. People began to come to the monastery to pray, to ask advice, to speak to the monks. They brought their friends, too, and some of the younger men who came talked more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. 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 centre of spirituality.

Adapted from The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace by Dr M. Scott Peck

If our starting point is that every person is special, 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. It is a culture everyone deserves, and one that has great strength.

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 centres 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 Cape Town

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 when white minority rule in South Africa finally ended in 1994. Our idealistic actions are not isolated. The cumulative effect of the work of many committed people and institutions can have a dramatic impact.

Sand into diamonds

Once upon a time, there lived a brave young pilot. One night, as she was flying high above the Sahara, the engine of her plane suddenly stalled. She parachuted to the ground. When she awoke the next day, she assessed her situation. It was bleak. She had no idea where the closest village was. She could be hundreds of miles away, or just around the nearest hill. She knew one thing for certain. She had to move in some direction. If she just stayed, she would surely die. Over mile after mile of desert, the bright sun glared down on her and reflected off the sand as she walked on and on. Soon her throat was parched, her skin was dry and burnt. She had no food or drink, and no water in sight. By noon she could continue no longer and collapsed. 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, and so real. And as it became clearer she realised it was a genie. And the genie spoke. "Do not despair. Do not give up hope. 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. 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. The hot desert sun was ablaze in the sky. The heavy dry wind ripped over the land. 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. Seeing the condition of this unusual stranger emerging out of the desert, the locals 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 thought 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, too, because she had not picked up more sand.

Adapted from The Parable of the Pebbles

The idealistic path is hard, but every experience along the way, when distilled, reflected upon and polished provides us with a treasure trove of wisdom and ideas to draw upon further down the road. In the midst of a City Year there is little opportunity for perspective, and little to which we can compare it. Take in as much as possible from each experience and opportunity, to fill up your pockets with the sand of idealism. Keep moving forward. Time and perspective will turn that sand into diamonds.

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 the, "anger, offensive actions, and criticism," that may affect their making the best decisions. These commitments of stewardship for future generations and moral toughness are a profound formula for ensuring inter-generational 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 yardstick of human experience."

The shoulders of giants

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

Isaac Newton

Newton has been called, "the founder of modern physics," and the sixteenth century natural philosopher certainly transformed the way that mankind viewed the universe and our place in it with his theories of gravity and of motion. At times resented by his colleagues for his towering fame, he had the sense to recognise that however extraordinary and groundbreaking the achievements of one supposedly "great" individual may be, they are always built, in part, on the unsung and unrecognised efforts of many others have come before, or worked alongside them. At City Year everything that happens take place within a team, and every one us is enabled to do what we do in part because of others who serve, in our own teams and across the great big team that is the service movement, worldwide.

The starfish story

One night a storm washed up many starfish on to the beach. In the morning a little girl found them wriggling, helplessly, in the sand. The hot sun was beating down.

"I suppose I am the only one who can save you," she said to the starfish.

She gently pinched one of its five points and threw the creature gently out to the lapping waves. The little girl smiled and continued walking down the beach, but after just a few steps, she found another stranded starfish. No sooner had she tossed this one back to the sea than she came across another. And then another, and another and then another still. She sent each one on its way back to the sea. But when she reached the top of a high sand dune, she came to a sudden stop. Stretching out in front of her were hundreds upon hundreds of starfish washed up on the beach. They were all dying in the hot sun. She felt a momentary despair.

Undeterred, she faced up to the seemingly impossible challenge, and one by one continued to return the animals to the cool ocean waters. She was so busy that she didn't notice her neighbour arriving. He watched her, fascinated. He was joined by others and before long a crowd had gathered to watch the little girl perform her frantic mission. They were all pointing at the little girl and laughing.

"That little girl's mad," said one.

"I know," said another, "doesn't she know that every summer thousands of starfish get washed up on the beach and die? It's just the way things are."

"There are so many starfish. She couldn't possibly make a difference," said a third.

Finally, an old man approached the busy but happy girl. "Little girl," he said, "there are thousands of starfish washed up on the beach. You can't possibly hope to make a difference. Why don't you give up and go play on the beach with the other children?"

The little girl's smile vanished. She gazed up at the old man, and then saw the crowd of people for the first time. She suddenly realised that they had all been laughing at her. Now they had fallen silent, awaiting her answer to the older man's question. She began to think that maybe he was right—maybe they were all right. She had been tossing back starfish for what seemed like hours. And a carpet of starfish still covered the beach. How could she have possibly thought she could make a difference? Her arms fell limp at her sides, and she dropped the starfish she was holding in her hand back to the hot sand. She began to walk away.

"That's right. Go on and play. You cannot possibly hope to make a difference," the older man said to the retreating girl. The crowd smiled and nodded their heads.

Suddenly the little girl stopped, and turned around. She walked back to the starfish she had dropped. Reaching down, she picked it up and—swinging her arm as hard as she possibly could—she let the starfish go with a wide, open hand. The crowd of people watched as the starfish soared and spun gently through the air, and then fell far into the sea.

The little girl turned back to the old man and, with a smile of great joy and a defiant tone, said, "I made a difference to that one!"

From the back of the crowd, a little boy came forward. He walked towards the girl, picked up a starfish, and threw it into the sea. As it, too, landed with a splash, the little boy said, "And I made a difference to that one!"

The little boy's mother and father then joined their son.

"I made a difference to that one!" said the mother, smiling.

"And I made a difference to that one!" said the father, laughing.

One by one, every member of the crowd joined in tossing starfish back to the sea, calling "I made a difference to that one" each time. Finally, even the old man reached down, picked up a starfish and tossed it gently to the sea.

After some time the voices began to quiet down. The little girl wondered if people were getting too tired to continue. But what she saw startled and amazed her. All the starfish were gone.

They had all been tossed back to the sea!

Adapted from the Star Thrower by Loren C. Eiseley

It seems obvious, but many people can make more difference than one person. That's why, at City Year, we're always telling people about our service, showing it to them, asking them to join it, inspiring them to undertake their own campaigns for idealism. It is great to make a difference to one starfish. It really matters, and has its own importance. It is even better to work with others to make a difference to many starfish. And it is a greater project again to instigate service as a habit that continues to make a difference to starfish you've never even seen. City Year can help make service such an expectation that those summer storms, which history will always throw up, are no longer just disasters, but also occasions for love and joy.

Stone soup

There once was a traveller who came to a small village, tired and weary from his long journey. The traveller 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 travelled 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 traveller 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 traveller 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 traveller 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 traveller. 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 favourite ingredient: mushrooms, onions, salt, black pepper, rosemary, peas. Everyone wanted to be part of the creation. Finally, the traveller 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

Resources gathered for the common good can do more good than the sum of all those resources kept apart. The pot is a metaphor for the untapped potential of community wealth that can be organised for the common good. Stone soup celebrates the power of bringing out the best instincts of people, rather than appealing to, or condemning them for, their worst.

The traveller

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 centre of the village, reading books and talking to passersby. One day, a traveller came upon his village and stopped and said, "Old man, I have been travelling 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 traveller scowled and said, "Old man, I have met nothing but 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 traveller 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 traveller came walking through the village. Once again, the traveller stopped and asked, "Please kind sir, I have been travelling 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 traveller replied, "I have found nothing but 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

We are all travellers through life, and our attitude colours our every experience. It is the lens through which we see the world. If we expect the best from people, we will tend to find them helpful. Similarly, we must not allow negative experiences to taint future expectations, especially in relation to people we have never met. One all too often finds what one looks for.

Ubuntu

Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu.

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

Zulu proverb

In a true community, a person cannot be complete if others do not enjoy full humanity. In other words, anyone living in an unjust society is diminished, degraded, as a result. That applies as much to the global as to the local community. When we do nothing we let ourselves down as much as those whose need to ignore.

The Vast Majority of Mankind

“I believe we should claim certain Rights for the children and labour for their universal recognition, so that everybody - not merely the small number of people who are in a position to contribute [...], but everybody who in any way comes into contact with children - that is to say the vast majority of mankind - may be in a position to help forward the movement.”

Eglantyne Jebb

Eglantyne Jebb was a charity worker and writer. As a young woman she was horrified by the effects of the First World War on the children of Germany and its allies. She organised a huge relief effort, sending much-needed supplies to enemy countries (at one point she was arrested by the police), and lobbying the government to lift the blockade for humanitarian reasons. George Bernard Shaw supported her, saying, “I have no enemies under the age of seven.” The British public responded to Eglantyne's call, and on the back of the campaign of 1919 the charity Save The Children was established.

Eglantyne knew that one campaign, or contributions just from one section of society, would not be enough to bring about the kind of change in attitudes that she knew was needed to protect the children of the future. She wanted not just to provide relief, but to be part of a movement. In 1923 she promulgated a Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the basis of today's UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. City Year seeks to contribute to that movement for social justice for children, and to involve more people in our work than just those who are able to contribute directly.

Eglantyne also understood the sense of adventure so important to those who serve: “Relief work does not consist entirely... in wearisome meetings, wearisome appeals, wearisome statistics, and a yet more wearisome struggle against uninteresting misery. It has its moments of enchantment, its adventures, its unexpected vistas into new worlds.” She was a true idealist.

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, 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, and acting as a solvent on things that are stuck. Water is transparent and ubiquitous, so easily overlooked, but like service, it makes a huge difference and is immediately missed when not there.