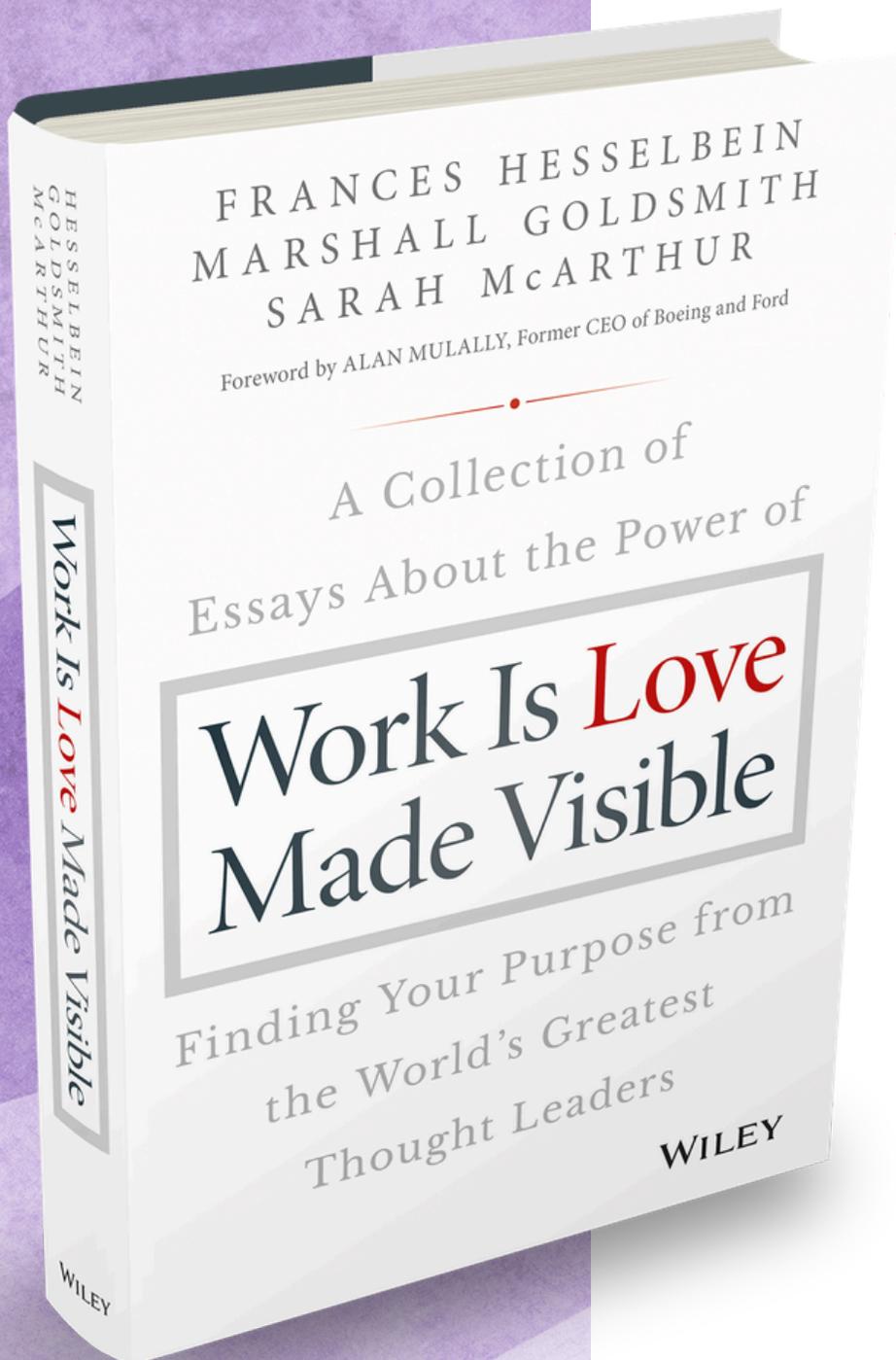


a chapter contribution

Understanding in Moments

by: Catherine Carr





What follows is a partial chapter that was included in
Love is Work Made Visible.

Life changes in moments.

And since there are close to an infinite number of them, it's a crapshoot knowing when the life-changing ones will hit. In my experience, they usually happen when I least expect them and always right about the time I think I've got it all figured out.

A different culture, a new condition, an idea never considered. Sometimes gently, sometimes not, forcing me to cross over and see the view from another perspective. At times freezing me in my tracks. Other times slowly drawing me in close. Every time, bringing me closer to understanding something new and allowing a deeper and more meaningful connection to the world.

While on assignment in a small village in the Ivory Coast, I got sick. Within weeks of arriving I was puking up vibrant yellows and neon greens into the plastic garbage can by my bed.

Nothing stayed down, not even the medicine. The project doctor put me on an IV and for four days I stayed in bed, except for those infrequent visits to the pit latrine. We lived and worked in a small compound where conditions were tight and there were no secrets. My colleagues and housemates were very kind, giving me what little space there was for my dignity when I did make those visits to the latrine, holding my head and IV bag high.

“As profoundly afraid as I was, I also knew how fortunate I was.

It was the first time I had ever really been sick--and sick to the point where there was talk of taking me out of the field. To do so involved re-delegating duties, a six-hour road trip with two land cruisers meeting midway, a transfer and bad roads the entire way, only to arrive at a hospital where the doctors would not know me nor have English as their first language.

The doctors in the project knew me and had come to understand my version of French. I was included in their medical rotations, along with the many children they were caring for at the hospital. I had a 10-by-10 space all to myself, a bed of my own, a fan, and intermittent electricity. I had my own plastic garbage can holding my vomit and no one else's. I was the lucky one in this situation.

I slowly got better, eventually returning to work weak but ready to see what had happened while I was out. My first stop was the infant ward. It was malaria season. Medical staff moved from bed to bed doing what they could. Babies crying out at their disappointment with life. Mamas consoling their sick infants. Because of what I had just been through, I now felt their frustration and fear of being sick at a profound level. In one bed I saw a mama lying on her side in the shape of an “S,” breast-feeding one baby while patting the back of another who was lying in the space behind her knees. I turned around and left.

I headed to the juvenile ward. “Just a quick look,” I promised myself. As soon as I entered, my heart fell into the eyes of a little boy. He was 10 years old, and from five strides away, even I, a non-medical member of the team, could see how sick he was. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, his knees inches from the child in the bed next to his. Draped over his lap was a well-used and once vibrantly colored piece of fabric.



His legs, from knees to toes, were wrapped in bandages, his body swollen and dusty. The only areas of his skin showing his true and beautiful color were where tears and beads of sweat had rolled down, cleaning away the dust. His lips were quivering in pain and he was taking quick and shallow breaths.

“

Our eyes connected and rather than look away, I looked deeper. Once you know something you can't not know it. I knew what it meant to be sick. I knew what it meant to be in pain, scared, and beyond miserable.

I walked over to the little boy and sat next to him, putting my hand on his head because it seemed that was the only part of him that did not hurt. He then shared his pain with me. He raised his hands from his lap, palms up, in defeat as if to say, "I'm broken." I nodded. He was speaking a mixture of French and the local language. I didn't understand the words, but I understood the feelings. I know what "broken" feels like. He spoke until he ran out of words. Then we sat in silence, holding hands, taking deep breaths together.

At dinner, I asked the team about the little boy in the corner. They knew exactly who I was talking about. Arsene had arrived weeks ago with two broken legs. He had been climbing a mango tree, picking those now ripe and delicious palm-sized fruits, when he fell. His mother wrapped him in a blanket and carried him in her arms for a full day, navigating motorcycle and bus transportation to get to the hospital. Arsene had been through multiple surgical procedures to repair his broken legs. There were complications, and just when things were going well, he had a bout with tetanus.

Over the following weeks, I found time every day to sit with Arsene. He would just talk. I would just listen. Then we would just breathe.

In time, because this is what healing takes, Arsene's broken body began to heal. Soon it would be time to say goodbye and I had to find a way to do it.

The solution was in my suitcase. Months earlier, while in Paris, negotiating the minefields of sidewalk dog poop threatening my city shoes, ignoring the rolling eyes of Parisian waiters, and counting my anxieties, a friend sent me a worry doll. The doll was two inches long and made of brightly colored strings. She came with the instruction that she was to dwell under my pillow at night and would take my worries away while I slept. I put her in my suitcase, figuring I'd better not wear her out too soon, for she would likely come in handy another day.

On our last visit, I explained to Arsene, using a bit of my incredibly bad French and many gestures and sounds, the powers of the worry doll. I explained that she would bring him strength as he stepped back into this vast world on his newly healed legs, that she would take from him his worries and remind him to take those deep breaths we had been practicing together. I let him know that he would always be in my heart, no matter where we were in this world. Then, knowing that children play hard and things get lost, I told him not to worry when the doll leaves. It would only mean that he no longer needed her. The doll would then go to be with the next person in need because this is what worry dolls do.



I placed the doll around Arsene's neck on a bright blue cord I had found and used it to make the worry doll into a necklace. Then we said goodbye, but not before Arsene promised to be careful when climbing mango trees and to keep going to school.

Arsene taught me that when the walls we build to protect us from pain and sadness crumble, it is only then that our hearts have the space to expand.

Our walls may protect us from the much larger world surrounding us, but they also keep us from understanding. Hope hides on the other side of those walls we've built. Joy hides behind sorrow. Hearts break. And then they expand, because hearts have the infinite capacity to grow and hold incredible amounts of both sorrow and joy.



You find your growth and freedom in that space between what happens and what you do. Even when it doesn't feel like it, know that there is always space: It may be tight at times and you might struggle to create more. Other times there might be so much space that you lose yourself. Either way, it is always there, encouraging you to open your heart wide, step into another perspective, and get closer to understanding something new, to connect to the world in deeply meaningful ways.

Life is made up of moments. They swirl about and follow us around, poking and prodding trying to get our attention. Sometimes we see them but most often we walk right by, never recognizing them for what they are. So they knock us over. Forcing us to pay attention.

But what would happen if we intentionally sought out the moments? If we made it a point to put ourselves in unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations? If we looked for occasions to be knocked over by the moments? It wouldn't be easy, but as my mom says, "If it were easy, everyone would do it."

“ Life is made up of moments. They swirl about and follow us around, poking and prodding trying to get our attention. Sometimes we see them but most often we walk right by, never recognizing them for what they are. So they knock us over. Forcing us to pay attention.



CATHERINE CARR

SPEAKER - HUMANITARIAN

Culture - Diversity/Inclusion - Team Building
Chaos/Crisis Management - Relationship Building

Book Catherine as your next transformational speaker

- Revitalize purpose and meaning at work
- Create cultures of compassion and belonging
- Stride confidently into chaos and uncertainty
- Deepen connections with your organization's mission, their colleagues, and the world



CatherineCarr.Global



@CatherineCarrGlobal

Dear Conference Sponsors and Organizers,

Using a distinctive and candid approach, Catherine shares first-hand stories from the frontlines of global humanitarian work where everyday moments of heroism, heart, and hardship, come together to transform perspectives and provide clarifying strategies to concerns faced in any workplace today.

Navigating the blurred lines among work, life, and humanity, Catherine connects with your audience and shares why what happens "out there" is relevant to what happens "right here" in your workplace.



Catherine transported us to a world of purpose layered with empathy. She shared her experiences in a way that touched the soul of our conference. Catherine's message was delivered with style, elegant dialogue, and a genuineness flowing from her inspired life work.

Bud Bernstein, Curator for Strategic Human Resources at Mt. Washington (HR Executive Retreat)

CATHERINE'S WRITING APPEARS IN



CONTACT INFORMATION

website: www.catherinecarr.global
email: cc@catherinecarr.global
phone: 347 237 0735

MEET CATHERINE

In 2009, Catherine Carr packed up 20 years of professional experience, her MBA, her Human Resources Certifications and put her life in a storage unit, to work with the international humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders. Since then she has worked in over 10 different countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Philippines, and Haiti. Each experience playing a part in shattering her perceptions, teaching her to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, and deepening her connection to the world.