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Humanity Shines Brightest When We Care About One Another

By Barbara E. Thompson

UCF Forum columnist

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I often reflect on the wisdom of the well-known quote by poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou:

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

I have intense appreciation for this observation. For me, it encapsulates the essence of inclusion – it is all about how we make each other feel. I marvel at how brilliant and complex this seemingly simple sentiment really is.

My work as an educator in the field of diversity and inclusion is predicated on Angelou’s words, this fundamental view of human relationships. In my experience, I have never met a person who did not want to matter in this world. We universally want to feel respected and valued. This “truth” seems to be present in the countless stories that have been thoughtfully shared with me during the years. These stories tend to be rich with emotion and suggest a striving to feel visible and understood.

There is another quote by philosopher, theologian and humanitarian Jean Vanier that also reflects an ideal of inclusion:

“Each human being, however small or weak, has something to bring to humanity. As we start to really get to know others, as we begin to listen to each other’s stories, things begin to change. We begin the movement from exclusion to inclusion, from fear to trust,

from closedness to openness, from judgment and prejudice to forgiveness and understanding. It is a movement of the heart.”

To be inclusive involves listening to one another with humility and generosity of spirit, with full attention that is unconsciously given with no thought of sacrifice but with appreciation of the privilege, the opportunity to understand the heart of another human being.

Imagine a world where we did this for each other. There would be no limit to what we could accomplish. It would be a world filled with breathtaking possibilities. We can do this for one another. We just have to want to.

People often note that this takes time, and it does. So perhaps my idealism surfaces when I consider if there is a better use of time. Is it possible for each of us to listen to the story of at least one other person? I think so.

Inclusion is about reaching in and touching hearts. It involves caring, wanting to share our humanity and our connection to each other. But this involves creating an environment where people feel safe and want to share their stories. The privacy of another person’s life cannot be denied. We cannot force, nor should we, a revelation of the heart. So as we open the door to sharing, we also must be respectful of the life experiences and the needs of the other person.

It is important to suspend the expectation that all of us wish to share – and wish to share at the same depth. I am appreciative of whatever another person wishes to reveal to me as this is a gift. It involves trust at the most profound level.

Perhaps the starting point is to reflect on our own willingness to be vulnerable, our own willingness to share with others. This involves how we, in Angelou’s words, have been made to feel, what our experiences and outcomes with sharing have been.

In my personal life, my heart is out there for all to know. And, in my professional work, I also have been very fortunate to have colleagues and dear friends who have listened to my many stories, and who have known that I was genuinely interested in listening to and understanding whatever aspects of their lives they wanted me to know.

This level of connection is at the core of inclusion, at its very essence.

Creating an inclusive world is not simple. Human relationships are not simple, but humanity shines brightest when we care about one another, when we want people to thrive and excel, and when we want all voices to be heard, listened to and understood.

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