

The Good Neighbor

by Debbe Kennedy, Founder, Global Dialogue Center

I dashed out of a parking garage, mindlessly rushing down the street, acknowledging no one, only to be abruptly halted by a red light. I stood impatiently, grinding my heels into the curb, ready to leap out in front of the crowd at the first sign of *green*. As the light changed, an unexpected slow motion took over. My shoes tried unsuccessfully to hold me back—the heels now solidly stuck in the crevice at the edge of the curb. My body instead took over, looming forward, lifting itself through the air, then falling with a thump onto the street. The point of impact was an excruciating, jolting crash of bones as I landed on the asphalt on both knees. Next, still in slow motion, out of nowhere, came a warm hand reaching out to me. I grasped it firmly, welcoming the care and strength from this person I had not yet seen. As I lifted my head up, my eyes met the eyes of this *Good Samaritan*. My anguish was clearly mirrored on his brown face. "*Are you all right? Let me help you,*" he said without words.

My life was suddenly interrupted as I was literally "brought to my knees," stripped of my dignity, then lifted up and mentored by a man with no place to go. He was homeless. For that moment so was I. I had passed him many times, always much too busy to notice him — or was it just easier to look away? I never heard his voice; never wondered what he had to say or thought about what he needed. I never recognized our sameness. Amazingly, as any *good neighbor* would do, he had time for me when I showed up unannounced.

One seemingly unrelated event — a few chaotic moments-in-time — shocked me into a new level of understanding and thinking about what it means to be a *good neighbor*. The nameless man caused me to start asking myself some deeper questions and now I ask you:

- How many times have you *rushed by* a good neighbor in need? How many times have your indifference and self-interest blinded you from the needs of others all around you? How has your behavior, actions or inaction contributed, directly or indirectly, to the state of the community where you live and work?
- How many people have you unintentionally ignored in your work and life?
- How many ideas, insights and talents have you overlooked because of your own limited labels and biases?
- How well do your own actions and behaviors set an example for others about being a *good neighbor*?

*"...there has to be room for all of us.
Not just the favored few, those who look alike and think alike,
but all who are part of the community of the future."*

– Frances Hesselbein
Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom,
Chairman, Leader to Leader Institute - (formerly the Peter F. Drucker Foundation)

Our communities, our nations, our world and our planet would be better places for all people, if we made being a *good neighbor* a personal responsibility and commitment in our lives. As I've questioned others about their experiences, they have reminded me that a good neighbor is a loving, generous and peaceful person...

- They help one another.
- They value each other without condition.
- They stand up for one another.
- They share what they have with others.
- They show interest and genuine care for each other.
- They invest in others---and sometimes it's in you.
- They value and respect life in all its wondrous forms.
- They often are selfless when it comes to helping a friend.
- They show up when you need them most.
- They are comforting, but also help you to become more yourself.
- They never rip you off.
- They never leave you stranded.
- They don't hurt you or blow up your house.
- They look out for your children as they would their own.
- They care for your animals and pets as you would.
- They dream with you.
- They work with you.
- They believe in you.
- They can change the course of your whole life.

These qualities ask much more of us as individuals. They call us to cultivate a genuine interest in the well-being of others that goes a step beyond the rhetorical values that are commonly, and sometimes casually, recited — trust, respect, inclusion, innovation, compassion, excellence, integrity, honor and service. A young business leader brought this to life for me in an interview not long ago. It was clear from my own observations, he was routinely ridiculed and ignored by his seasoned peers and truly struggling to get his bearings in his new role. He had been "brought to his knees" plenty of times. He mentioned none of this to me. Instead, when questioned about what he thought would create the best environment for people to reach their full potential, he said, *"What if you could come to work every day and know that everyone around you was interested in helping you be the best you could be. Wouldn't that be a great place to work?"* I say to you, wouldn't it be a great neighborhood, community, city or world to live in, if we woke up each day, knowing our *good neighbors* all around us were devoted to helping us reach our full potential and belonging to the community?

*"If you've come to help me, don't bother. If you have come because
your destiny is wrapped up in mine, let's help one another."*
— Aboriginal insight

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- 1. Focus on the small things you do.** Seemingly small unconscious behaviors, actions and habits can work to exclude people. To help others feel valued, notice they exist—say *hello* for starters. Listen to them with genuine interest. Raise your consciousness about the others around you. Respond as a *good neighbor* would do.
- 2. Get involved.** Find out what is going on in your community. Investigate where you can contribute more as a *good neighbor*, helping to create a more loving, generous, equitable, healthy world for all people and living creatures on our planet.
- 3. Set the example for respecting others.** Breakthrough your habits of indifference and self-interest. Make every day an opportunity to practice living as a *good neighbor* wherever you go --- make it your personal responsibility to believe that we can change the world we know today through our actions and behavior. Make your contribution to creating a more meaningful and equitable existence here on earth.

Look for the uncharted path that bears your name.

Believe and expect that miracles will happen.

Know there are good neighbors everywhere walking with you.

Lead the way where you are!

d.k.

Debbe Kennedy is an author and Founder, President and CEO of the Global Dialogue Center and Leadership Solutions Companies. and author of *Action Dialogues* and the *Diversity Breakthrough! Action Series*. Kennedy also had a distinguished leadership career with IBM for over 20 years.

The Good Neighbor was adapted and expanded especially for the **Habitat JAM**, sponsored by the Government of Canada, UN-Habitat and IBM, December 2005. Excerpts were taken from Debbe Kennedy's *Action Dialogues: Meaningful Conversation to Accelerate Change* (Berrett-Koehler – 2000), *Positively M.A.D. – Making a Difference* (Berrett-Koehler – 2004) and "*Uncommon Conversation: Learning from an Unexpected Teacher*" (BrownHerron 2003).

Learn more...

www.globaldialoguecenter.com
www.debbekenedy.com