



THE DEFINING MOMENT

by Frances Hesselbein

I was speaking to a large group of chief learning officers, and after my speech, we had a very open and engaging dialogue. The last question asked was, “Mrs. Hesselbein, what was the one defining moment that determined the person you would be—the leader you would become?” No one had ever asked me this before, yet I knew the answer and immediately responded. Long ago, when I was eight years old, I was visiting my grandparents in South Fork, Pennsylvania, a small coal mining and railroad town. My grandfather had a men’s clothing store, was justice of the peace, and played the pipe organ in the Methodist Church every Sunday.

I adored my grandparents and spent every weekend with Mama and Papa Wicks. They had seven children, so they needed a big house—and it seemed only logical to them to build into their house a pipe organ in a music room with a sixteen-foot ceiling. That room, with stained glass windows that caught the sunlight, was my favorite place. On the shelf above the pipe organ keyboard were two beautiful old Chinese vases. I would coax my grandmother to let me play with them and she always said no. Finally, on this Saturday visit, when I was eight years old, feeling very assertive, I stamped my foot at my grandmother and demanded that I be allowed to play with the vases. Instead of scolding me, my grandmother led me over to a small love seat facing the pipe organ, put her arms around me, and told me this story.

Long ago, when your mother was eight years old, some days she and her little sisters would come home from school crying that the bad boys were chasing Mr. Yee and

calling him bad names. Now in this little town was a Chinese laundry man, who lived alone in his small laundry. Each week he picked up your grandfather's shirts and brought them back in a few days, washed, starched, ironed perfectly. Mr. Yee wore traditional Chinese dress—a long tunic, a cap with his hair in a queue. The boys would tease him, calling him, “Chinke, Chinke Chinaman,” and other unkind names, and they would try to pull his queue.

One day there was a knock on the kitchen door. When I opened it, there stood Mr. Yee, with a large package in his arms. I said, “Oh, Mr. Yee, please come in. Won't you sit down?” But Mr. Yee just stood there and handed me the package, saying, “This is for you.” I opened the package and in it were two beautiful old Chinese vases. I said, “Mr. Yee—these are too valuable. I couldn't accept them.” He said, “I want you to have them.” I asked why. He told me, “Mrs. Wicks, I have been in this town for ten years and you are the only one who ever called me Mr. Yee. And now I am going back home. They won't let me bring my wife and children here and I miss them too much, so I am going back to China. The vases are all I brought with me. I want you to have them.” There were tears in his eyes as he said good-bye.

In my grandmother's arms, I cried my heart out for poor Mr. Yee. That was long ago—the defining moment when I learned respect for all people, the defining moment that would stay with me, would shape my life with passion for diversity, for inclusion.

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Years later, January 15, 1998, I was at the White House, seated in the East Room, about to receive our country's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I was overwhelmed that day—I am still overwhelmed. In the front row before a low stage, I sat with other honorees including David Rockefeller, Admiral Zumwalt, James Farmer, Dr. Robert Coles, and Brooke Astor. Each of us had a military aide to escort us to the podium when our name was called. When it was my turn President Clinton ended my part of his citation by saying, “I will ask this pioneer for women, diversity, and inclusion to please come forward.” As I walked toward the president, I remembered my grandmother and Mr. Yee and the defining moment of respect for all people, for diversity and inclusion—that moment in the mountains of Western Pennsylvania that helped shape my life, that “determined the person I would be, the leader I would become.”

Today, in the darkness of our times when we observe the lowest level of trust and the highest level of cynicism, the call for leaders who are healers and unifiers must be heard. Wherever we are, whatever our work, whatever our platform or forum—and we all have them, from the water cooler to the stadium—we must find the language that heals, the inclusion that unifies. It is a critical time for leaders at every level to make the difference. “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle,” should be a powerful reminder for all of us.

In the future it will not be the one big message, the one big voice, but millions of us, in our own way, healing, unifying, and experiencing that one defining moment when we recognize that sustaining the democracy

is the common bottom line—whoever we are, whatever we do, wherever we are, the call is to sustain the democracy.

Sometimes when we hear that call, we can go back in our own family history and recognize a connection, a force that moves us toward the defining moment.

So we each count those defining moments of our lives that defined the person we would be, the leader we would become. We find moments in our lives when

someone helped to “shine a light” that would illuminate our future and the lives of all we touch.

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