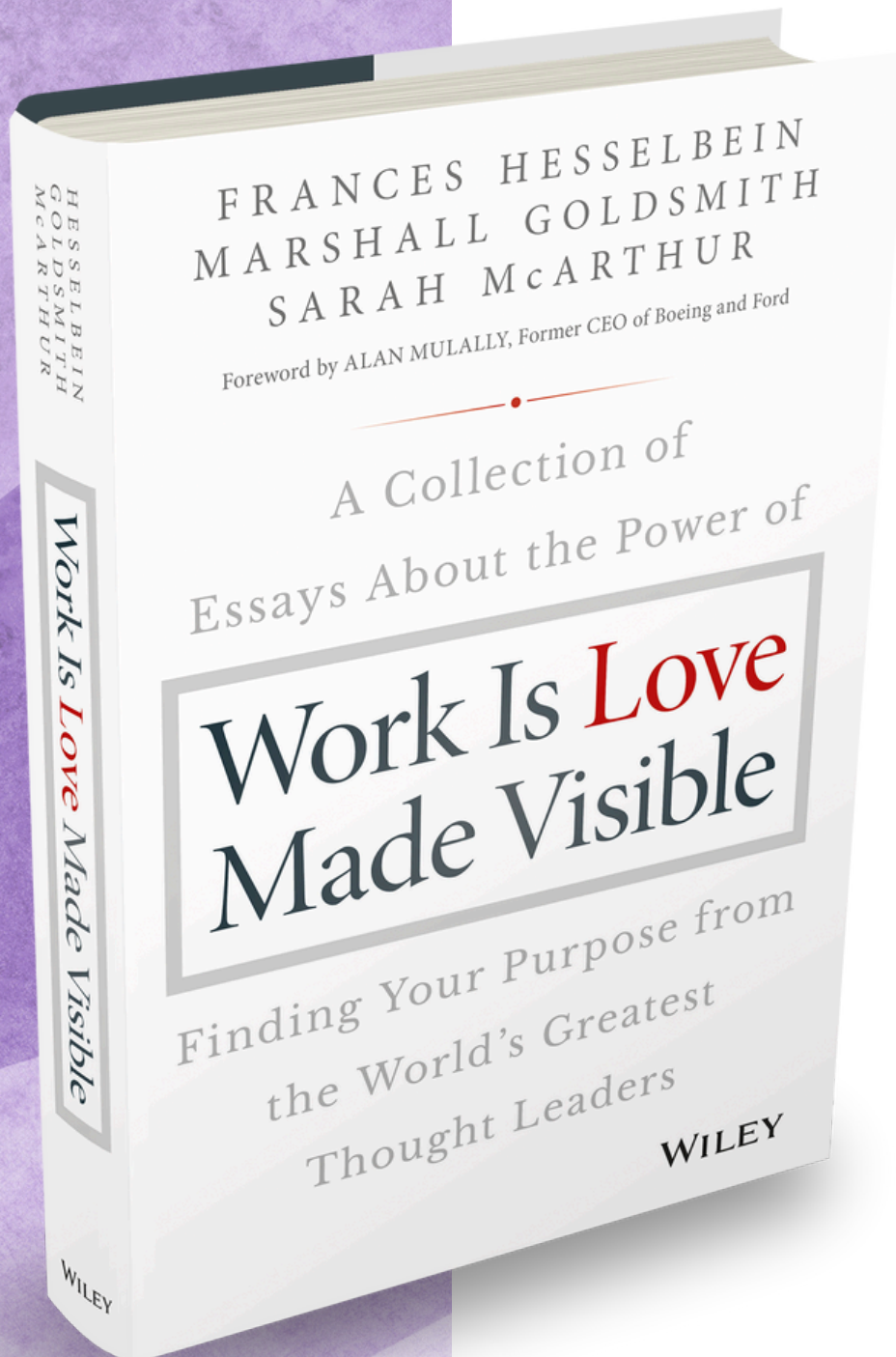


a chapter contribution

Understanding in Moments

by: Catherine Carr





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Exploring Perceptions ♦ Transforming Perspectives ♦ Expanding Possibilities

To **SpringDeep** is to breathe in courage,
breathe out what holds you back, and to
fiercely leap into the depths of your dreams.

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 preconceived notions, teaching her to become comfortable with the uncomfortable, and deepening her connection to the world.

Over the years Catherine has learned: Morning tea solves afternoon problems. Helping one another is an instinctive response around the world. To fully engage, our walls must fall. The importance of never losing sight of normal. And sometimes, communication means saying nothing at all.



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.

Late one afternoon in 2013, well into my fifth year with Doctors Without Borders, I was working and living in a small village in the Middle East. The team had converted an unremarkable two-story house into a small hospital. Our task was to provide emergency medical care to victims of war, civilians and fighters alike.

On this particular afternoon things were slow. No emergencies, the sun was shining, and not a cloud over the olive groves in the distance. It was the middle of winter and yet there was a sense of spring in the air. I decided to escape the crowded communal office and visit the medical teams downstairs.

I patted my head, determining that my hair was more or less tucked respectfully under "the sock," that close-fitting head-covering peeking out from under the scarf of my hijab. If I had known a moment was right around the corner, I would have checked more carefully.

Understanding in Moments



After some time and a lot of laughter with the downstairs crew,

I bounded back upstairs, using the typically empty stairwell. I was in a great mood, humming and taking the steps by leaps. It felt good to move and I enjoyed feeling the wisps of hair that had escaped the sock against my neck and face. My hijab had definitely slipped out of place and didn't care.

I had rounded the corner of the first set of stairs and launched into the second set when I saw him coming down toward me. He was tall but seemed even more so because he stood at the top of the stairs. He had a full beard and wore a traditional white head covering, white pants, and white tunic, with a black vest and wide black belt around his waist. Given my geographic location, our patient demographics, and the fact that he was walking unassisted, I knew he was a fighter who had come to visit a friend in the hospital.

It is said that, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." A lovely theory indeed, but when standing before an unexpected reality in an empty stairwell, space has a way of collapsing in on itself.

We stood. Staring at one another. I thought about bolting back down the stairs but knew that was lizard brain thinking. I held my ground. Space collapsed and time slowed. We were functioning at our most basic levels. "Interesting," I thought, "in addition to 'flight or fight', there is also 'freeze'."

Knowing lizards aren't very smart, my ego rolled right over lizard brain to take the wheel. Still not the place to be if the goal is rational thinking, but it does seem to be the path our minds take when confronted with any new situation. It's as if the brain says, "Okay. Situation safe. Now, how does this situation affect me?" Ego thinking can be a dank dark place where decisions are made in the name of "me me me" and with the conviction that my way is the right way.

I will never know what he was thinking. But, assuming we were both in ego thinking at the same time, I can imagine.

Me: "Hey Mister, who do you think you are? Standing there all intimidating and making me feel uncomfortable?"

Him: "Woman, who do you think you are? Running around with your hijab out of place, not respecting our customs?"

Me: "Don't you know who I am? I am a woman from the U.S. of A. and can do whatever I want."

Him: "Have you forgotten where you are? There is a war going on outside these walls. And, and...was that humming I heard?"

Me: "Yes, that was humming and listen here. You have no right to intimidate me just because of how you look. There may be a war outside but on behalf of all women in the world, I demand..."

And on it goes, the righteously right ego thinking. Falling deeper into the well where empathy and understanding do not thrive. I saw it happening and noted we were only five or six seconds into this exchange.

Then, I saw a glimmer. It was the light of rationality. I turned toward it and thought, "Whoa!!! Catherine. You are in Syria. Your hijab is out of place and he is as confused as you are. Fix it."

But he fixed it faster. He covered his eyes with his hands and turned his body into and against the wall. "Look at that," I said to my ego. "By turning away, he not only honors his culture and mine, he also creates space for us to pass."

Rational thinking now standing strong at the wheel, I slowly walked up the stairs and humbly said in a low voice, "Shokrun," (Arabic for "thank you"), when I passed by him.



I reached the top of the stairs and turned to see what he would do next. Nothing remarkable. He simply continued his journey down and out of the building, never once looking back.

I stood there pondering all that had happened in that less than 15-second eternity of time. I like to think that a male rebel fighter crossed paths with an American female humanitarian and together, in silence, they found space in a small stairwell to honor one another's cultures in this world.

And then I wonder if somewhere in the Middle East, a rebel fighter is telling his rebel friends about the time he encountered a female humanitarian in an empty stairwell.

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It is possible to find empathy and understanding in a matter of seconds and in complete silence.

We can also arrive at that same place when we allow our hearts to connect over time, even if we share only a few words of a common language.

While on another assignment,

this time 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.

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.

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

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.

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**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."

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