

“Way to go, kid!”

Shortly before she died earlier this year, Russia's legendary social activist Olga Alexeeva sadly observed that too many people are trying “to save the world in 45 minutes.”

She was talking about wealthy philanthropists, but her words apply to social entrepreneurs as well. People are suffering – and we want to help them YESTERDAY! But it takes time for social enterprises to put down roots and begin to thrive. And I know there are moments when each of you wonders whether you will EVER make a difference.

So let's find a way to replenish ourselves. Let's look away from the forest for a while and walk among the trees, stop obsessing about the big picture. Let's concentrate instead on the impact we have on the people around us – our families, our friends, our employees, our casual acquaintances . . .

Here, for your consideration (yes, I've watched every episode of the “Twilight Zone”), are three stories. In each, the other person had no idea how much he changed my life -- just as you and I rarely know which of our words or actions will alter the course of another person's journey.

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THE BUDDING BALLPLAYER

I was a tiny 14-year-old in the spring of 1959, barely an inch over five feet, when University of Minnesota baseball coach and former major league all-star Dick Siebert came to my local baseball field for a Saturday morning clinic. His team had won the national collegiate championship in 1956 and would do so again in 1960.

Somewhere mid-morning, he had six of us lined up near second base. We would each have a single chance to field a grounder off Siebert's bat and throw to first to beat another kid who'd raced from home plate at the crack of the bat.

When it came my turn, I crouched, leaned forward on the balls of my feet, pounded my glove and waited, incredibly nervous. But instead of spanking a hot grounder in my general direction, Siebert surprised me by hitting a dribbler near the pitcher's mound. I raced toward the ball as the runner hurried toward first, lunged for it, grabbed it -- and then tripped headlong! I flew forward, sprawling as I threw the ball, then groaned as it bounced into the dugout.

I lay face-down on the infield grass, completely embarrassed. More than a hundred kids had seen me blow it and I dreaded getting up.

Then came Siebert's booming voice. "Way to go, kid! That's the kind of hustle we like to see around here! Did everybody see that?!? Way to go!"

I felt ten feet tall . . . and I've never forgotten. What a gift he gave to me that day.

THE BUDDING SPORTSWRITER

I *loved* being a sportswriter. I started doing it for nothing during the spring of 1961, kept working as an unpaid stringer for more than a year, then went full-time for *Suburban Newspapers* as soon as I graduated from high school in 1962. Sixty dollars a week, no benefits. Throughout my first two years of college I worked 30-35 hours a week during the academic year and full-time in the summers.

The managing editor, Roger Vessels, came from a storied journalism family. His mother had been a legend in the weekly newspaper business in northern Minnesota, and Roger had carried on the family tradition in suburban Minneapolis.

When the daily newspapers in Minneapolis went on strike for 116 days during the summer of 1962, we began to publish twice a week instead of once, on Thursdays and Sundays, and never stopped. I was 17 that summer and for the next two years we filled about half the Sunday paper with sports. I covered games, took photos, wrote stories, developed and printed photos in the darkroom, laid out pages, wrote headlines and captions, pasted up galleys before they went to press – and every Sunday morning about 1 a.m. I dragged my friends from whatever party we were attending and drove to the office to grab the first copies off the press. The sight of my bylines and the pages I'd designed was the most exciting thing I could imagine.

But one slow Tuesday afternoon in the summer of 1964, Roger sat down beside me on a swivel stool at the lunch counter in a nearby diner. We chatted for a while and then he off-handedly asked what I planned to do with my life.

I didn't even hesitate. "I'm going to be a sportswriter!"

Roger paused, put down his fork, swiveled toward me and said "Look," then paused again. "Look," he finally repeated, "you're far too talented to just be a sportswriter."

Then he turned back to his lunch and I sat there, astonished. Believe me when I tell you he rocked my world and altered the course of my life. Five months later I became editor of one of our weekly papers, switched to night school and never looked back.

THE BUDDING RADICAL

I turned 23 on Christmas Eve 1967 and during the next few months showed up almost every Friday night for a late dinner with a group of friends, most of them 15 to 20 years older.

One evening I found myself railing once again about our presence in Vietnam and asking why we always turned to war-mongering as a solution to the world's problems. This was a typical rant for me, and my friends had been patient for weeks, but this night Paul Bengston, a high school teacher in his late 30s, suddenly put up his hands and barked, "Hold it a minute, Jerr!"

I stuttered to a halt and stared at him. What? He eyed me for a moment and then said, "If you really believe all this, if you really believe there's a better way, then why don't *you* do something about it?"

I was shaken. Nobody had ever challenged me that directly, and it changed everything. The next week I joined the Peace Corps.

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You each have similar tales to tell. We all become who we are because of unexpected people who enter our lives, sometimes for just a moment or two. And every day our words and actions have an extraordinary impact on others.

It doesn't take much, sometimes just a word or two, a pat on the back . . .

So when you find yourself wallowing in worries about your social enterprise, step into the forest to rejuvenate yourself. Look around. And know that you do make a difference, every day, every single day.