

Thank you, Gene

Thank for being you. When you opened the door of your house to me seven years ago, you ushered me into a way of being that has kept inspiring me ever since. You had travelled to Seattle in the morning to do work for the Global Child Nutrition Foundation, and now, back home on your beloved Whidbey, you were spending the afternoon to share your reflections about life and leadership for a project I was working on. I thought we'd be done in 90 minutes, instead, our visit turned into an intense four-hour interview. You told part of your story, including a reflection on having only animal crackers to share with malnourished children you met in a village in Tunisia.

You told me that that moment changed your life. These children helped you enter into a lifelong commitment to feeding them and others like them who had no access to food. You saw it as one way to contribute to world peace. "Nourished children have a much greater chance of becoming peaceful contributors to society," you reflected. Your tears came as you recalled these Tunisian children who became your children for that moment. You were grateful you to them for providing you with life giving meaning. You attributed your own happiness and energy to the cause they gave you.

As you were sharing with me, something in my core shifted. I think that must have been the experience many others have had spending time with you. Meeting you changed me. You helped me see that being deeply curious about life turns every day into an adventure. You talked about discoveries of new planets and how giddy you felt learning about them in the nature and science magazines you and your husband Bill read together, and you had continued reading on your own. You taught me that there is no impossible. You asked yourself and challenged others: "Tell me about what stands in the way, so we can find a way around it."

You were deeply moved by life and you moved many of us with your tireless enthusiasm. You'd take me on a ride across Whidbey Island, pointing out the views, the roses and how much you loved taking a drive at sunset to savor the beauty of it all. You touched on the sadness about Bill's passing, saying: "Isn't sadness a way to adjust to what's happened?" I sensed you looked at life with grateful eyes, whether you were taking in the Cascades and the Puget Sound from your living room, a waiter in a restaurant in Langley where we "had to go," hungry children who had never had had a comb through their hair, people who gathered around you inspired by your energy to connect with theirs, new friends at your last home in Oak Harbor, or just me, stopping by. Your example let people know that life is deeply worth living, exploring, learning about, giving to, being passionate for, and savoring.

I remember the last time we met, now about a year ago. Part of your memory had gone, and yet the familiar fire and passion I knew of you had not. You exuded that you loved deeply and all of us. You held my hand firmly – your life's energy was strong, even in the last dance. You asked me then "So, what are we going to do next? There is so much work to do." And you listened deeply, acknowledging that part of your mind had gone, yet still passionately engaging with everything you had left in you. You exuded comfort, even though I know you also were in pain. You didn't dwell on your own struggles. You asked and asked, listening deeply, encouraging, celebrating and taking me by the hand. That is so you to me. You engaged with all you had, that was given to you, and you shared it freely with whomever crossed your path - so freely that it brings me and many to tears. Also, now that you have passed, I sense you

are still giving to all of us from the greater somewhere. You shared through your life how beautiful we are, that inspiration and love are possible and that we must learn to live them.

“Isn’t retirement a sacred cow that we must grind into hamburger?” you quipped. You didn’t believe in dwelling on limitations. You believed in what is possible. You mentioned that some young people look old and that some old people look young and that it all seems to depend on our attitude. As far as I can see, you died with the beauty of a newborn, full of life, full of love, full of fire for the adventure of being alive. You said that you changed roles in life quite a few times. Looking me straight in the eyes, you said: “And so will you.” That little phrase is one of your sayings that keeps reverberating in my veins.

I asked you, “What would you do if you knew you had six more hours to live?” You mused: “Exactly what I am doing now. No. I don’t think that’s quite right. If I knew I was going to leave tonight, I wouldn’t clean the house today, someone else can worry about that. Frankly not much different from what I am doing. I wouldn’t be on the phone calling a bunch of people. I would simply kick back and say ‘well, this is the start of something wonderful’ and ease myself into what’s out there. I’d feel at peace.”

I sense your curiosity is eternal and guides you now, wherever you are. I can feel it raining from the sky. Gene, I can’t write enough to thank you for being you. You showed me a way that I gratefully walk on.

With deep gratitude and love for you. Enjoy this next stage of your journey.

Hylke