

# John McKnight

## Virtual TSI September 17, 2020

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Marsha, gift, memories, give, lives, community, Judith, people, summer institute, wonderful, Pat, reform, Jerry, share, David Chappelle, cottage, present, library, institution, excluded

### SPEAKER

John McKnight

Welcome everybody. This is such a wonderful gathering. You know, the Institutes started in 1984. And I think I've been there- I didn't come the first year- I've been there though for the, all the years, beginning of the second year. That's 35 years.

And there are so many wonderful friends I've made because of this and, like, a lot of you, but better friends could you have them people like Jack, Lynda, Cathy. They have been the essential ingredient of our, creating this community cake.

And I've always felt every year, I've spent an awful lot of time going to conferences. And this is, best of all, this is the Village Well for me, once a year I get to come to the Village well and be refreshed. So many memories of wisdom and celebration, and joy. I know many of you have been here to experience that as well. And you know, memories are very important. There's a wonderful philosopher who is also on the side, a comedian. His name is David Chappelle. And I recently heard him say, when people die it's like a great library, burning down. They knew so much. And if they live on, it will be in the memories of the people who knew them. So our memories are great libraries of many, many lives.

And I'd like to remember three lives that, I think, help get us started with the basic principles of the good life that we seek.

Now, I'm pretty old, and I don't see very well. But I have senior moments. And so rather than trying to talk off the cuff, because this is such a wonderful group, I've taken the liberty of writing down what I would like to share.

And what I would like to share is the memories of three people who are gone, but their lives are a big part of the libraries of my life, and I know a lot of you.

The first person, let's remember, is Marsha Forest. She was a founder of the Summer Institute. And Marsha was just overflowing with life. The word I think of is: Vivacious, and the dictionary says that vicious means among other things, Jazzy, and she was the jazziest person that I've ever known.

More energy than I could begin to keep up with. Marsha had a motto guide us through these days ahead. And it was "All Means All." Not some of us. Not many of us. But all of us. And for Marsha things weren't real or just or joyful, until the "gang's all here".

Now, why is ALL so important? I think the reason is because we all have unique gifts, different gifts. And therefore to be complete in any way, we have to have them all, in order to be creative and the best that we can be. And it takes a serious effort, if we're to come together. Because there are so many people who are on the edge, or who are on the outside.

Now, I had a great friend, named Jerry Miller. He was a professor at Ohio State University, and was chosen to become the director of the juvenile reformatories in Massachusetts. He did everything possible to reform his institutions. But the young people were still incredibly damaged by the experience, no matter what reform he tried.

And after three years, Jerry decided that the worst thing that could possibly be done to those young people, would be to put them in a reformatory. And therefore if they were going to be reformed, they would have to get out. And he's a legend because he took all the kids in seven reformatories in Massachusetts, and led them out. Incidentally, if you're interested in the story, he wrote about this in a book with a wonderful title, "Last One Over the Wall". Might want to read, Jerry Miller.

At any rate, when he closed the first institution, he told me there were eight cottages, and the eighth cottage, Cottage, 8 had the kids who were labeled "Worst". Who were the most dangerous, they thought, or the most destructive. Jerry said, 'I decided that that's where I would start'. That he would bring these young people into the community first. Those who are labeled the worst, came out first. And when I asked him "why", he said, because with people they call the "worst", if it worked then the other cottages were easy and all downhill.

So the way to get them all out, was to reach to the extreme edge first, and allow the community to discover the gifts of these kids. Follow the community as a supporter. So if "All means All", our focus should always be on enabling those furthest out of the community. Last one. Turn off the lights.

Another reason for ALL, is because we need everybody's gift, especially people who've been kept out. And you know why we need them? Cause we're having a party! A party is a place of hospitality, celebration, fun. A place whose memory is filled with the wisdom of Marsha Forest.

The second person, we can remember and add to the library of our lives, is Judith Snow. Another founder of the Summer Institute. Some people thought that Judith lived in a wheelchair. It's nonsense. She lived in the lives of the thousands of people who came into her presence. Her motto was that "the most important thing for me is to be present." Where shall I be? Where you are. Because if I am not present, I will not be able to see your incredible gifts." I must be present. If you are to see mine, and if we are to share them. If I am present our friendship can grow. And then we can create a wonderful vision, together and create a wonderful vision.

So open the window. And let's fly to our vision, Together.

And when we get there, we won't have to worry about walking or chairs, because we can then go anywhere. This can never happen unless I am present.

I spent a lot of time with Judith. And I never told her this, but I'll share it with you. I kept hearing this music behind me whenever I was with her. And finally I realized that it was Tony Bennett singing, "Come fly with me". The Theme Song of her life. And now we're flying on the wings of our memories of her.

Finally, we can remember, Pat Worth. Pat ran away from an institution, when he was a teenager. In the beginning he slept on park benches. And he finally found his way to community. And when I met him, he contacted me, because he knew that I had been a neighborhood organizer, and he said, "I want to be an organizer". So I arranged for him to come to Chicago for a week to get training to be a neighborhood organizer.

And after that experience, he decided that he wanted to organize people who had been excluded, so that they could act powerfully, in their own way, in their own behalf, in their own words. And he asked me to join him as he went across Canada and organized these people who had been so often excluded, with labels like developmentally disabled.

So we went from Canadian city to Canadian city, organizing new groups of people who then could speak for themselves. And when we had finished, I remember Pat saying to me, "Now John, you can see, that's not disability, we suffer. We suffer Disconnection.

The problem with our disconnection is that it doesn't work. It doesn't work for us. It doesn't work for the community. And so that's why we have to be connected and mutually share our gifts.

You know, the most powerful force within us, is the desire to give. And society has generally recognized that, so that if people want to give more than anything else, then the greatest punishment, you could inflict on somebody is to prohibit them from giving their gifts.

And we have institutionalized that - a place where you get food. You get shelter. Where you're dressed. But you can't give your gift. The name of it is Prison.

So, if we recognize that the worst thing we can do, is to deny your giving of your gift. Then, the most important thing is that we connect people, so that their gift can be given. There's a memorial dimension, a moral dimension, to being able to give your gift. Because in the Bible it says 'it is more blessed to give than to receive.'

So in a charitable world that wants to give to the 'lessers'~ the people who get the blessing, aren't the Lessers. It's the Givers.

So the connections that we mean by inclusion, are those connections that say, 'those who have been denied the opportunity to give their gifts, will now, come among us. Right? So, what Pat understood

was that you have to be connected. So you can have the joy of giving your gift and be blessed at the same time.

So three memories. Three great books on the shelves of our lives.

- All means all.
- We must be present.
- We must be connected.

These are the great memories, Marsha, Judith and Pat have given us.

Now, they're in the library of our lives. And you know, each of these books ends with the same words.

And the last line is always. "Come fly with me. Come Fly with me.

Open the window. Let's Go.

And look down there. Let's go there. Oh, the Toronto Summer Institute.

What a joy.

Welcome!