

The alchemy of vulnerability and care

by Vickie Cammack

My godmother Martha was a feisty Lancashire lass who drove ambulances for the air force in the Second World War. In the early 1950s, she left the U.K. in a huff, disgusted at how veterans like herself were being treated, and made the big move to Canada on her own. Martha was tough, opinionated, exacting in her standards, and known for the dry wit she delivered with a twinkle in her eye.

In her 80s, she had become frail and brittle, living in a care home. She sat motionless in her chair, her short shock of white hair combed back with a pouf at the front, and a pair of wraparound sunglasses kept the whispery shadows she still saw to a minimum.

As I bent over to give her a hug, I said, “Gee, Martha, you look pretty cool with your shades and slicked back hair.”

Martha replied in her lingering Lancashire accent, “Oh, yes the aids have been telling me I look like Elvis. But I told them there is only one difference between me and Elvis.”

“What’s that, Martha?”

“I’m not dead yet.”

Of course I laughed. But I knew Martha was right to remind the world she wasn’t dead yet. In a society obsessed with material goods, speed, and productivity, Martha had to fight to be seen as relevant. But would the world be better off without her? I think not. You see, before she left this world, Martha’s impairments, vulnerability, and stubbornness had been catalysts for kindness to blossom in the neighbourhood where she lived.

Before entering the nursing home, Martha had lived alone in a two storey home. She couldn’t get down the stairs, so she was confined to the top floor unless she was carried out to an ambulance. It seemed obvious to everyone that Martha should move. But Martha’s infamous pride and stubbornness took on mythical proportions on this matter.

Between her brusque manner and lack of gratitude for support, it would have been understandable if her

neighbours washed their hands of her.

But they didn’t. Instead, they brought her books and sweets. They kept an eye out. They brought over turkey on holidays, even though Martha insisted she could have done a better job of roasting it herself. They organized get-togethers at Martha’s house, and over time, they got to know each other. Now when they bumped into each other they always had something to talk about – another Martha story, a shared chuckle at one of her jokes, or worries about her health. While they often cursed her stubborn and demanding nature, they rarely failed to acknowledge how inspired they were by her spirit and feistiness. As her challenges grew over the years so did the relationships among her neighbours.

Martha transformed her street into a neighbourhood. Because of Martha, her neighbours became patient and inventive. Because of her cantankerous spirit her neighbours became hospitable and gracious. Because of her humour they understood the true meaning of resilience. Because of her stubbornness they entered her home and each other’s lives.

We need people like Martha, even those who are difficult and prickly. They are alchemists transmuting vulnerabilities into the potent force of caring. Our collective vulnerabilities are seeds that grow care. They are elixirs, converting every day actions into beauty and tenderness.

Vickie Cammack is a social entrepreneur, a Tamarack thought leader, and the founding director of Tyze Personal Networks. //

Martha was tough, opinionated, exacting in her standards, and known for her dry wit.