

FOREWORD BY THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE

Authors of the international bestseller *Leadership and Self-Deception*



the shift

How Seeing
People **as People**
Changes Everything

Kimberly White

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Praise for *The Shift*

"The Shift is a transformative book—a rare view of the defining element of corporate culture, the heart of mankind. It shares what executives most need to learn, first about *living*, then about *leading*. It thoroughly inspired, touched, and taught me."

—Roy E. Christensen, founder and former President and Chairman, Beverly Enterprises, and Chairman, The Ensign Group

"I work in a high-tech industry and yet I've never encountered a book that was more relevant to my work. It is a beautiful expression of Arbinger principles—displayed in the most profound dimensions of life—and its effect is truly like magic. *The Shift* is simultaneously inspiring, touching, and profound. I don't know anyone who wouldn't be deeply taught—and moved—by the remarkable journey found in this book. Few books are truly 'must-read,' but *The Shift* is absolutely one of them."

—Kimberly Koro, Senior Vice President, Qualcomm Technologies

"This is truly a rare book. On page after page we encounter people living the way we all know we should but often don't. Who could have known it would be so inspiring—and so thoroughly humbling—to enter the lives of such people? The effect is transforming. As we meet these ordinary people we finally know whom we want to be like: we want to be like them. I don't see how I can be the same team member, leader, or person after encountering this book. A complete inspiration to read and genuinely mind-changing."

—Laura Hart, Vice President, Business Operations, Qualcomm Technologies

"The Shift is compelling and delightful; it is easy to read and brings to mind so many memories, so many real-life situations that I could identify with—not just nursing home situations but ones in my daily life as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, friend, employee."

—Stacy Parkinson, SNF owner, attorney, and former First Lady of Kansas

“Delightful. Inspiring. Humbling. *The Shift* will remind you that no matter your profession or life pursuits, we all interact with other people and must learn how to work together. The principles contained herein, if applied and practiced, will transform and enrich relationships and lead to a greater sense of satisfaction. This book belongs on the shelf alongside all the great business and self-improvement works of our time. It has changed the way I approach my colleagues and clients and helped instill in me a greater purpose for what I do every day. Read the book. Make the shift. Reap the benefits.”

—**Darren Henderson, Founding Partner, Corient Capital Partners, LLC**

“After decades as a SNF executive, I found *The Shift* to be a wonderful and delightful book that should be required reading, not just for the leadership team, but for every CNA, nurse, housekeeper, social worker, and recreation therapist. Learning to see our residents, fellow employees, and family members as real people with real worth, instead of charges, problems, or duties, will change both their lives *and* ours. Thank you for an important and refreshing look at a calling worthy of our full hearts.”

—**Todd Hansen, SNF administrator and former state health-care association president**

“*The Shift* awakened me. It touched my heart and soul. The author shares countless intimate glimpses into personal acts of tenderness and nobility that are enormously and profoundly moving. A rare and extremely fulfilling read.”

—**Nanci Wilson, Chief Clinical Officer, Plum Healthcare Group**

The Shift

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The Shift

HOW SEEING PEOPLE AS PEOPLE
CHANGES EVERYTHING

Kimberly White



BK[®]

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
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The Shift

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For Zachary
*my best friend, my favorite comic,
the smartest guy in every room,
with thanks for letting me drag him into this*

For Mark and Paul
who saw it all before I did

and

For Terry
who saw it before anyone

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Foreword

THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE

Authors of *Leadership and Self-Deception*, *The Anatomy of Peace*, and *The Outward Mindset*

Two years ago, an executive from a healthcare client of ours called to tell us that the executives were thinking of commissioning someone to write a book about their company. They wanted to know whether we would allow them to share some of the Arbinger Institute's ideas. They were asking because, in their view, their story cannot be told without talking about Arbinger since they built their company, in large part, through the process of applying Arbinger's ideas to healthcare.

Beyond our early thumbs up, we have played no role in the writing or production of this book. In fact, we heard very little about the project until Kimberly White reached out to us eighteen months later with a near-completed manuscript.

Upon reading the manuscript, we were reminded again that although the people in this organization have been our clients and friends for years, they have also been our teachers. They have built an amazing company that enriches millions of lives—the lives of the elderly, the infirm, the injured, and the family members of all those they serve. They do this perhaps better than those in any other organization of its kind.

At the heart of their success lies this insight: to be great at caregiving, *you have to actually care*. Behavioral strategies designed to demonstrate care, which have become increasingly popular as healthcare reimbursements have become tied to customer satisfaction scores, aren't enough. No matter how many

training dollars an organization puts toward trying to improve the behaviors of its people, there is no way around the stubborn truth that real care begins only with real caring. Other people can tell whether the care we are showing is real and heartfelt or manufactured and fake—our patients can tell, our coworkers can tell, and our family members can tell. Try as we might, we can't hide the truth.

So it isn't enough to modify people's behaviors. The change that is most needed is a change in how we see—how we see others, ourselves, and our obligations relative to one another. This realm of how we see is the realm that we call *mindset*. In over three decades of working with clients in healthcare and many other industries, we have learned that efforts to change both mindset and behavior yield dramatically better results than efforts to change behavior alone.

The genius of the company you will encounter in this book is that by focusing on mindset change as well as behavior change, from top to bottom, it has established a program and culture that produces real, actual, heartfelt caring. And the value of this book is that it manages to capture that caring in such a way that it seeps from every page into the reader's heart.

Kimberly White engaged on a personal journey as much as a professional one when she threw herself into learning what makes this particular company tick. The nurses and aides and janitors who opened her eyes to how they care in their jobs also opened her heart to how she had been failing to care in her own life and how that reality was the cause of so much of the pain, despair, and anguish that she had been blaming on others.

Studying the transformative work of this particular company changed Kimberly's life. Reading how and why that happened may change yours.

The Arbinger Institute
November 21, 2017

Preface

This book was a complete surprise to me. Everything about it—from what I learned in researching it to how it changed my personal life to even its subject matter—is different from what I ever imagined when I started.

Let me explain. I was hired to write a book about a particular healthcare company that owns nursing homes. Now, don't be hasty and put this down just because I said "nursing homes." Give me a chance to explain. I promise it gets interesting.

When I started, I had only the vaguest idea of what the healthcare company did. What I did know, from my father, who worked there at the time, was that its philosophy and management practices were fascinating and unique. Those who worked at the company were profoundly, almost nuttily, devoted to the idea of seeing people—all people—in the truest and deepest sense as real people. For example, the executive team thought of themselves so completely as a team that they didn't take individual bonuses but *shared* one. I also knew that the two co-CEOs were not the highest paid people in the company and that, because of a profit-sharing plan at the local level, most of the middle executives actually took a pay cut to move "up." (And by the way, if you're wondering if it's unusual for a company to have two CEOs: yes. Yes, it is.)

This is intriguing stuff. So I approached the CEOs of this company with the idea of writing a book about the kinds of things they did and the decisions they made at the company

level. They were delighted with the prospect of a book that would share what they had learned in their company, but they were uncomfortable with anything that smelled to them like self-promotion. “We know what kind of book we *don’t* want it to be,” they told me: not a self-congratulatory puff piece, not a whitewash, not a promotional tool.

But what did they want? A history? A case study? A philosophical exploration? They just shrugged. They’d never written a book; they’d let me figure it out, which was fine because I had already mapped out the sort of case study/leadership theory this situation called for. And I thought (mistakenly, it turned out) my primary task would be shadowing the executive team.

But I couldn’t get in to see them. There were delays as they canceled meetings to handle crises of various kinds (spoiler alert: the nursing home industry is not actually boring), and what with one thing and another, our initial meeting kept getting postponed. Finally, one of them suggested that, in the meantime, I should go visit some of their facilities to see what the company does from the ground up anyway. “Wear scrubs,” he told me.

Wear scrubs?

That was a surprise. I couldn’t see why I, an independent, objective observer there to learn about management theory, ought to get down and dirty enough to have to wear scrubs in a nursing home. Doing this was unlikely to help me at all with the philosophical book I was envisioning. Management is management and leadership is leadership. But a job is also a job, so I bought some scrubs.

Like most of us would be, that first day I was put off by the look and smell and unfamiliarity. I chose to start by shadowing the nurse who treated wounds, since checking surgical stitches and bedsores on feet seemed preferable to engaging with the residents literally face to face. This nurse’s name was Lauren,

and she was another surprise. She was happy, she was effusive about the joys of her job, and she *loved* her patients and told me all about each one as I followed her around. Then I went to the physical therapy room and met more happy, fulfilled people who couldn't stop telling me how much they loved working with the elderly. Then I followed a nursing assistant who thought she had the perfect job.

I visited three facilities that first week, and surprises like those just piled on. I started asking these line staff, "What's the best and worst part of your job?" and couldn't believe their answers. I watched them for hours and saw for the first time what *tireless affection* meant. I saw deep devotion and great humor in places I'd never expected them. I saw happiness and belonging and meaning all gorgeously combined with some of the most physically and emotionally demanding jobs in the country. I discovered that the people who worked in this industry were better than me.

Over the course of eight months, I experienced a profound shift as I watched and talked with these people—a tectonic, life-changing shift into an entirely different way of being a person and experiencing others. The things I learned from Lauren and others like her transformed not only my marriage but my relationship to my children and my view of my *self* and my own life. The difference was dramatic and staggering. For example, when I started researching this company, I desperately wanted to get a divorce. By the time I finished my research, I was happily married.

Yup—to the same guy.

Months later, I met with the CEOs and told them I knew what kind of book I wanted to write. I wanted to write about the tremendous, unexpected change that had come into my personal life as a direct result of the time I had spent in nursing homes. I wanted to write about the staff members I had

met who saw others as people, no matter how grumpy or old or frail or compromised by dementia those patients were, and how much joy they found in helping those who could not help themselves. I wanted to express my love for those who lived long, vibrant lives full of meaning and experience and whose opinions and thoughts and wisdom and value were not diminished by the slowing of their bodies. I wanted to express how I discovered that everything about the way I had been seeing the world was wrong and how I came to see it truthfully. I wanted to write something that would give others the same experience I had: a shift to a way of seeing and living with others that opens up the potential for true appreciation, love, and joy.

The CEOs were ecstatic; in a lovely parallel to my own experience, this is what they'd been looking for without even knowing it. In the end, we decided to not even name the company in this book; it's not so much about what any one company does but about what any company—or team or group or family or individual—*can do* with the power of seeing people as people. And this anonymity allows us to focus on the semi-independent individual facilities and staff, because the shift I experienced is available to anyone, whether or not the executive leadership team shares a bonus. So here we are. I started out aiming to write a leadership case study and ended up writing about how direct care workers in individual nursing homes show how to see people as people. Surprise!

The Shift is for all those who are trying to improve their relationships and who are willing to start seeing people as people. I can tell you right now it's not going to go the way you expect. Really, it's not. But I'll be there right to the last page; I'm making the shift myself, and I'll walk you through it.

The founding ideas of this healthcare company come from the Arbinger Institute, a worldwide management consulting

company. Those who are already familiar with the Arbingers ideas will recognize the two ways of seeing people and the transformative moment I call *the shift*, but you will see them in a compelling new environment. You will find dozens of true stories, including the details of my change and one company's way of operationalizing the Arbingers ideas, that add further support for the power of this approach.

The book is also for those who are not familiar with Arbingers; it is my true story and is written to stand on its own. You don't need any prior knowledge or background, merely a willingness to engage with your own life in a new way.

And it's also for anyone who works in this astonishing industry of caring for the elderly. In this book you will find validation, appreciation, and admiration for the work you do. I hope you can use it to share the joy of the industry with others who don't understand the importance of your work or are dismissive of you for choosing geriatric care. You are my heroes.

All the stories in this book come from my personal experience with the company, and all of them are true according to my notes and my best recollection. Some of the stories are events I witnessed or participated in, and some were told to me. These last are included only when I could verify the events with an actual participant. Quotations are always just that, direct quotations, and not paraphrases (unless I so indicate). All the people in the company are real and described accurately, but all names have been changed—not just to maintain the anonymity of the company but to protect the privacy of the residents. Names of individual facilities have been changed for the same reasons. My descriptions of people and events in the nursing homes and offices are accurate to the best of my memory and according to the notes I took in the moment. If there are inaccuracies and errors, they are mine and mine alone.

I slightly altered some details of my own personal life for brevity (some issues were more complicated than I could fully describe here) and for the privacy of my husband and children. However, the substance of our issues, and my emotions and private thoughts as I dealt with them, are all unflinchingly and embarrassingly accurate.

Authors always say they “couldn’t have done it” without the help of some list of people, and in my case that is literally true. The stories here belong to those I met, watched, or heard about in the halls of nursing homes. They transformed my life; I owe them my happiness. We all owe them this book.

Kimberly White
March 2018

1 *The Shift and Why It Matters*

There may be places in the world that are more obscure and isolated than Blanding, Utah, but I'll bet it's on the short list. It's a very nice town—it doesn't have that aura of hopelessness you get from small towns in decline. It's just small and far away from almost everything. It's located where the four least populous corners of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah meet. They meet there, but they haven't done much with the place. The town does get some tourism from nearby Moab and the Navajo and Ute reservations, although in this part of the country, *nearby* means not too much more than an hour's drive. I may well be the only person who ever went there just to visit its nursing home.

I was visiting the nursing home as part of a larger research project on its supporting company, a healthcare group based in California. The CEOs agreed to keep the company anonymous to avoid the odor of self-promotion and for other reasons mentioned in the preface.¹ Here I will call it Healthcare Group, or HG. HG was founded on the ideas of the Arbinger Institute, a management consulting company. Arbinger promotes a unique leadership philosophy based on the singular importance of seeing people as true and valuable people in the fullest sense.

As part of its commitment to this philosophy, HG views its “rank and file” as no less capable than managers or executives,

with all kinds of reasons for choosing their careers. Maybe they didn't want to do office work, loved working with people, felt called to healthcare, or simply didn't speak English well enough for executive work. None of those reasons for working on the ground floor of nursing homes (or hospitals, restaurants, shops, or whatever) makes these people any less capable of making good decisions, and their proximity to the residents makes them more responsive to immediate needs. So this company's leaders try to mandate as little as possible from the executive level and instead, as they put it, "locate responsibility where it belongs"—with the staff members doing the actual work. They assume their people are competent and insightful and let them shine. This approach has worked: the company has been extremely successful in providing consistently excellent care and has an outstanding reputation in its industry.²

I spent most of my research time in California, in San Diego and Los Angeles and Sacramento, where HG's support center and most of its facilities are based. How I ended up in Blanding, I hardly knew. One of HG's middle executives, a man named Jeremy, talked me into it while showing me around some other nursing homes—more properly called *skilled nursing facilities*, or SNFs. (People really do pronounce it “sniffs.”) Jeremy is a young man with dark eyes and hair and the quick, energetically earnest manner of a motivational speaker or Zumba instructor. When I protested that I didn't have room in my research schedule to travel to and from Blanding, he merely called my bluff and rearranged my schedule for me (including half a day for exploring Arches National Park) with the air of someone handing me a valuable gift. So I went, comforting myself that if it was a waste of time, at least I could get revenge by complaining about Jeremy in the book.

He's off the hook, though. Jeremy was right; the payoff was more than worth the trouble. As a tourist site, the Four Corners

area is pretty incredible, and Arches at sunset will make you want to quit your job and take up poetry. The images you've probably seen in calendars and in Western movie backdrops do not capture the stunning wildness of the reality. I'd lived most of my adult life in Manhattan, and this vast red rock desert had none of what passed for value in that glass-and-steel cage. Quiet and wild and ancient, the striped hills loomed over the meandering highway in judgment of the shallow instantaneity of modern life. At long intervals there would arise from the ground a massive red stone arch or obelisk carved by wind and rain long ago, when Manhattan and Los Angeles were swamp-lands. It was humbling to spend the afternoon in the presence of such towering antiquity.

What the Shift Looks Like

I arrived at the nursing home early the next morning. As I passed through the standard institutional glass doors and headed down the nondescript institutional hallway, I assumed the astonishing and humbling part of my trip was over. Little did I know.

In the hallway, a worker was using a large floor polishing machine to remove tape residue from the floor. No one else was around, so I paused and began to ask him questions over the roar of the machine. After a few minutes he finally turned it off and leaned against the wall to talk. "I didn't mean to interrupt your work," I apologized, but he shrugged me off. He wanted to talk, not with the air of getting out of work, but like nothing else he could be doing was more important than helping me.

His name was Jason. He looked to be about my age, but he had a gaunt, weathered aspect that may have meant he was younger than I but worn out. His clothes were dark and clean, his manner diffident but friendly. His primary job was running the floor machine. It was run every day in all the hallways and

large rooms, and that's what he was paid for; that was his entire shift, all day, every day.

But here's what I learned about Jason from talking to others who work with him: He does more than he's strictly paid for. He knows every single last resident of the facility. Every day Jason can be seen pushing wheelchairs to and from dining and activities or carrying blankets to an old lady who caught a chill or filling a water jug for an old man who can't fill it himself. None of these tasks are technically his job, but they are part of the job to him.

Jason told me that all his friends, who all had similarly low-skilled jobs, lived their lives for the weekend; they went to work mainly so they could party and relax from Friday night to Sunday. But for him it was the opposite: the weekend was the space he had to fill before he could get back to work. He looked forward to Mondays the way other people look forward to Friday night, with excitement and anticipation and impatience. This job was his lifeline, his center, how he filled the empty yearning places of his heart.

This is an experience we all long for, isn't it? A work environment we look forward to going back to with excitement instead of dread is the holy grail of modern life. And when we are dissatisfied with our work, all the books and bloggers urge us to find another job or devote our time to other tasks, on the assumption that some particular as-yet-unknown activity will enliven us and we just have to find it. But this man doesn't have a better set of tasks than his friends; he's not getting fame or riches or even necessarily upward career mobility. He cleans the floors. Specifically, he cleans the floors *in a nursing home*. Yet he's happier and more fulfilled than so many of us. So what gives?

"This is my family," he explained. This nursing home, the residents he's grown to know so well, the other long-term

employees with their friendliness and appreciation, the endless opportunities to help someone in need—they have formed the family he otherwise lacks. He comes to work to be home.

This obscure man, working in an unglamorous job in an unglamorous facility in a small town nobody's ever heard of, is happier, more energized, and more fulfilled at work than literally anyone I ever met in Manhattan. He tirelessly devotes his energies to caring for the old and infirm and to supporting his coworkers. You might describe him, dismissively, as just a bachelor in a dead-end job, but if you did so you would be utterly blind to the impact his kindnesses and depth of feeling have on the people around him. I was feeling pretty cool to be a Manhattanite taking research trips to Los Angeles, and I discovered something in that (very clean) hallway: it is humbling to be in the presence of such towering goodness.

The story of Jason stands in pretty perfectly for the highest aspirations of HG and its distinctive philosophy: to try to create in each nursing home an environment where the staff see one another and their residents as people in the truest, deepest sense. When that happens, the housekeepers and maintenance workers, the nurses and nurse's aides on every shift, the business office and medical records personnel, the facility's administrator and director of nursing, the aged residents in every room—all the people who spend their days and nights together in that facility—come together to form an environment that feels like family.

I don't mean the griping, infighting sort of family either. I'm talking about the good kind of family, where everyone has a voice, everyone has a place, and everyone yearns to come home for the holidays. Phil, one of the founders of HG, described this as "the rich, sweet humanity we all long for"—a place where people are kind and mutually helpful and forgiving and they work hard for one another.

HG works to build this kind of environment by trying to help its employees shift from the typical ways of seeing and engaging with others to a way of seeing others that takes their full humanity into account. This shift changes everything—from how we see and judge what others are doing to how we see ourselves and even to how others respond to us.

It's not obvious to most of us that this kind of shift is needed or possible or so profoundly transformational; it wasn't obvious to me when I started. But I saw environments that felt like family to the people in them; I met people who saw others as true people and loved them and brought out the best in them. In fact, I saw many such places and met many such people, and this book will tell their stories. The experiences I had with them led to my own profound shift, which made it possible for me to feel this "rich, sweet humanity" in my own home and my own marriage. I cannot overstate the effect of the shift on my own life: indeed, the whole world changed when I did.

Now let's be clear: not everything HG does as a company is right, not every facility achieves that family atmosphere, and not every employee is as happy as Jason. If you wander at random in an HG nursing home, you cannot expect that everyone in it (or even anyone in it) will be devoted to his or her coworkers and residents and living this joyful way. The facilities aren't all equally good and the employees aren't all equally devoted. But for our purposes, even if perfection were possible, it wouldn't be the point. What matters, what changed my life, was seeing that this way of living was even *possible*—and that it was possible for everyone. Seeing people as true people and engaging with them this way does not require any particular type of personality, any particular education level, any particular kind of job. Anyone, however shy or gruff or awkward, doing any work, however maligned or physically demanding, can interact with others in a way that truly honors them—or not.

One final caveat: even at our best, we humans are only human. In one facility, the certified nursing assistants, or CNAs (*nurse's aides*, we used to call them—the ones who do most of the dirty work of moving and cleaning and showering and changing the residents) were unhappy and griping. Not all of them but a substantial minority complained to me that they were frustrated because other employees frequently took days off and left these CNAs, who couldn't afford to take a day off, shorthanded. When they were shorthanded, they didn't have time to spend with the residents, whom they loved and who gave meaning to their work. They'd built up a lot of resentment.

Later that day I met their supervisor, a woman named Francie with a gruff face but, it became apparent, a gentle heart. I asked about her team of CNAs, and she told me feelingly how hardworking and fabulous they were and how much she loved and appreciated them. So I asked her how she demonstrated her appreciation, and she answered proudly that she always let them take days off, anytime they wanted, without giving them flack.

So there Francie was, genuinely trying to honor her staff and unwittingly contributing to the very problem that made their job hard. It's kind of funny but heart-wrenching at the same time. Nobody was being a jerk, everybody was trying to do good work and care for others, and yet it had all gone sideways.

People are people; our capacity for making mistakes is as infinite as our capacity for greatness. Nothing I say in this book will guarantee perfection or anything close to it. But the lessons matter anyway because even when things do go sideways, as they will, sideways is better in a place where everybody is trying to do good work and care for others, where good intentions have misfired, than in a place where it's every man for himself. So what we will see is not perfection but something far

better than that: ordinary people forgetting themselves in helping other ordinary people.

Can It Work for You?

Of course, I know what you're thinking: This is all very lovely, what a pleasant idea, but it could never work in *my* industry/company/office/family, not in the real world, not with the struggles I face. That's certainly what I thought when I started this book.

I don't like the term *midlife crisis*—it's so overused and generic—but a person without that prejudice might well have used the phrase to describe me at that time. My husband, Zach, had just lost his business and left us with debt and nothing else to show for it except the need to leave our home of eleven years. I didn't blame him, not exactly, but I hated the way he acted about the whole situation and hated his apparent lack of appreciation for the sacrifices I'd made. We fought interminably and with intensity. We had money problems. We had recently had a surprise baby whose timing meant that I had to see the words "advanced maternal age" printed all over my prenatal paperwork and whose arrival stopped me from pursuing the freedom of divorce. Our eldest child, barely an adult, dropped out of high school and chose to stay behind in New York when the rest of the family moved to Illinois, a fact that I *know* you just judged me for. It seemed that every aspect of my life was tainted by failure and misery. No sweet-sounding phrases or motivational posters of red rocks could change the dispiriting circumstances of my life.

But my life did change. It changed immeasurably, for the better, without any meaningful change in my circumstances. It changed unexpectedly in deep and messy and wrenching ways that weren't always welcome. So when I describe the tremendous shift in perception and relationships that occurs when we

stop seeing people as objects and start seeing them as people, it might all sound a little bit too nicely packaged and optimistic and theoretical. It's not going to happen quite the way you expect, if your experience is anything like mine; the shift comes unintuitively. But we'll learn about it and see how spending time in facilities like the one in Blanding and meeting people like Jason shifted me.

We will come to understand that seeing people as people is not about sweet, inspiring phrases and empty words of manipulative appreciation. It's about the reality of living and working with human beings in all their glory and in all their ugliness and *seeing* what's true about them. It's about grunt work and paperwork and the day-to-day running of a business, an office, a home. The following chapters will contain more than one story about cleaning up feces; there's nothing soft or shallow or empty about what HG is trying to do. Its operating philosophy cannot be disentangled from the solid, blunt difficulty of being an imperfect person surrounded by imperfect people. And it focuses on creating a shift from seeing people as objects to seeing them as people, a shift so profound it changes everything.

Seeing people as people is an idea so simple you'll swear you've heard it before but so profound you'll never stop learning from it. It's an idea that looms over all the book-of-the-month trends and piecemeal fixes for unhappiness like a red stone tower in the sandy desert, an idea that opens up the possibility that your life and work, even if they started out as depressing as mine, can be full of love and joy.

This book is written to show how living in a way that honors people changes everything for the better—from efficiency and productivity to meaningfulness and purpose. It shows how to begin seeing others truly and how to keep doing it. And all of this plays out in the unlikeliest of places, with the most forgotten people in the most despised lawful industry in America.

If you're willing to rearrange your schedule and join me there, the payoff will be worth it.

2 *Missing the Gorilla*

WHY WE SEE PEOPLE AS OBJECTS

I returned home from my third research trip with tremendous reluctance; I knew what I was going back to, and I didn't think I could face it again. I sat in the car, looking at our tiny apartment through a dreary, unenthusiastic rain. I did not want to go in to my unappreciative, feckless husband or my quarrelsome children, who whined and complained through the homework and chores I had to make them do. I did not want to go in and pretend that I was happy to be home, when in reality I had been far happier away.

The simple truth is that I was miserable at home. Miserable and disappointed and trapped in a way that I think is familiar to many people: I felt oppressed and restricted because I was surrounded by people who, one way or another, had let me down. Acknowledging this feeling is important because it is precisely what we want to shift out of.

For me, it wasn't that I didn't love my family—all of them. It was just that I didn't feel happy around them. I felt burdened and overwhelmed. And I realized, sitting there, that much of the burden came from the feeling that I was under a microscope. If I got cranky (because I saw how much laundry had piled up or my flight got in very late) and snapped at my husband, he would immediately fight back with something hurtful. If I raised my voice at my son who *never* put his dishes away, he

would roll his eyes scornfully and say “Don’t freak out,” and no one would take my side.

Spending so many hours in nursing homes had shown me such a friendly, vibrant way of living that my slow, dreary home life stood out in sharp relief. A group of people working together to help others, I learned, creates an atmosphere of vitalizing contentment you could wear like a soft hug. In one facility, a social services director was having trouble with patients not being ready for outside appointments, and in a staff meeting the facility management director volunteered to have *his* housekeeping staff handle reminders since the “nurses are always so busy.” Administrators walking me through their facilities would quietly pick up dropped candy wrappers from the hall and throw them away without recrimination. I entered a small office where staff members had written “We love you!” “Melinda is the best!” all over Melinda’s whiteboard. In hours and hours of observation, the most common type of conflict I had witnessed was two or more staff members each insisting that the other was the best/kindest/most devoted.

Out among these people, I felt as though I were basking in a warm glow. Returning home was like falling back into a desolate chill. And I felt the difference to the bone after this latest trip because I had just encountered the apotheosis of all I was missing in the form of a single person.

The Doug Coulson Problem

Doug Coulson is a human resources (HR) executive at HG and a man who will remind you of Santa Claus. He lacks the long white beard (to be perfectly honest, there’s a pretty thorough lack of hair), but he is comfortably round and kind looking in the way we imagine Santa Claus physically, which is very handy for the purposes of describing him in a book. He speaks clearly and steadily without pauses or ums and with deep

intelligence and infectious passion. He also, in some magical fashion, makes you feel the same way you imagine you'd feel in the presence of Santa Claus: important and beloved. You feel like a little kid with a man whose whole life has been devoted to loving little kids and deciding they've been good.

He told me he had worked as an executive in another nursing home business whose culture was significantly driven by fear—fear of being fired, fear of being yelled at. Like so many good people, he felt he had no choice but to adopt the currency of fear to survive. He was still trying to get rid of bad habits he picked up in those days, he told me, though I found it hard to imagine. He also said he had been aware of the peculiar ethos of the company I'm calling HG. "I saw it from afar," Doug said with his warm-butter voice, "and I yearned to be a part of it."

He had, of course, suspected that all the HG stuff might be too good to be true. "When I first came to [HG] I thought, 'Can we really achieve the kinds of results we need to achieve while running a business like this?' And honestly, I was just waiting. I was just waiting, like: 'Well, it's month three. Nobody's yelled in three months. When are [chief executives] Phil and Matt going to come in and just start screaming?'"

"I slowly but surely realized there's a much better way," Doug went on, "and this is it." I asked him what one thing he thought I needed to know to understand HG, and he said, "The thing that I need for you to know is that I love Matt and Phil so much that I would do anything for them. And that's the key. . . . When I was on the executive team, we loved each other so much, we cared for each other in such a way that there was an incredible amount of unity, an incredible amount of satisfaction just from being together and working on issues. So for me the key to HG is all love." This is not, by the way, language that all of us can use in our offices—I get that.¹ But if you replace *love* with *respect*, *admire*, *trust*, or another word more suited to

your own environment, you'll see that Doug is describing what would be, to most of us, an ideal working environment, with teamwork and mutual support and safety.

To many of the other administrators in HG today, Doug Coulson is the personification of the entire project of running a company by seeing people as people. One of his newest hires put her finger on the heart of why: "He looks at you," she told me, "like you can do no wrong."

It was like a knife in my heart to realize, sitting uselessly in that cold car on that wet, dark night, that I had no Doug Coulson in my life. I was on no team of people working together and loving one another. Nobody ever looked at me like I could do no wrong. Other people had that—all the people at HG had that—and *I* did not. My husband seemed to look at me like I could *only* do wrong.

And it was too late to do anything about it. I'd always tried to do the right thing, but something had gone wrong; my husband had changed, and I was stuck with the new him. This dark dreariness was just the reality for me, the long, endless years stretching away through a dismal fog that couldn't even rain properly. Researching HG had only made things worse. I had caught a glimpse of a better life, I yearned for it, but because of the marriage and family I was stuck in, I could not have it.

I sat in my car for as long as I could justify it, dreading going inside, the condensing fog soaking me with the knowledge that no one in my life looked at me like Doug Coulson did.

What's most amazing, as I now look back on that evening, is how desperately, blindly, tragically wrong I was about everything I was thinking and feeling in that car. It's not that I wasn't miserable—I most definitely was—but I was wrong about why and about whom to blame, and whether I needed a Doug Coulson, and I was completely wrong about the impossibility of

ever having a vibrant, happy life. In fact, I was wrong in almost every conceivable way—Mrs. Wrongetta McWrong. The fact is, I have a great life now, alongside the very same people with whom I was once miserable, even though I’ve never seen Doug again. I had a tremendous shift, and from my new vantage point, I realized that the feeling that I was trapped by the personalities of others was a delusion.

Later in this book we’ll see exactly how a person like me can experience clarity, healing, and wonder and how it all arises from a shift toward truly seeing people as people. But first, I need to tackle the objection you have been too polite to raise until now: Of course I see people as people, you’ve been thinking. How else could I see them?

Good question. To understand the answer, we need to don some intellectual hard hats and take a short tour of the philosophical substructure at play here.

Warner, Arbinger, and HG

The HG approach to business has its roots in, of all things, academic philosophy. The first and principal stop on our tour, in fact, is at the desk of emeritus professor of philosophy and Arbinger Institute founder C. Terry Warner. Warner looks and acts exactly the way you might imagine he does. Just picture a philosophy professor, and—that’s right, you’ve got it. He looks exactly the way a thinker of deep thoughts ought to look. His hair is gray, his face is deeply lined with introspection, his voice is low and smooth and authoritative, his home office is literally covered with books he has actually read. He always has the air of being in the middle of discovering something new and weighty and exciting, as though every thought is a miracle.

In his three decades of scholarly life, Warner relentlessly pursued a set of questions about our deepest motivations as human beings. His answers grew into a distinctive and comprehensive

account of human behavior and emotion that is at once provocative and inspiring. We can't do it justice here, but I urge you to read Warner's *Bonds That Make Us Free* and the Aringer Institute's *Leadership and Self-Deception*;² the payoff is worth it.

In the meantime, the key point for our purposes is this: sometimes we go around in life seeing other people as though they were objects, set out for our use or put in our way, and whether we find them annoying or distracting or helpful, it is without concern for or interest in their unique internal lives. We recognize them intellectually as people, of course, but we don't value them for their humanity as such. We value them the same way we value objects—only insofar as they are useful or troublesome to our own interests.

A chair, for example, is an object. The way I think of it can take many forms—maybe I love it because it was handed down from my grandmother or resent it because it was a gift I don't like but can't get rid of, maybe it's comfortable, maybe it's just for show, maybe I have to treat it delicately, or maybe it's so sturdy I can stand on it to hang curtains. Whatever the case, I don't worry about whether it feels pain, has opinions, or is being used the way it wants to be. I paint it or reupholster it or throw it out depending on what I want or need. It won't dust itself, tighten its screws, fluff its seat cushion, or do anything at all to change itself; if it's broken, I have to fix it.

We all too often see other people in an analogous way—as functional or decorative items to be used, ignored, or enjoyed without giving any thought to their experiences, preferences, sufferings, or desires. We also see them as static: they won't change or improve without our help and input. And if we don't like them, we see them as needing to be fixed.

Seeing others in this one-dimensional, shallow way happens to the extent we are self-absorbed, caught up entirely in our own plans and interests. When my own concerns are taking up

all the energy of my mind, the people around me matter to me only to the extent they impact those self-directed concerns. In this frame of mind, since I leave no room for their inner experience to call to me, I see others not as people but as *objects*, as *though they have no inner experience at all*. As human bodies they may be helpful to me or amusing or troublesome or no use whatsoever. They are in this way only as real to me as any other object in the physical world, and I care about them the same way I care about those objects; they may in fact be very important to me in *function*, but their own infinite personhood never crosses my mind. I don't think about their perspectives or their troubles, I don't wonder why they see things the way they do, and I don't feel motivated to help them (except maybe to further my own interests). Seeing them with my distracted heart as human-shaped objects, I cannot help but treat them as though they were human-shaped objects.

But of course, the people around you and me are *not* objects! They are people, with their own histories, fears, hopes, loves, wishes, dreams, and disappointments. They are as real—as astonishingly, unfathomably, breathtakingly, humanly *real*—as I am. They have their own backstories and struggles and their own perfectly legitimate way of seeing things that will certainly, unpredictably, differ from my own. They are, in a very real sense, infinite: the thoughts and perceptions and experiences of life that comprise their inner world number in the *billions*, and no one else can ever completely comprehend their complexity.

Even if I devoted twenty years to learning another person's history, experiences, thoughts, dreams, wishes, and disappointments, by the time I was done, he or she would have lived a further twenty years and I would be behind again. The richness of another human life is utterly and magnificently unknowable.

Seeing people as people means not just seeing, physically, their human shape but looking deliberately into this infinite

and unknowable depth to acknowledge that others are every bit as human and valuable as I am. When I do this, I cannot help but also see them as worthy of my attention. I am alive to their inner experience (or my best guess about their inner experience)—what they need, how they’re seeing the situation—and my understanding of their humanity calls me to help them or mourn with them or joy with them if I can. Their thoughts and opinions matter to me because I understand that their experiences are every bit as authentic and significant as mine. I may not necessarily agree with them or enjoy them or even like them, but I see their perspective as legitimate and their unique life experience as equal in value to my own.

By contrast, when I am seeing them as insignificant or predictable or flattened, as puppets or objects, I am fundamentally mistaken about them. Seeing people as though they were objects is not just another way of going through the world; it is not just an alternative approach. It is, and is always going to be, inaccurate and distorted precisely because people are not objects. Looking at something human and infinite and seeing it the same way I would view an inconvenient traffic signal is seriously crazy. And yet I do it all the time.

Of course, the language of seeing and sight in all of this stands in for a much deeper and broader notion of being alive to others, which Warner and Arbingner have elaborated in the books mentioned above. It represents not just a mode of perception or passive regard but an entire way of being with others. To “see” people this way is therefore to live with them in a particular way—an engaged and involved and curious way. It calls us to action and activates our concern.

This difference between these two ways of seeing people can be described many ways. Philosopher Martin Buber, whom Warner credits with first articulating the distinction, calls seeing people as objects the “I-it” and its reverse the “I-Thou” ways of

being (although, unlike Warner, he was not able to explain how or why people shift from one to the other).³ Warner himself sometimes describes the two ways of seeing others in terms of being “in the box” and “out of the box” because of the way seeing others as objects cuts us off from the complex and poignant world of real people. The Arbinger Institute, which trains companies and groups to apply these ideas to reduce conflict and increase effectiveness, uses the language of the “inward mindset” versus the “outward mindset.” The inward mindset refers to the self-absorbed way of seeing others as objects, and the outward mindset refers to the way of seeing others as they truly are and being motivated by them. The people at HG have their own in-house vernacular and talk about having “an attentive and caring heart” instead of “a blaming heart.” Mostly, though, they just talk about people being real people and deserving to be treated that way. (They’re not big on formal vocabulary there.) In this book, I’ll use the phrase “seeing people as people” and trust that what we lose in elegance we’ll gain in obviousness.

The Gorilla

The idea that we miss something crucial about life when we are self-absorbed and see others as objects is not just philosophical abstraction. In research psychology, there is a similar, well-studied phenomenon called *inattention blindness*.⁴ It refers to the finding that when we humans are paying close attention to one thing, we can be utterly blind to other things that happen right in front of our noses. For example, sometimes we’re really absorbed in a book or a task and we don’t hear people calling our names; sometimes we’re singing along to the car radio and miss our highway exit in spite of multiple signs directly in our view. These kinds of incidents happen all the time because our brains can’t focus on everything at once. If the brain is really

focused on one thing, it doesn't process many other things that are going on.

What's astonishing is how outrageously susceptible we are to this kind of tunnel vision. In a foundational experiment, subjects watching a video of a basketball game were asked to count the number of passes made by one of the teams. A shocking number of these people were so absorbed in the task of counting passes that they failed to notice when a gorilla walked onto the scene and beat its chest right in the middle of the game. You can find this video online⁵ and watch it, and you'll see that it's nearly impossible to miss the gorilla—unless you yourself start counting one team's passes. If you get absorbed in that, then you may miss the gorilla, or at least not notice it for the first few seconds, *even though you know it's coming*.

Something analogous seems to happen when we are absorbed in ourselves. Our self-concern can blind us to the internal reality of other people. I may go days, weeks, even years without really, meaningfully, thinking about what's going on with another person—what her perspective is and how things look to her—because my attention is directed at the question of how she affects *me*. I might spend dozens of hours thinking about how annoying a person is and how wrong his opinion is. I might go so far as to talk to others about how terrible that person is—all without ever, in all those hours of criticizing, spending any time wondering about what his perspective is or how he experiences my treatment of him. If I am thinking of myself as the star of my own personal movie, everyone else is an extra, a set piece, and I completely miss the gorilla.

On the contrary, when I'm open to seeing people as they truly are, I can be alive to all the relevant aspects of them. I'm no longer blind. And what I learned at HG was that when a group of people makes the shift to this way of seeing, there is a mood, a feeling of upbeat activity, that is impossible to mistake

and energizing to be around. I encountered this energizing mood in many of the SNFs I visited. In the best places, person after person was likeable, devoted, caring, and fulfilled; they were full of appreciation for one another and gratitude for their residents. As I walked around these facilities, every single person I passed would acknowledge me with a nod and a smile. The residents were greeted with “Good morning, my dear!” and “Hello, handsome!” One nursing director summed up the atmosphere at her favorite facility this way: “It was like a competition: Who is going to help first?”

On the other hand, this shift doesn’t happen every time or everywhere. Let me give you one example. HG had a cohort of nursing consultants who traveled from facility to facility to train and assess facility nurses. The consultants enter the picture as outsiders put in charge, and it’s easy to see how this dynamic can lead to conflict and trouble. I saw plenty of admirable consultant-nurse interactions, but I also saw some that made me cringe. I shadowed one consultant for a few hours, and while she was bright and quick to give credit where it was due, she wasn’t gentle about identifying errors and would heave loud, put-upon sighs with each discovery. After an hour with her I felt like a dismal failure, and I didn’t even *work* there.

The irony of this situation is that many consultants are promoted for this position from within the company, promoted from facilities exactly like the ones I found so energizing and charming. In fact, the consultants I was able to speak with were very gracious to me and highly complimentary of the person-centric approach; they hadn’t abandoned it. And yet, in the context of entering a building as the expert, they were less kind than they likely had been as clinicians.

That brings us to a very important observation: seeing people as either people or objects is not an aspect of personality, such as extroversion or decisiveness or intelligence. We

all sometimes see people as people and sometimes see people as objects. Which one we do in a given moment depends on many factors, but each way of seeing others is available to every one of us.

And that means we can shift.

3 *Soft Like a Brick*

THE POWER OF SEEING PEOPLE AS PEOPLE

“Welcome to Lily Ridge!” she called. I could see only her hands and her head as they poked around the corner, but they told me enough to intrigue me. Her smile was genuine and her voice a touch breathy, as though she had just run a short way, almost as if she had hurried down the hall just to poke her head around the corner and welcome me to this nursing home.

“Thanks!” I said, hurrying toward her. “What’s your name? What do you do here?” She seemed to be in business clothes rather than scrubs, so there were some fifteen nonnursing jobs she might have worked in. She told me her name, but I didn’t catch it as she explained, hurriedly, “I’m on my way to a transport, so I have to go right now, but I’m usually in reception and I saw we had a new person here and I just wanted to make sure you got welcomed!” With that and another brilliant smile, she took off at a business run back down the hall, and I was left just grinning after her.

A person who has shifted to seeing people as people is a delight to be around and has an unlimited capacity to spread positive feelings. But as you might be thinking by now, the shift is easier said than done. People do not develop a good attitude by simply being told they need one or become happy by being told to cheer up. Likewise, none of us shift to seeing others as people simply by knowing we should. And the more

entrenched we are in difficult relationships, the harder it is to shift. Fortunately, just because the shift isn't automatic doesn't mean it isn't possible. We can facilitate the process by turning to certain keys, and we'll get to them later. They just turn out not to be what we expect.

This chapter will explore some of the benefits of the shift to seeing people as people, in spite of the counterintuitive fact that it is more demanding and rigorous than seeing them as objects.

A Workplace That Feels like Home

You may be wondering whether seeing people as people really matters. You may be thinking, It's nice, but so are puppies; it doesn't mean they belong at work.

But let's look at this little moment in Lily Ridge. It's the kind of thing that happens when someone is seeing others as people—cheerful, friendly, likeable, welcoming, and in this particular case, kind of adorable. But there's more. I'd only just arrived at the skilled nursing facility, nobody knew I was coming, and I was wearing generic blue scrubs—this receptionist had no way of knowing that I was writing a book or that there was any reason to care what I thought about her facility, but there she was anyway. And her job description certainly didn't require her to greet visitors when she is already halfway out the back door transporting a resident. If her primary concerns were for her own self and needs, she would have spared her feet and just gone on the transport. Her devotion to her responsibility to welcome visitors, her desire to put a friendly face on the facility, arose precisely because her primary concerns were for others: her coworkers and residents who are benefited by her warmth in reception and me, a first-time visitor to a strange place who would feel more comfortable if welcomed.

Like Jason in Blanding, this receptionist was a powerful example of exactly what you want from an employee, coworker, family member, or friend. She'll dash around in uncomfortable business shoes to make a stranger feel welcome and then rush over her own name because she is focused on *doing* the right thing, not on getting credit for doing it. This is what it looks like when someone is truly seeing other people as people, and I for one can't see any downsides.

Here's another example. At the Rosewood Creek facility, I ran into a pair of nurses who were particularly enthusiastic in talking about HG. It's usually difficult to get licensed nurses to stop and talk because their time is not their own, but these two men had such strong opinions, they both paused their rounds to tell me their experience. They were good friends—one had literally bought a wrong-size wedding band off the other!—and one of them had another higher-paying job at a different facility but still worked at Rosewood Creek because he enjoyed it so much. They had a lot of the same positive comments about family and teamwork as I'd heard in other great facilities (for example, "When I come to work I feel like I'm home"), but I was struck particularly by this comment by one of them: "I've never [before] worked in a place where there's no backbiting and nobody trying to step on others to move up." In this facility, they told me, there was no gossiping, no backstabbing, no undermining of others. People just did their work and helped one another, and if someone got promoted, all of them could see it was the right person and they were happy for him or her.

The environment they described didn't arise because all the people who worked there were perfect and none of them made mistakes. (I'm sure we would have heard about them by now.) They must have had opportunities for backstabbing and faults to complain of; that's the reality of engaging in life and work with people, that they do things wrong. But here, nobody was

capitalizing on others' mistakes, at least not to any significant extent, because they weren't focused on themselves and their status but on helping one another and the residents.

The Hardest Kind of "Soft"

When people see one another as people in the deepest and truest sense, they create an environment that's light-years away from the typical workplace culture of politicking, resentments, and cliques. More than that, it calls them out from petty self-concern to be more engaged and to do more work than if they were seeing others as objects.

Once, a power line collapsed onto a facility in the middle of HG's annual leadership meeting. The executives canceled that meeting to help evacuate more than a hundred patients in a complete power outage. I was shown a picture of a group of them, CEO and all—lit by headlamps and a camera flash—pushing equipment and beds in the middle of the night and grinning like it was the happiest day in their lives.

Now, an executive who's absorbed in himself, even if the business is small, can certainly think of other people who are more suited to lugging hospital beds in the dark after a full day of work than he is. In fact, it will seem obvious that *someone* has to coordinate and supervise activities from a well-lit place, and that it should be he. After all, that's what the individual SNFs have employees for, to do that kind of work.

On the other hand, a person who's thinking about others and seeing them as real sees that the people in the building with the scared residents are having a much tougher day than whoever sits in the office waiting for updates. She thinks about all the residents who are confused and scared, all the line staff who were caught by surprise and have stayed to help in spite of missed dinners, and she simply and uncomplicatedly wants to help them. She doesn't think about her own warm bed; she

thinks about the single mother with a bad back who may be able to go home if another body shows up to help. She doesn't think she is entitled to the clean and dry jobs—she looks for someone who is cold or tired so she can do the heavy lifting and *that* person can go make phone calls. In every way, the person who is seeing others as people feels called to lift their burdens and minimize their pains rather than her own—even in the dark, even during meetings.

This means seeing people as people is not *easier* than seeing them as objects; on the contrary, very often it means doing difficult and uncomfortable tasks. When we are absorbed in ourselves and view those around us merely as objects, our own needs and comforts are paramount and we base all our decisions on maximizing those. When other people matter too, then very often their needs are paramount (not always, of course; we aren't *less* important than others, but we stop feeling like we are *more* important). The call to honor the reality of the other, the deference we feel when faced with the infinite unknowability of another human creature—these are powerful feelings. And they demand real action from us.

If seeing people as people strikes you as “soft,” I can tell you this: if it's soft, it's soft like a brick.¹ If it's shallow, it's shallow like the Pacific. If it's empty, it's empty like the Nile flooding the surrounding countryside and soaking it with richness and vibrancy to support an empire.

Raoul is an assistant on a large SNF's activities team; he started in maintenance but had “worked his way up,” as he put it. He has the strong accent and groomed facial hair that television had taught me to associate with Los Angeles street gangs. When we met, he was busy painting the nails of a very frail African American lady a bright, showstopping blue. He used careful, practiced strokes and held her hand gently while he talked with me about how much he loved his job. “The guys say

painting nails is, like, make me gay,” he told me with a dismissive head shake and a shrug. His friends thought his work was feminizing, silly, laughable; Raoul didn’t. “This could be my mother, my grandmother,” he told me, pointing at the women around the table. “It makes them happy.”

He lived in a culture where men are ridiculed for doing gentle things, but he did them anyway, kindly and well. In those old women he saw loving mothers and sisters and daughters and grandmothers, and unmoved by being laughed at by “the guys,” he loved that he could make these deserving women happy with something so simple as nail polish.

I walked in once on Mac, a facility administrator, having an intense conversation with a very stressed-looking couple. I remember the weariness on their faces, the deeply etched tiredness that comes from slow-drain problems like diminishing health or consistent and unflagging financial trouble. Mac told me later that they were family members of a man who had recently been admitted to the facility to recuperate from an unexpected injury. The man fell into that most frustrating of financial categories: too young and well-off to qualify for Medicaid or Medicare but not rich enough to be able to comfortably bear the cost of his care. The man and his family had therefore decided to forgo the recommended physical therapy, a separate charge they were unable to afford.

Mac knew the family was in dire straits, but he also knew that without therapy, this man—otherwise healthy and only in his sixties—would probably never return to his previous level of activity and independence. He had run the numbers and talked to his team of managers and department heads, and they had discussed what skipping therapy would do to this man’s vibrant, meaningful life. My interruption had come just before Mac told the family that he would charge them only half the

cost of the man's care so they could use the savings to pay for his physical therapy.

"We can't do that all the time," he emphasized later, not wanting me to get the wrong idea since he and his team can't care for *anyone* if they don't run the facility responsibly. But on the other hand, margins are so small in nursing homes that one could argue they should never do it *anytime*. They certainly don't have to. It's not their fault if this man doesn't get therapy—they don't even know him—and those many thousands of dollars they now won't collect will come out of their bonuses at best. But they don't see it that way. "It's the right thing to do," Mac told me.

Jeremy, the middle executive who sent me to Blanding, told me this was one of the greatest benefits of HG's policy of leaving such decisions to individual SNF leaders and staff. "You're able to make decisions for the benefit of humanity," he said.

At another SNF, a staff member was tragically murdered; his girlfriend, the mother of his two young children, also worked in the same facility, so everyone in the facility was affected by the news. A couple of days after the tragedy, the administrator of the facility learned that the stunned and shell-shocked family had not done anything to arrange a funeral, so he brought them into his office and helped them through the process, even calling the funeral home when he found it was not charging the family a fair price. The rest of the staff organized a coffee fund-raiser. The administrator told me, his voice rising with emotion, "People who make \$10 to \$15 an hour would pay \$20 for a cup of coffee. That's amazing—to earn twenty bucks after taxes, and they have kids, that's not easy." But they would hand over \$20, crying for the murdered man and his family. The staff raised \$3,000.

Seeing people as people is more demanding, challenging, and unyielding than blind disregard; it requires far more of us

to see people than to be blind to them. But at the same time, since by definition we are not absorbed in our own selves and comforts, we don't experience that requirement as a burden. We experience it as an opportunity, a gift, to be able to help those amazing, infinite persons. The \$20 for coffee was nothing compared to honoring a valued coworker's life. Likewise, Mac's team would *prefer* to lose a little bonus money than to watch a man's productive life come to an end. This is why we end up with the benefits we've seen: cheerfulness, a willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty, cooperation, and an environment free of envy, backbiting, and hostility.

The Cascade

This isn't just me talking either. Science backs this up.

We get a particular feeling when we see others do something extraordinarily kind or moving or altruistic; we can get the feeling from real life or movies or books or even conversation about such actions. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and others have labeled that feeling (quite aptly) as "elevation."² And they have found that when people feel moved, or elevated, by experiencing or witnessing a kindness, they become more likely to do something kind or altruistic themselves. Doing good, or seeing people as people and treating them as such, creates a cascade of other-centered actions that nourish and encourage ever more such kindnesses. As we've seen, it can end up in an entire facility's staff working in openhearted unity with one another. It doesn't make every problem go away, but it increases the number of people who are truly seeing one another and valuing one another, which, I think I can assert, is more pleasant than the reverse.

And seeing people as people can be contagious; when we encounter a person who sees the greatness in others, it can open our eyes to that greatness as well. For example, in one

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