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Sources for material cited in text:

*Chapter 1 epigraph:* Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life* (NY: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 98.

*Chapter 2 epigraph:* William Sloane Coffin, referenced by Ed O'Donnell based on his memory of a sermon presented by Reverend Coffin at Riverside Church, NYC, in the late 1970s.

*Chapter 6 epigraph:* Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), p. 49.

*Chapter 6, epigraph beneath subhead:* Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Fundraising* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), p. 36.

*Chapter 6, quotation at end of chapter:* Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (Doubleday, 1975), p. 16.

*Chapter 13 epigraph:* William B. Oglesby, cited by Richard L. Morgan, *Autumn Wisdom: A Book of Readings* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1995), p. 96.

*Chapter 13, poem "Small White Cannibal":* Grace Beacham Freeman, *No Costumes or Masks* (Brevard, N.C.: John's Press, 1986), p. 26.

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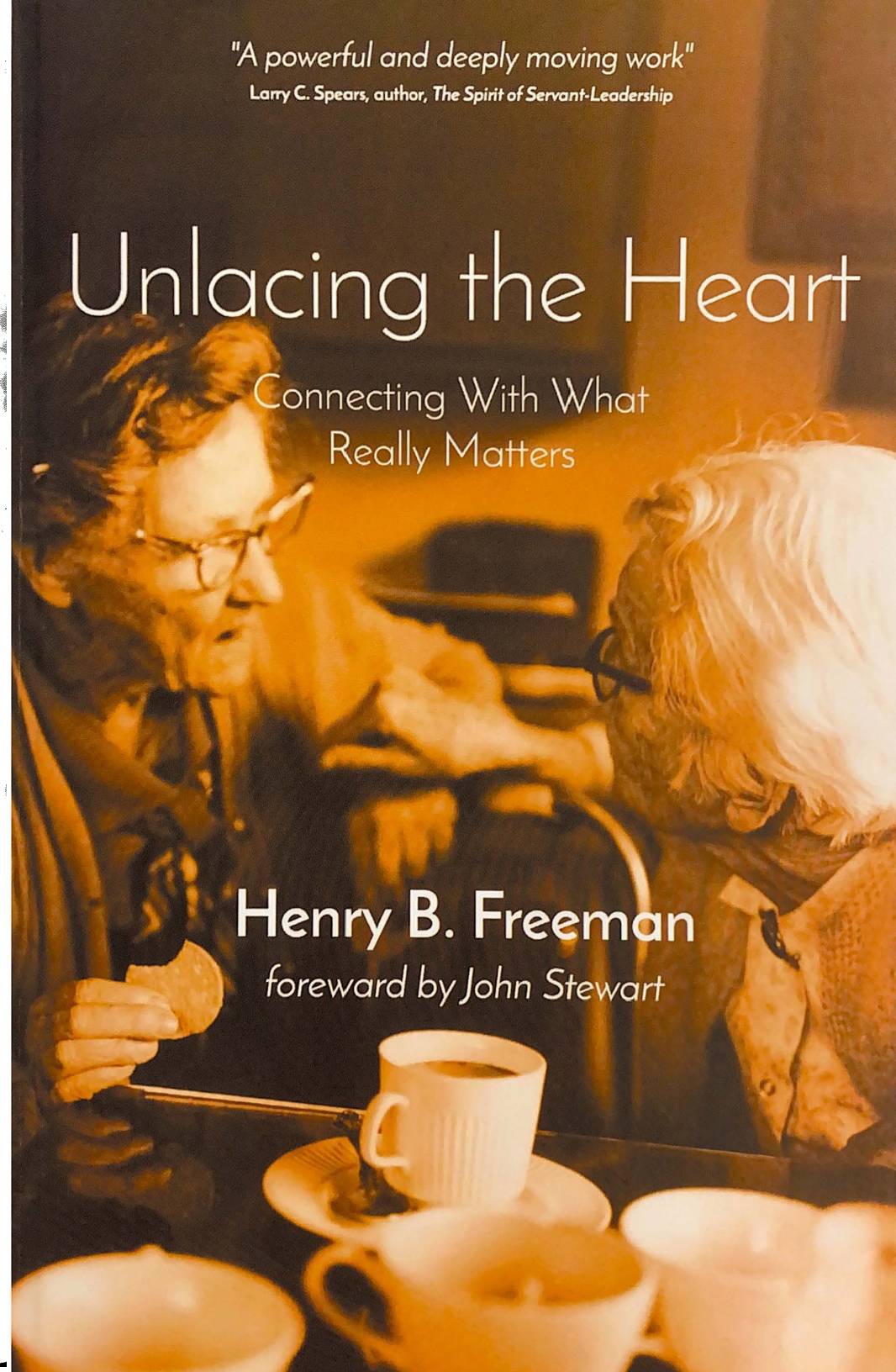
Larry C. Spears, author, *The Spirit of Servant-Leadership*

# Unlacing the Heart

Connecting With What  
Really Matters

Henry B. Freeman

foreword by John Stewart



5

Steak and asparagus  
with Margaret

“What is it, Henry, that you want to talk about?”

A number of years ago when I was vice president at Earlham, I had a visit with someone who showed me what it means to be in an authentic relationship with another person. Earlham was in the middle of a capital campaign and I had just completed a hectic month of travel. After a few days back in the office I was again on the road for a two-day East Coast trip.

My trip started out with an all-day meeting in New Haven, Connecticut followed by dinner that evening in Hartford with a donor. My plan was to then make a late-night, three-hour drive to Boston for an important breakfast meeting with a group of campaign volunteers. I was packing a lot into a very short time period, each of these meetings was important in its own way and, from my perspective, nothing on my agenda could be left out.

The trip started badly. While my plane arrived on time the night before, the all-day meeting at Yale went on two-hours longer than I had planned for. Adding to my anxiety and frustration was a traffic jam on the drive to Hartford that kept me at a standstill for more than an hour.

As this was long before the era of cell phones and texting, I could not call ahead to explain my dilemma to the Hartford donor. Instead, I began to calculate in my head what I could do to remain on schedule. The answer was clear: If I could limit our dinner to one hour, I would still be able to get a few hours of sleep before my breakfast meeting in Boston the following morning.

While I viewed the dinner meeting in Hartford as important for growing my relationship with this particular donor, I knew it would not lead to a significant gift to the campaign. My host was an elderly woman who had been generous to Earlham in years past and had been very open about telling me that the college was in her estate for \$60,000. During our last visit, however, Margaret had declined to entertain a request that she establish a one-million dollar endowment for student scholarships.

Our research showed that she was clearly capable of such a gift and we knew from an earlier conversation

that her accountant agreed that such a gift was feasible. But Margaret was haunted by memories of her poverty-stricken childhood during the Depression. When I asked for the gift, she told me that she very much wanted to support Earlham but that she was fearful of giving away money that she may need at some future point to buy groceries.

While the fundraiser in me knew that a conversation about a planned gift in her estate was an obvious next step that was not the purpose of this dinner. My goal was simply that of "keeping in touch" in a way that might open the door for a future conversation about her estate plans.

As I reached the front gate of the retirement community, I decided I would make a point of mentioning early in our visit that I had run into problems with traffic. I would also apologize for the fact that I needed to leave a bit early because I had already booked my hotel room in Boston and had a 7 AM meeting the next morning.

From the moment this small gentle woman greeted me at her door, my plans were shot. After a brief hug and hello, Margaret asked the question that she said had been on her mind all day.

"Henry, now be honest with me. Do you like fresh asparagus? If you don't I have some frozen carrots in the



freezer that are also very, very good.”

After I confirmed with a smile that I absolutely love asparagus—a slight exaggeration but an essentially truthful response—she asked how I like my steak. She then explained that she had ordered Omaha Steaks in preparation for my visit but wanted to be sure that she cooked them “just right.”

Over the next hour, we made small talk as I sat at the dining room table and she stood at her stove cooking our steaks and asparagus. Before I could explain why I was late and why I might need to leave a bit early, she said she had been worried about me.

“Henry, you travel so much. What would happen if you were in an accident? I had hoped that nothing was wrong or perhaps that you had just forgotten about our plans.”

Now long past when I had hoped dinner would be over, my host brought to our small table a plate of asparagus and two plates with a tasty, medium-cooked Omaha Steak for each of us. Before digging into our meal she asked if I would join her for a moment of silence, which is the Quaker-inspired form of prayer that alumni often suggest when I meet with them.

For the next few moments I waited for my host to break the silence. Finally, she uttered these words,

“Thank you, God, for having Henry here so I have someone to talk to.”

Knowing that I had just been invited into an important moment in another person’s life, I looked across the table at a small frail woman with tears in her eyes.

“What is it, Margaret, that you would like to talk with me about?”

Margaret then told me that she’d learned earlier in the day that she was dying of cancer. Having ventured out from behind her protective wall into a very scary place, she then withdrew with a question for me.

“What is it, Henry, that *you* want to talk about?”

During a few more moments of silence, I struggled with how to respond. Knowing that I was about to begin a very special journey with her, I told Margaret about the mood I was in and the fact that I had arrived at her door with every intention of leaving as soon as I could. I then apologized for entering her life in a way that no human being should ever do.

“You, Margaret, had invited me into your home and your life as a guest,” I said. “I, however, did not arrive as a guest. I arrived this evening as a person with an agenda and you were part of that agenda. And that is not appropriate nor is it fair.”

Then I said, “The real agenda is to talk about what

is important in your life.”

For the next three hours, Margaret and I sat together as she unfolded her memories of childhood and people who were important to her. At times the stories brought laughter and at other times, tears. She then talked about her fear of a painful death.

Her desire, she said, was to simply fall asleep.

At the end of our time together, I thanked Margaret for giving me a gift I hope I never forget. The gift I received that night was the knowledge that I was a guest in her home and that I need to always be ready to leave my agenda at the door when invited into the life of another person. More importantly, I need to always make space for what is in the heart of the people who welcome me into their lives.

That night I arrived at my hotel in Boston at about two AM. I then had my seven AM meeting and flew back to Indiana later that day.

A month later I arranged a trip back to Hartford to visit with Margaret. In a phone conversation with her the week before, she asked that I call her when I arrived at the airport. When I got into the terminal and placed the call, I was surprised to hear an unfamiliar female voice on the other end of the phone. “Yes, Margaret is resting, but she is looking forward to seeing you.”

After renting a car, I made the 45-minute journey to see Margaret. When I arrived I didn’t need to knock on her door. It was open. A housekeeper was cleaning.

Margaret had died shortly before my arrival.

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The evening I joined Margaret for our dinner of Omaha steak and asparagus, I entered her apartment with all of my research in order and knowing everything about her that someone in my profession needs to know. I wore the hat of a fundraiser and the financial agenda that goes with the title.

When entering the life of another person, the problem is not that we are tired, wear a particular professional hat or bring along an agenda as we knock on the door. The problem is that so often we ignore the small inner voice that invites us to take off our professional hat and put our agenda aside.