

Joy, Understanding, and Acceptance: The Warmth and Protection of a Small but Mighty Flame We Keep Eternal

By Phil Liebman

Every year, except one, over the past 12 summers, I gathered in Boulder, Colorado, with a group of people I regard as the most important in my life. It's not that my family is any less important. In very meaningful ways, my family is clearly far more important to me. But in surprising ways, these people are family – the kind of family everyone should have.

The first clue as to why is that I find a deep connection and sense of intimacy in a group that has typically averaged about 100 people. I have known most of these people for years – some for more than twenty, and most for ten or more. But it's the feeling that they know me that makes this feel so intimate. Even more remarkably, each year there are half a dozen or more people whom I've never met before, and that experience of connection is kindled with at least half of those folks, most of whom will begin returning year after year – as I, and most of us, do.

We engage with our eyes, with warm, welcoming, accepting smiles, and with deeply meaningful conversation. And we embrace each other in our hearts. We also hug. A lot. It's not a requirement, or even necessarily a custom. It's a purely spontaneous expression of affection for our family – that keeps expanding and shrinking. We are mostly at, or beyond, the age when it becomes less unusual for a few of us to die each year. Beyond the moment of mourning or missing someone meaningful in our lives, it always reaffirms that our time together is precious.

Life is always precious. But in the day-to-day experience of living, it's easy to let the mundane and even the tedious fade into the background, blending with the things that matter most. We do our best not to take things for granted, and we extend our gratitude to the hard parts of life – where a little encouragement helps us endure and

thrive. Just as we do when we gather in Boulder, each of us tries to remember that it's all perfect. The joy, the pain, the boredom, and the exhilaration of life. It wouldn't be a complete life without all of this, so we celebrate being human.

We are the keepers of a flame meant to bring light and warmth - to both see our way forward and to celebrate the parts of our past that have made us a family. And just as life is precious, the flame is even more so. Without tending to it, shielding it from the winds of change, or, even worse, from growing indifference, we shrink and become less, not because we are aging, but because we must also remain committed to bringing new life into our family, knowing that they will be needed to keep the flame eternal.

It's hard to explain why this gathering of The Keepers of The Flame is so important to those of us who make the annual sojourn. I try as best I can to explain it to my wife, Lynn, who accepts that it is deeply important to me - and something I find tremendously beneficial - without really understanding why. Nearly every Keeper I know feels the same. Lynn understands that we are all former or current Chairs connected by having spent at least 10 years with Vistage, or TEC, as it was known until a little more than 20 years ago. She knows it's not a business conference - and yet we gather around the values and principles that deeply connect us to the work. But I understand that she struggles to see these people as my family, and that it's more like a convenient way to describe a gathering of old friends and colleagues.

What we do together is simple and profound. We listen deeply to one another as we talk about what feels tremendously important to us. It's sometimes the value we derive from others' counsel, and often the insights we discover when providing counsel. But the value is less in the delivery or format - and all in the humanity we nurture. That nurturing is the result of intentional dialogue crafted from curated experiences shared by rotating groups of convenors. The elegance is that the enormous amount of work that goes into the preparation is nearly invisible when we gather - yet fully recognized and appreciated.

It's hard to explain, but I would put it this way: I don't go there to see people; I go to connect with people who truly see me. More than a safe place to open up and be seen, it's where I feel most understood and fully accepted. And it's through their eyes that I can best and most clearly see myself.



This year, we learned that one of our Keepers, Fred Chaney, who at age 89 had continued to chair groups of CEOs for more than 57 years until this year, wasn't in attendance because he had entered hospice. A year ago, he told us that Keepers of the Flame was where he always felt most understood. Even when deeply respected and adored by countless people, what makes us feel least alone is being among those who understand us – where we can openly share our personal truths, all that we believe and think.

Carl Jung wrote, "Loneliness does not come from having no people around, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views that others find inadmissible." I have long believed that the joy we experience in our lives comes from the things we accomplish that we find personally meaningful – and even more so when we understand that we also benefit others through the contributions we make.

Each year, I depart our gathering feeling that I have accomplished more in a short time than I would have believed possible. I leave feeling nourished, not only with a clearer understanding of who I am and how I have grown over the previous year, but also with a great sense of hope for what is always possible when the company we keep are the Keepers of the Flame.