

## “Setting the World on Fire: Our Diversity is our Strength”

By Annemarie Scobey-Polacheck, Director of Corporate Philanthropy at Johnson Controls

St. Catherine of Sienna said, “Be who you are called to be and you will set the world on fire.” To me, this quote, this way of approaching the world, is a statement of profound acknowledgement of the diversity of God’s call to each of us. Let’s take it apart.

First: *Be who you are called to be*. Who we are each called goes beyond how we might ordinarily define ourselves. St. Catherine of Sienna didn’t say, “Be who you are and you’ll set the world on fire.” She said, “Be who you are called to be and you will set the world on fire.” Who we are is how the world sees us, often our profession — an accountant, a teacher, an engineer, a nurse. But, “who we are called to be,” is to recognize our own potential in response to the needs of the world. Frederick Buchner, a theologian, writer and Presbyterian minister said it this way, “*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.*”

Second: *you will set the world on fire*. This statement is just as important as the first. What does that mean, to set the world on fire? Setting the world on fire means that after we have been part of a situation, something changed. Going back to high school chemistry, there are two types of changes — physical changes and chemical changes. The main difference between the two is whether or not the matter can go back to the state it was before the change. Ice melting is a physical change, because if your ice cube becomes water, all you need is to drop the temperature and you’ll have ice once again. But fire creates chemical change. Firing pottery is a chemical change; there is no going back to clay. Baking a cake is a chemical change; there is no going back to batter. Fireworks are a chemical change because once the color explodes in the night sky, there is no putting that firework back in the shell. This chemical change is what it means to set the world on fire. When we are being who we are called to be, something around us changes for the better — we set that part of the world on fire — there is a chemical change. There is no going back.

Whether or not we are able to sustain being who we are called to be for a prolonged length of time, we all can think of instances when absolutely, we nailed it. We were exactly who we were called to be at a particular moment and we saw the change happen around us. We each can look back at our lives and see moments of grace, moments of miracle, moments where we had the courage to be who we were called to be and someone around us changed because of it. Because of us, something got a little better.

Our youngest daughter, Jamilet, was detained into foster care at birth. Jamilet needed extensive physical therapy just to roll over by nine months, when most babies do it on their own by four or five months. But each week, in Jamilet’s first foster home, before we received her, a physical therapist named Julie Wellenstein visited and worked with baby Jamilet. Julie eventually got Jamilet rolling, then sitting, then standing. By the time Bill and I received Jamilet, she was almost ready to walk, at 13 months. Fast forward 15 years later — Jamilet recently had the role of featured dancer in Dominican High School’s production of *Mamma Mia*. As she moved through the complex, high-energy dances, I watched in awe. Imagine my surprise, when after the

opening show, I spotted Julie Wellenstein who had come to the performance, not knowing that Jamilet was in the show. I took a photo of the two of them together. Julie set Jamilet's world on fire by living her call as a physical therapist. It was indeed a photo of a chemical change. Jamilet is changed because of Julie's ability to live her call, and there is no going back.

The question for all of us is, "How do we find that place where our gladness intersects with the world's hunger?" In our prayer, in our daily living and interactions with others, let us strive to learn who we are called to be, so that we may set the world on fire.