The Borlaug Chain

At the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) annual meeting in the Fall of 2012, Doug Steele, director of extension at Montana State University, eloquently stated how every single action a person takes has far reaching consequences. As Doug explained, consider Iowan Norman Borlaug:

Norman Borlaug was ninety-one when he was informed he had personally been responsible for saving the lives of two billion people. He was the Iowan who hybridized corn and wheat for arid climates. The Nobel committee, the Fulbright Scholars, and many other experts calculated that Borlaug’s work saved over 2 billion people from famine all across the world — and the number is increasing every day. But maybe Borlaug was not the person who saved the 2 billion people. It might have been a man named Henry Wallace, an Iowan who was vice president of the United States under Franklin Roosevelt, during his third term. Henry Wallace was a former secretary of agriculture. As vice president, he used his power to create a station in Mexico whose sole purpose was to somehow hybridize corn and wheat for arid climates — and he hired a young man named Norman Borlaug to run it. So, while Borlaug won the Nobel Prize, it was really Henry Wallace whose initial act may have been responsible for saving the 2 billion lives.

Maybe though, it wasn’t Henry Wallace who should’ve gotten the credit; maybe it was George Washington Carver who saved the 2 billion lives. What many people don’t know about George Washington Carver is that while he was 19 and a student at Iowa State University, he had a dairy sciences professor who allowed his own 6-year-old boy to go on botanical expeditions every weekend with this brilliant student. George Washington Carver took that little boy and gave 6-year-old Henry Wallace a vision about his future and what he could do with plants to help humanity. Carver developed 266 products from the peanut that we still use today. And then there’s the sweet potato. Eighty-eight uses he developed from it. He also wrote an agricultural tract and promoted the idea of what he called a “victory garden” to ease food shortages during the war. But with all the time and effort and years that Carver spent on things like peanuts and sweet potatoes and victory gardens, isn’t it amazing that a few afternoons with a 6-year-old boy named Henry Wallace turned out to make that much difference!

But maybe it was actually a farmer from Diamond, Missouri, who saved 2 billion people. The farmer, named Moses, and his wife, Susan, lived in a slave state, but didn’t believe in slavery. They were known as “sympathizers.” One cold winter night, Quantrill’s Raiders attacked Moses and Susan’s farm. They burned the barn, shot several people, and dragged off a woman named Mary Washington — who refused to let go of her infant son. Mary Washington was Susan’s best friend, so Moses sent out word immediately, trying to arrange a meeting, trying to do something to get Mary and her baby back. Within a few days, he had the meeting set; and so, on a bitter cold January night, Moses took a black horse and went several hours north to a crossroads in Kansas where he met four of Quantrill’s men and Moses traded his only horse for what they threw him in a burlap bag. There in the freezing dark, with his breath’s vapor blowing hard and white from his mouth, Moses brought out of that burlap bag a cold, naked, almost dead baby boy. And he opened up his jacket and he
opened up his shirts and placed that baby next to his skin. Moses fastened that child in under his clothes and walked that baby out — talking to that child every step of the way, telling the baby he would take care of him as his own, promising to educate him to honor Mary, his mother, who they knew was already dead.

That was the night that the farmer told the baby he would give him his last name. And that is how Moses and Susan Carver came to raise that little baby, George Washington Carver. So there it is — it was obviously the farmer from Diamond, Missouri, who saved over 2 billion people.

For the truth is, who really knows who it was whose single action saved 2 billion people? How far back could we go? And how far into the future could we go to show how many lives you will touch? There are generations yet unborn, whose very lives will be shifted and shaped by the decisions you make and the actions you take — tonight, and tomorrow, and tomorrow night, and the next day, and the next. See you there.