

Overcoming What Ails Us!

Every four years in the U.S. we see the same misguided and blind hope -- that somehow some politician is going to make things right for us and fix the brokenness of our lives and the world, e.g. war, global warming, economy, poverty, etc. And then we end up disillusioned because it doesn't happen. Why? Because human beings get the government and society we deserve. Our government and society are a reflection of how we actually are within ourselves and how we live -- a reflection of our individual and collective consciousness.

It's time to face the reality: All social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic issues are interrelated and have spiritual root causes. Conflicts in societies are a mirrored reflection of the battles inside us. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and it is us."

To change our governments and change the world, then, we have to change ourselves and the real communities which we inhabit at the same time.

Spending so much of our energy on continually hoping to get real "change" in large institutions without working concretely on the root of the problem in the sphere of human and community consciousness does not make sense. It doesn't mean that we should withdraw from that sphere of social and political life, it is just that the time has come to build up grass roots community consciousness in a more long-term and radical undertaking.

GRASSROOTS POTENTIAL and INERTIA

There are millions of small organizations, both spiritual and community-based, that are already making a difference at the grass roots level and acting as a countervailing "movement" to unresponsive institutions. With all these groups and people doing good, why does it seem that the forces of negativity are overwhelming them? The answer to this question is no further than our own hearts.

Most groups come together with a particular affinity: for example, those on a particular spiritual path like Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, New Spirituality, or people with strong feelings on specific issues like local food, environment, peace, and wellness, or political affinities like Democrat or Republican, etc.

Because of our human nature, we identify with groups and hang out with people who think like us or who have the same beliefs. The dark side of group identification, though, is that we often

unwittingly participate in dividing our society and community into those who believe like us and those who don't. This tendency stems, in part from the evolutionary history of humanity where tribalism was a vehicle to protect ourselves from others. Stanley Milgram's now famous experiment, where people were asked to "electrocute a stranger," and actually did so, revealed our primal and "fear-based" human nature to conform to "groupthink" and to follow established authority.

When we get comfortable around people who think as we do, especially in religious and spiritual groups, we can actually hinder our spiritual growth because we are not challenged by the "other" -- people who are different from us in some way. We hang out in our own "silos or bubbles" -- it could be Christian, New Spiritual, Democratic or Republican, social activist, or other silos -- all the while believing that our way is the best. This false sense of superiority (spiritual pride) is like a cancer within our society, and unless we consciously try to overcome it, we are part of the problem and not part of the solution.

DIVIDE, DOMINATE and RULE

We are easy prey to negative forces in our society (I simply call this Darkness) that feed on our being divided into separate groups so as to exert power and control over us for their personal agendas. We consent to this domination of our interior spiritual consciousness and give the Darkness allegiance by supporting the social, cultural, political, and economic arrangements of the day. It has been this way since the beginning of history.

It is difficult to overcome these differences because we have become so used to being part of "in-groups" for so long. There is a sense of security and safety within our own groups, but the times call for us to reach out beyond ourselves and our personal comfort zone. It's time to challenge this pattern of group identification -- really, we are talking about our ego's identification with this world. I know I need to!

We are called to do something very difficult -- to see others not through the lens of belief and group identity, but through an available, open heart, and the deepest spiritual consciousness. As we overturn our petty judgments, assumptions, and fears about the "other," there will be discomfort and tension at first. But, building new relationships across boundaries by conquering our fear is the rocket fuel that will ignite a whole new level of spiritual and community consciousness.

CONNECTING ACCROSS BOUNDRIES

There are grass-roots groups forming around the planet with the intention of healing these differences between us -- bringing people together -- people who have differing beliefs who are working to make the world a better place. I can speak to our effort in Reno, Nevada. We have spent the last ten years growing what we call the Connecting the Good and in the last seven years we have developed the Connections Gatherings process that focuses on personal and community transformation simultaneously. We call these folks who do this work "community weavers." I just spoke with someone who calls this type of person a community "mender."

So, instead of hanging out with others who simply reinforce our own sometimes cherished and insulated world view, we connect with each other heart to heart, beyond the intellect and ideology, building a community of practitioners -- people who want to grow in Love, to be in service to others, and who are wanting to weave the community as a whole together with this same power of Love. As a result, by simply being a catalyst for community "emergence," this approach has generated many, many projects and new social and economic networks.

THE POWER OF LOVE

Throughout history, there have been many names given to this grand vision of what is possible for humanity. Jesus called it the Kingdom of Heaven (...on Earth as it is in Heaven"). Dr. King called it the Beloved Community. Mahatma Gandhi and our friend Dr. Ariyaratne (Sri Lanka) point to it as Sarvodaya (Awakening of All through Sharing). These different names reflect the longing within our hearts that the power of Love can overcome the love of power.

A Connections Gathering is a humble attempt to support one another to live this "Kingdom" now, in the present moment, inside each of us, and with each other. And, to connect with one another in a new way beyond our "comfortable" group affiliations, to help this Kingdom break into the everyday reality of our busy lives -- in our families, businesses, with our physical neighbors, and all our relations in the community and world.

The spiritual and community revolution of Love, like Jesus spoke of and lived, bridged all divisions and walls between us. But here is the paradox: If you try to organize the power of Love and the Spirit into narrow containers such as religious and spiritual groups, over time, the result is always the same -- you either kill the Spirit and/or domesticate its potential power. The ego always rears its head, spiritual pride sets in, and people in one group naturally think they are better than people in other groups. People get comfortable and forget the professed purpose of

the group. Perpetuating the group becomes more important, thereby becoming institutionalized. Groups always seem to become self-interested, compete with each other, and unwittingly create division.

How can break out of this cycle?

COMMUNITY EMERGENCE

When you bring people of different beliefs together, who already belong to many groups, for the pure intention of supporting each other's spiritual growth, connecting the community, and being a catalyst for the emergence of something bigger, you are not creating just another self interested group. We have found that it is possible to connect people and groups informally through an "emergent" network, without building a formal, self-interested structure. This liberates Spirit to flow freely through all of the new "nodes of intersection" of the continually developing social and economic infrastructure of the community. This is the literal "weaving" of community I'm describing. It is like building a larger "container" for Spirit to flow into, expand, and make real impacts in the lives of people at the grassroots level. What is missing is the entrenching of dogma, superiority, and lock-step ideology. What is created and experienced is freedom.

This form of servant leadership is the antidote to all "dominator" systems (within ourselves or the society) and their reproduction. Love, connection, and service become the glue holding this developing culture together. It is easy to start. Reach out and find others who are different from you and yet have the same longing for a new world. It doesn't take large numbers. It just takes a small group of committed people to start weaving their community together keeping the highest vision in their hearts. What works in one region can work elsewhere as this kind of organic movement will erupt at the grass-roots level around the Earth. As thousands and millions of communities simultaneously participate in an unnamed eruption of Spirit, it is natural that new leaders will emerge at the grassroots in the spheres of social, economic, and political life and structures will then be changed from the bottom up.

The times call for this gentle approach -- and we can be more like mothers nurturing our children, helping each of us to grow in Love so that we may heal this broken world.