

Listening to Chaos

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There is a traditional Japanese story about a fellow who dies and finds himself in a shimmering realm. He thinks to himself, "I guess I was better than I thought I was." He is approached by a glistening being, who ushers him into a regal banquet hall in which an immense table is laid out with unimaginable delicacies. He is seated at the banquet table with many others, and a choice selection of food is served to him. As he picks up his fork, someone approaches him from behind and straps a thin board to the back of his arms so he cannot bend his elbows. Trying to pick up the food, he sees that he can't get it to his mouth because he cannot maneuver his stiff arms to feed himself.

Looking about, he notices that all the other people around the table have their arms bound straight so they cannot bend them. All are grunting and groaning as they attempt to reach the food to their mouths but they cannot and there is great wailing and moaning at their predicament.

Going to the being who had shown him to this place, he says, "This must be hell. But then what is heaven?"

The glistening being shows him through an archway into another huge banquet hall in which there sits another great table, filled with the same array of foods. "Ah, this is more like it," he thinks. And sitting down at the dinner table he is about to dig in when someone comes and ties a board to the back of his arms so, once again, he cannot bend his elbows to feed himself.

Lamenting that this is the same unworkable situation as hell, he looks about in dismay to notice that, at this table, there is something different occurring. Instead of people trying to force the food into their mouths straining against the rigidity of their arms, each being is holding out their arm straight to feed the person on either side.

How often do we, in searching for community, sit at the table and try to feed ourselves, instead of those who sit at the table with us? How often do we miss an opportunity for True Community because we cannot see that to feed others is to feed ourselves? When we move into True Community each benefits from the other's insight and wisdom. Each benefits from the shared knowledge and compassion of the group. Each benefits from the safety and warmth that is created in a community of peace and love.

The renowned author and community builder M. Scott Peck wrote a book in the late eighties called, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*. In it, he describes the steps a group must take in order to become a loving and peaceful community. Peck believes that we put off community by saying that community will come when we have peace. Instead, he says we should be seeking community in order to bring peace. True community does more than merely tolerate others. True community asks each of us to accept and integrate the opinions, ideas, theologies, cultures and rituals of others in a way that helps us to grow and become more complete and whole human beings. But to that end we must be willing to be vulnerable to change. We must be willing to be affected and infected. Willing to learn and understand. Willing to stretch our minds and our hearts. Even if our values remain unchanged, we must be willing to explore.

But how do we get there? And do we know where we are in our journey to community? Peck describes four phases that groups go through in order to become a truly diverse and whole community. They are: Pseudocommunity, Chaos, Emptiness and finally true Community.

The first is Pseudocommunity. Peck believes many groups begin with Pseudocommunity. This is when groups come together for a purpose and differences are glossed over, minimized and even ignored. The group is cohesive and people speak in generalities, with vague and sweeping statements. The group has come together to achieve some goal or to complete some unified task. When the task is complete, the group may disband. But, if a group, a church or fellowship for example, chooses to stay together, new goals and tasks are named and the group works toward those goals.

According to Ed Groody in his article *You Mean We Have to Keep on Growing*, "One of the fundamental premises of Pseudocommunity is that we are all the same." Conversations are superficial and we are only willing to share that part of ourselves which seems to fit or the part of ourselves that will keep us included. Anything that might make us different from the group is withheld because we are afraid we will be thrown out. Problems arise when members of the group who once glossed over differences in order to achieve a common goal begin to voice differing opinions about these goals or tasks. The differences, which were once overlooked, now become impossible to overlook. Suddenly there is disparity where none seemed to exist before. Suddenly people are shifting the focus to the incongruities, rather than the similarities. Suddenly people are saying what they really think, believe or feel when previously they put those thoughts aside. Now people feel they have an investment in the group and in the outcome of the goal or task. Now people feel that they must speak up, or their ideas and opinions will be disregarded or ignored.

When people begin to speak up and speak honestly, the group moves into what Peck calls the Chaos stage. Usually this stage is precipitated by a conflict or problem that can no longer be ignored. There is, very often, unproductive conflict with people taking sides and arguments going in circles. Everyone seems to be talking, but no one feels heard or understood.

Each person is trying to make their point, trying to convert others to their way of thinking. There are also those who try to heal people who seem to be in pain about the conflict in order to resolve everything and get back to “normal.” “If you would all just be rational about this and see it my way we wouldn’t be fighting.” Each person is trying to feed themselves, but their arms are unbending and they cannot reach their mouths. They moan and wail at their predicament. This is what Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher and theologian calls an “I—It” relationship. We cannot acknowledge the other as human because it might compromise our position. Fear, anger or resentment are generally what people feel during this stage of community building. Fear that their ideals will be pushed aside. Anger at not being heard or understood or that the group can’t just agree with them and return to pseudo community where everything was “FINE.” Resentment, that others may get their way while they are left alone, outcasts of the community.

Yet the Chaos stage also offers great hope and is essential. Groody states: “[Chaos] is an important concept and one foreign to a western culture, still reliant upon outdated concepts of Newtonian physics, which values control, predictability, stability and equilibrium above all else.” This is a pivotal stage for a community and vital to the health and well being of the group because, as Peck says: “Fighting is far better than pretending that you are not divided. It’s painful, but it’s a beginning. You are aware that you need to move beyond your warring factions, and that’s infinitely more hopeful than if you felt you didn’t need to move at all.” Chaos and conflict mean that people feel invested enough to speak their mind. It means that people care about their community and their place in it. It means that the goals and tasks of the community matter. They matter enough for people to break out of Pseudocommunity and share their concerns and convictions. But growth cannot begin if we don’t start by sharing where we are and what we believe. By withholding opinions we begin to feel marginalized and resentful. If those who feel they cannot speak publicly begin to speak privately (in the parking lot, in back rooms) in ways that cause splitting or divisiveness there is no room for movement and growth. Personal hurts are compounded and become larger than the individual. The way out of that discomfort is never easy and usually requires at least some degree of chaos and conflict. It also means that instead of listening to what others have to say, we are busy planning how to respond or defend our position even before the other has finished speaking.

There are many dangers in the Chaos stage of community building. The group can remain in conflict until so many are upset that they leave the group. Those who are the most tenacious are left and therefore control the group. But by that time, there is very little of the group left and community is no longer an achievable goal. There are times when peace comes at the cost of community. The group can also try to flee into organization. Peck describes this as a natural human reaction to Chaos. By creating order and organization we hope to make the Chaos go away. I know that in my own life when things are chaotic, I like to try to clean up my desk or the kitchen or my workbench because it gives me a false sense of order. My life has not changed, my brain is still in Chaos, but boy oh boy my desk looks great! It is the same for groups; organization only makes things look better. The Chaos still exists under the new structure of committees, sub-committees or surveys. Another danger is that the group will fall back into Pseudocommunity to try to avoid the conflict. This is generally done by scape-goating an individual in the community, usually the leader.

Peck says that the leader of the group is singled out and takes much of the blame for a given problem because the group feels this person did not do enough to help them avoid or minimize the problem in the first place. The conflict escalates and the group feels more and more resentment toward the leader for not “fixing” it. As a result, the leader is usually asked to leave as a way of “resolving” the conflict. This in and of itself does not solve the conflict, but it does reduce its power. The group will sometimes stay in this conflicted stage for a while before either moving on to the Emptiness stage, or back to the Pseudocommunity stage.

If the group is committed, then they will move forward to the Emptiness stage. This stage requires that people begin to listen to the differences expressed by members of the community and integrate those differences. This stage asks us to see each other as carrying an essential message or lesson. Using the Buddhist image that everyone is enlightened except us, we begin seeking what others have to offer us, rather than focusing on what we have to offer them. We can't possibly gain the enlightenment we seek in others if we are blinded by preconceived notions, prejudices, ideologies, solutions, and the need to heal, fix, solve or control the situation or one another. We must let go of these behaviors. The desire to fix, heal and solve interpersonal differences is, according to Peck, “a self-centered desire for comfort through the obliteration of these differences.” But letting go of these agendas requires a certain level of trust. We must believe that we will be heard. That what we have to say is valid and valuable to the community. It means that we have to be trustworthy. We must listen and respect as valid and valuable what others have to say. We need to open ourselves to the possibility of change. Here the focus is on ourselves and what stands in our way.

Groody states: “community calls us to take off our masks and let others know who we are and what is going on with us under the surface.”

Emptiness requires the release of our stranglehold on the truth. It requires the death of “everything that stands in our way” of being in community, of hearing and empathizing with one another, of sharing honestly our pain and our deepest fears. We are asking, ourselves and each other, to speak the truth, to share our brokenness, to admit our shortcomings and share our successes and joys. According to Peck, we achieve Emptiness when we can honestly ask ourselves what gets in the way of our ability to listen and learn from one another, to be emotionally mature. If we can honestly address this question in ourselves, we can open ourselves to others more fully without feeling the need to fix or convert others to our way of thinking. It is, in the words of Martin Buber, being in an “I—Thou” relationship. One that acknowledges the humanity of both (or all) people involved.

It is during Emptiness that we can acknowledge that we carry obstacles and barriers that prevent us from being present and from seeing a situation clearly. We begin to recognize that we may have a need to control, manipulate, fix or win. Moving through Emptiness requires that we use “I” statements because using “I” statements compels us to take responsibility for our thoughts and feelings, providing more information about who we really are. Reflecting and offering feedback are also essential to be sure that we understand and hear correctly what the others are trying to say. Every time we do this, we risk. And that risk is the greatest gift we can bring to a community because with it, we bring our vulnerability.

It is only by going through Emptiness that a group can enter true Community. This deep level of vulnerability is crucial if we are to share and express our true feelings, beliefs and ideas. The honest exposure of ourselves is what brings us to the deep level of community that we seek and yearn for as human beings. In the words of M. Scott Peck, “There can be no vulnerability without risk; there can be no community without vulnerability; there can be no peace—and ultimately no life— without community.” In True Community we come to see each member and their differences as valuable and essential. We experience deep healing and mystery. Linda Weltner writes: “Over time, givers become receivers, teachers get a chance to learn, leaders discover how to follow, and visa versa. In a culture obsessed with issues of individual freedom, a religious community teaches what it takes to join forces: the habit of forgiveness, the art of tolerance, a willingness to compromise and an appreciation for the value of everyones contribution.”

The community is involved, committed and all are ready to honestly participate in decision-making. True Community does not mean that we will experience blissful joy all the time. On the contrary, as human beings we will always have conflict. True community means that when we experience conflict we will address it right away, with honesty and integrity, not allowing it to move under the surface to fester and ooze.

Peck goes on in his book to warn that this deep level of community is difficult to maintain and often groups move back into Chaos and Pseudocommunity and must work their way back to True Community again and again. But one of the beautiful things about being a Unitarian Universalist is living in the questions and living in the process. If a group is truly going to become a community, it's members must be willing to face Emptiness. We must be willing to stop and ask ourselves what is getting in the way of our listening and understanding one another. We need to be willing to let go of the outcome and allow it to become what it will in all it's richness and color. If we do not, we become like the archer that the Taoist philosopher Chaung Tzu speaks of:

When an archer is shooting for nothing she has all her skill.

If she shoots for a brass buckle she is already nervous.

If she shoots for a prize of gold she goes blind, or sees two targets—

She is out of her mind!

Her skill has not changed. But the prize divides her.

She cares.

He thinks more of winning than of shooting.

And the need to win drains him of power.

Community requires honesty, integrity, and a willingness of each member to grow and learn. It requires that we seek our own path with compassion and that we support the paths of others with the same compassion and love. Becoming a True Community can bring great joy and great pain. We can be renewed and invigorated. All are welcome at the banquet table where we are provided the opportunity to be enriched by the vast assortment of delicacies that true Community has to offer. We come together as Weltner says “not to lose our identities, but to savor each nourishing morsel in this spiritual stew of ours.” We have the chance to be fully and wholly human, offering, with outstretched arms, nourishment to each other's souls and minds. Without this connection, we will all starve.

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