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# The FURROW

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## In Search of Belonging: Cultivating Community in a Diverse World

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A friend who shares my fascination with living systems and how we might incorporate lessons from nature into how we organise, lead and change, has been intimately involved in establishing an ecovillage, a living example of a sustainable way of life.

It's been a rollercoaster ride, with highs and lows, twists and turns. When I asked what the biggest challenge has been his answer was 'community'. "*That's been the hardest part,*" he said, somewhat surprised himself. "*Not the fundraising or dealing with the council or building houses or growing food, but living community.*"

We talked about religious life and what I've learned in fifteen years of working with people as they attempt to live community intentionally. Though the secular and religious domains mostly operate as separate worlds they have so much to learn from each other. To me, religious life is a longitudinal study in conversational democracy, decision-making and community building, and the best example I know of our human efforts to hold together well. Authentic community, when it happens, is rare and hard won. Its ups and downs, imperfections and flaws have something to say to all of us, particularly at a time when external shocks and black swan events suggest that more than ever, we need to cultivate these capacities and skills to deal with increasing complexity and uncertainty.

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I don't know what I imagined was happening behind the convent wall I passed each day on my way to school. A kind of prayerful tranquility, perhaps. I had never looked past the myth of perfection presented by the nuns who taught me. I suppose I bought the facade. Once I began to work with women who trusted me with

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their reality I often came upon another truth, although many put on a good face for outsiders like me. One provincial leader confided: “*Community really hasn’t worked.*”

Though this may be true for many and less so for others, community is clearly a mixed bag. Keeping up appearances or putting on a good face or hiding what goes on behind lace curtains is routine human behaviour. We all do it sometimes. The difficulty for those living a committed religious life is that its implicit promise was an oasis of authentic relationships, truthful sharing, deep listening and human kindness. With hindsight those dreams were probably unrealistic, but in any event top-down control and crazy rules actively discouraged real human connection and often put the nail in the coffin of community. No special friends. No walking in two’s, only three’s. No talking at all except at specific times. No conversations about family, or health, or politics, or faith ... nothing, in fact, that might cultivate the intimacy and sense of belonging people hanker after.

Yes, I know. *I know.* That was years ago. But we are all conditioned by conditioning we’re no longer aware of. It can be hard to break invisible chains. Many of the intra- and interpersonal skills necessary for meaningful relationship – openness, vulnerability, honesty, empathy – were knocked out of folks early on, or simply not cultivated. We all know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of immature behaviour by those who’ve learned to slither through situations rather than speak the truth and say plainly what they want and need. And it hurts.

‘Putting on community’ in any context quietly erodes the basis of real relationship. In a seasonal blogpost, sociologist Brené Brown confessed the pressure she felt to put on a show at Christmas and questioned whether the show really needs to go on. “When our lives become pageants, we become actors,” she said. “When we become actors, we sacrifice authenticity. Without authenticity, we can’t cultivate love and connection. Without love and connection, we have nothing.” She could have been writing about many of our lives.

One religious community, struggling with the question of how to restructure in light of declining numbers and increased frailty put it this way: There are so few of us, in theory we could buy a small hotel and move in. But the simple fact is, we don’t like each other.

I found this both incredibly sad and incredibly honest. It shines a spotlight on a growing human predicament: How can we live together in all of our difference? In an increasingly troubled world this seems like an urgent question.

## THE FURROW

### THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Human relationship is such a delicate thing. It's hard to explain why it works when it does, and hard to overcome difficulties and restore trust when it doesn't.

The capacity and potential of every living system – including human communities – is determined by the nature and quality of the relationships within it. And complexity science helps us to understand why. Scientists involved in the early explorations of complex systems discovered that if connections are too sparse, networks basically freeze; and if connections are too dense, networks churn around in total chaos. But when the soup of connection becomes just dense enough, new collective properties emerge. The emergence of surprising new possibilities in any system lies not in the individual parts or nodes of the network but in what emerges from the connections among them.

'Connection' it seems, is the invisible phenomenon that underlies our existence. Relationship makes things possible and like Goldilocks and her porridge, the ideal is neither too hot nor too cold, but just right. If a community is too closed in on itself, there isn't enough new oxygen and energy to provide the diversity and difference necessary to keep the system healthy. Meanwhile if there's insufficient internal connection because people hold back or withdraw, relationships can wither on the vine and the community's capacity and potential decline.

I vividly recall the moment when the power of relationship and participation in practice crystallised for me. It was a sunny spring day, the Chapter was now in its final furlong and Mary and I were making our way to lunch. I was interested to know how she felt things were going.

"Fantastic!" she chirped enthusiastically. Obviously I was delighted. "What is it that's working?" I asked, presuming it was something about the process that hit the spot. I couldn't have been more wrong. "We're talking to each other. We're really talking to each other!" She was glowing. "When we started working on this we weren't able to talk. We didn't know each other. We didn't trust each other. But just coming back together again and again, has opened us up. We're relaxed with each other. And we're actually ... *talking!*"

It took a few moments for the penny to drop. She wasn't referring to this Chapter process at all. She was talking about the previous five years where the clear focus had been on cultivating a culture of participation and engagement in the life of the Province as a whole. When we began I had no idea that women could live together for decades and never really know each other. Nor did I appreciate just

## IN SEARCH OF BELONGING

how disenfranchised and disenfranchised people in religious life can feel. Naively, I presumed they would enthusiastically opt-in and participate given half a chance. And, while they did show up, the truth is it took several years to jumpstart a cold relational engine.

Although I often wondered aloud if we were making any progress, the leadership team wisely stuck with it, quietly keeping open the invitation to participate. And they were right. People kept coming back. It was gentle, unforced, but persistent. On the surface it may have seemed that nothing much was happening, but that sunny morning I realised that deep in the cultural soil something invisible had been growing all along: an esprit de corps that revealed itself at that Chapter in a powerful way. It wasn't perfect, but it *was* wonderful.

### CREATING A 'THIRD PLACE'

Reflecting on this experience later I realised that we had somehow created a whole new environment outside what were often troubled and isolated communities, an environment that sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls 'the third place', a neutral ground outside the family or the workplace where people with diverse worldviews and backgrounds can come together in an inclusive way. The third place is not a place at all, of course, but a process. Something we *do*. While 'relationship' and 'community' are nouns, through a living systems lens they are more like verbs. And a third place doesn't just happen. We cannot legislate for it, but we can design processes and structures that deliberately invite meaningful participation and authentic conversation, and in the process cultivate spaces in which community becomes possible.

According to physicist David Bohm, the word 'participation' has two meanings. "The earliest meaning was *to partake of* as you partake of food. The second meaning is *to partake in*, to make your contribution. It means you are accepted, you are being taken into the whole." Perhaps the 'third place' we created was spacious enough for diversity and difference to be accepted and embraced.

Still, the fact remained that despite the felt sense of being part of the whole, there was a disconnect between the high point of these larger gatherings and the reality back home. In many ways the strength of connection outside primary communities highlighted the sometimes weak relationships within them. And while this 'place' *did* provide sustenance it couldn't resolve layered and complex problems back home.

### BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Throughout religious life there are communities living with the poor behaviour of a few which can cause real distress for the many

## THE FURROW

and which ultimately cannot be challenged because structurally, there are no consequences: nobody gets fired. Some respond to all of this by withholding themselves as a shield against being hurt. In the absence of connection, some essentially check-out, opting for what's often described as a "bed-and-breakfast" relationship and look for belonging elsewhere. Sometimes they're judged as "paddling their own canoe" without reference to their community. In other cases a legacy of unaddressed hurts has silenced some and caused others to abandon all hope that community is remotely possible. As in other walks of life, hierarchy has had an infantilising effect as everybody waits for somebody else to solve problems that only the people themselves can resolve. And so while some people describe community as "a good experience" for others it's been "a disaster".

These patterns are so common it seems to me they must be symptoms of deeper issues. At a fundamental level, community remains an unexamined question.

## THE PARADOX OF DIVERSITY

In many marriages children act as glue. After they've flown the nest their absence can reveal relational gaps as empty-nesters come face to face with questions like, *Why are we here? What holds us together now?* Some stay put for convenience, some because it feels too late to move on. The marriages that thrive do so because the bonds are sturdy enough to withstand deep change and couples successfully renew their relationship for a new time.

An enormous part of living and working together successfully is determined by how we deal with *difference*. It seems to me that in religious life, the structures of the past, particularly the bond of shared ministries and the way that life in community was lived, often created the illusion of community, contributing to the assumption that community is something that just happens, something you *partake of* but don't have to *partake in*. Because of this, community is not generally understood as a way of working and being together; an elusive prize in an ongoing quest.

In addition, the absence of shared corporate ministry in recent years can reveal interpersonal diversity which is often experienced as something to be wary of rather than valued. As difference becomes a pressing issue for our entire species, this is but a microcosm of a much wider human problem. All over the world, at macro and micro levels, we are witnessing great fracture and division and all manner of social tension and aggression, as worldviews with their competing answers to life's questions, collide, and difference morphs into conflict.

In living systems, diversity is nature's best strategy. Make things the same and you make them weak. (Think, the potato famine. Or the perils of groupthink.) But when it comes to *human* nature, difference is hard, especially when it comes to our core beliefs which are so central to our sense of identity that instead of simply holding a belief, we often become it. The belief has us, rather than the other way round. Confronted by information that contradicts firmly held convictions, we will often ignore or deny or rationalise it away rather than live with the discomfort and dissonance it causes.

Dismissing new evidence or information may calm the dissonance we feel, allowing us to remain loyal to our worldview, but it also dismisses and invalidates the experience and identity of those with a contrary perspective and it blocks access to an alternative or expanded set of beliefs that might offer better ways to navigate the world.

One of the most contentious areas of difference I've witnessed in religious communities is the question of 'God', the Divine, immanence. No matter what any of us does or doesn't believe, no one can credibly claim to know who or what or if 'God' is. Indeed, not knowing is the essence of what it means to have faith. For some, 'God' is a dimension to be explored. For others, however, 'God' is a question that has already been answered. I have watched people quietly dissect each other with their 'answers' rather than live together in their not-knowing. For those who have committed themselves to a life of spiritual exploration, difficulties arise when their answers to questions of 'God' are not allowed to evolve and they find themselves living in a land of fixed answers rather than journeying together on a shared quest.

I recall one woman who faced this dilemma daily. Every evening, she could hear the sounds of the community downstairs, readying itself for prayer, and every evening she'd stand frozen at her bedroom door. Would she go down? Or wouldn't she? This ritual had long since stopped being meaningful for her. To join the community in prayer was to deny her integrity, her very soul. To stay in her room however, was to risk being subtly shunned and deny herself access to community and a sense of belonging. It was lose-lose all the way. And every evening, as she stood in the doorway, struggling, it tore her apart.

#### INTEGRATING DIFFERENCE

The hallmark of our development as human beings is our ability to take on more perspectives. It seems to be part of our hard drive that as we move towards more perspectives we move towards more

## THE FURROW

compassion and greater complexity. What once seemed black and white begins to look a lot more grey.

This evolutionary process – from differentiation to integration – can be observed at every level of life. From the cells in our body to the entire universe, every living system begins by differentiating. At the moment of conception cells begin to form and immediately divide to become a liver or heart or skin. However these separate parts only become viable when they integrate into a larger whole. A heart cannot survive independent of the body. And as miraculous as it is, a heart is capable of far less complex activity than a human body, just as an individual is capable of far less than a larger group.

Crucially, in natural systems, ‘integration’ does not mean ‘uniformity’. By definition, integration means *integrating difference*. All living systems evolve to the degree that they can differentiate without excluding and integrate without forcing unity. It’s a skilful balancing act. And in human beings, it’s not a question of being more or less agreeable: some of us have the capacity to take on more perspectives, and some of us don’t. As elsewhere in the living world, evolution isn’t guaranteed.

## THE PARADOX OF GROWTH

In his book *No Boundary*, Ken Wilbur points out that “A boundary line, as any military expert will tell you is also a potential battle line.... as an individual draws up the boundaries of his soul, he establishes at the same time the battles of his soul.”

In some religious communities, the battle lines were drawn years ago as they retreated into their rooms and into themselves. To avoid the battle they sustain an uneasy peace that consumes a lot of energy. In the vocabulary of living systems this is known as entropy: energy that is not available for the real work, a kind of tax on the system that is often expressed as apathy or half-heartedness or lethargy. Even in communities where there’s little negativity or challenge, harmony can easily drift into complacency.

We may prefer homeostasis but human beings grow through trauma and challenge. Our brain evolves when we are excited or demanded into growth. It’s a paradox. The more I experience difference the more I sense threat. But the more I move away from difference, the more I move away from my own growth. Our development and spiritual growth requires us to engage with difficult issues honestly, directly, face-to-face. Learning to have and survive tough conversations is what builds trust, deepens relationship and makes things possible.

The mutual trust between Albert Reynolds and John Major, for example, is widely believed to have played a significant part in steadying the diplomatic ground that led to the Downing Street



Declaration and paved the way for the Northern Ireland peace process. What is perhaps less well known is that the early days of negotiation were marked by rocky patches caused by missteps and misunderstandings. In an interview to mark Albert Reynolds' death John Major recalled a particularly incendiary conversation that moved their relationship into more trusting territory:

*"I had accusations of bad faith to make against Albert and he had accusations of bad faith to make against me and we repaired to a private room and we had a pretty furious row. But the joy of the relationship with Albert from the start was that, in a fashion I can't quite explain, we were able to have the fiercest of rows without leaving scars and without leaving either of us less inclined to pursue the peace process than we were before. It was a clearing of the air... I understood Albert's difficulties and he understood mine, so when I accused him of bad faith, I knew why he'd done what he'd done and when he accused me of bad faith, he understood why I had done what I had done. That was what enabled us to have a row, sort it out and return to the table. It was a relationship unlike any other I had during my years in government. I think we can say without equivocation that during the Irish peace process we became friends."*

Human beings are good at creating sameness but not so good at including difference and in contexts like religious communities, where people are highly motivated by the need to be part of a group, the desire to belong often conceals a kernel of insecurity about being included and accepted. And so the natural human tendency to avoid conflict and unpleasant truths is often amplified.

It's true that difference disrupts and disturbs us but it also holds the possibility of newness and change. The skill is to surface different perspectives yet remain in relationship. Social scientists observing married couples discovered that enduring marriages are those in which the couple knows how to *fight well*: they're willing to fight but they know how to fight without sacrificing the relationship. They have a strong intuition about when it's time to stop talking and start fighting; and they know when it's time to stop fighting and start talking. Fighting and fighting well is a dance as delicate as a waltz or a tango. And just because there isn't a visible fight happening doesn't mean people aren't fighting.

#### FREEDOM TO FIGHT

Adam Kahane is well known in the world of complex collaborations in high conflict environments. For years he advocated that to make progress we need to talk and collaborate with the enemy but

## THE FURROW

in his most recent work he has revised his thinking. The sweet spot, he now believes, is not simply talking but finding a balance between talking and fighting. “The mistake I was making in my collaborations was to reject fighting as uncivilized and dangerous, and therefore to push it into the shadows. This didn’t make the fighting disappear; it just drove it underground, where it would be exercised less consciously and cleanly . . . By contrast, collaboration that cycles generatively between talking and fighting enables a social system – a family, an organization, a country – to evolve to higher levels. We cannot make progress without employing both talking and fighting.”

It’s a lesson I too learned the hard way. In the months after that high point Chapter experience, I discovered those five years of participation and collaboration had been concealing an unexpressed fight. The leadership team had presumed everyone would want to participate and collaborate. And so did I. To create space for members to develop their voice and a sense of agency I encouraged the team to step back and lower their profile, which they did both willingly and skilfully. For almost everyone this was a liberating move. But to those who wanted to be actively led, who preferred their leaders to be presidential, it looked as if the leadership team had “disappeared”. To them, this new way of leading – cultivating the capacity and creativity of everyone – didn’t look like leadership at all. When leaders stop thinking for us and ask us to think for ourselves, not everyone is able to step up and step in. Some of us like being told what to do. Indeed, some of us like telling others what to do. And so they staged a coup d’état and reinstated an old, familiar kind of leadership.

Reflecting on that experience I realise we shouldn’t have taken progress for granted. We should have acknowledged that change inevitably means loss as well as gain. We should have addressed the disappointments and downsides upfront. In short, we should have surfaced the hidden fight. But that experience also confirmed that religious life is just a *microcosm* of society in general and whatever the context, change is a long road with peaks and troughs. As a species we are standing at a cultural crossroads and we must find a way to get past the inertia of the present and redesign our organisations and communities for a very different future. As we do, we’ll have to learn how to create spaces safe enough for change to take root and not to fall back; to be willing to fail and willing to learn; to sustain our efforts and grow our capacity; to experiment personally and collectively and have the courage to do our learning in public, so that those lessons become fuel for future efforts.

And so, in that spirit, I offer this story of *success, failure and learning*.