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The social dimension of community development:

'Bringing people together'

SOME PEOPLE SAY, 'HUMAN BEINGS are a lot like crabgrass. Each blade of crabgrass sticks up into the air, appearing to be a plant all by itself. But when you try to pull it up, you discover that all the blades of crabgrass in a particular piece of lawn share the same roots and the same nourishment system.

As activist comedian Fran Peavey says: '[We]. . . are taught to think of ourselves as separate and distinct creatures with individual personalities and independent nourishment systems. But I think the crabgrass image is a more accurate description of our condition. Human beings may appear to be separate, but our connections are deep and we are inseparable.'¹

Mike Riddell says:

Some people consider it demeaning to have a need. . . for anything else. They follow the illusion of autonomy. The teaching of the universe is that all things live together. Nothing is totally independent. All that has life is in relationship.

This is not a cause for resentment, but celebration.

The tree has need of the soil, the soil has need of the rain, the rain has need of the cloud, the cloud has need of the air, the air has need of the tree, and all have need of [all]. None detracts from the other and, in their harmony, they allow each other to be fully what they are.

Humans are intensely relational creatures. They need each other. They shrivel with rejection and loneliness, [but] flourish with love and affirmation.²

✧ THE POTENTIAL FOR CONNECTION: *'You are not alone'*

Gerard Dowling, a colleague of mine says: 'Community is created exponentially by undominated connectedness. It is more than the sum of the individuals. It includes the relationships between the individuals.'³

According to Fran Peavey, there is potential for connectedness with not just the few with whom we share an obvious and immediate affinity, but with all our brothers and sisters in the human family, regardless of the glaring differences and ongoing difficulties between us:

Those of us working for social change tend to view our adversaries as enemies, to consider them unreliable, suspect and generally of lower moral character. Saul Alinsky, a brilliant community organiser, explained the rationale for polarisation this way:

One acts decisively only in the conviction that all the angels are on one side and all the devils are on the other. A leader may struggle toward a decision and weigh the merits and demerits of a situation which is fifty-two per cent positive and forty-eight

per cent negative but, once a decision is reached, he must assume that his cause is one hundred per cent positive and the opposition one hundred per cent negative. . .

Many liberals, during our attack on the then-school superintendent (in Chicago), were pointing out that after all he wasn't a one hundred per cent devil; he was a regular churchgoer, he was a good family man and he was generous in his contributions to charity. Can you imagine in the arena of conflict charging that [he was] a bastard, then diluting the impact of the attack with qualifying remarks?

This becomes political idiocy.

But demonising one's adversaries has great costs. It is a strategy that tacitly accepts and helps perpetuate our dangerous enemy mentality.

Instead of focusing on the fifty-two per cent 'devil' in my adversary, I choose to look at the other forty-eight per cent; to start from the premise that within each adversary I have an ally. That ally may be silent, faltering, or just hidden from my view. It may be only the person's sense of ambivalence about morally questionable parts of his or her job.

When I was working to stop the Vietnam War, I'd feel uneasy seeing people in military uniform. I remember thinking, 'How could that guy be so dumb as to have gotten into that uniform? How could he be so acquiescent, so credulous as to have fallen for the government's story on Vietnam?' I'd get furious inside when I imagined the horrible things he'd probably done in the war.

Several years after the end of the war, a small group of Vietnam veterans wanted to hold a retreat at our farm in Watsonville. I consented, although I felt ambivalent about hosting them.

That weekend, I had a chance to listen to a dozen

men and women who had served in Vietnam. Having returned home only to face ostracism for their involvement in the war, they were struggling to come to terms with their experiences.

They spoke of some of the awful things they'd done, as well as some things they were proud of. They told why they had enlisted in the army or cooperated with the draft: their love for [their country], their eagerness to serve, their wish to be brave and heroic. They felt their noble motives had been betrayed, leaving them with little confidence in their own judgment.

Now some questioned their own manhood or womanhood and even their basic humanity. They wondered whether they had been a positive force or a negative one overall. What meaning did their buddies' sacrifice have? Their anguish disarmed me and I could no longer view them as simply perpetrators of evil.

How had I come to view military people as my enemy? Did vilifying soldiers serve to get me off the hook and allow me to divorce myself from responsibility for what my country was doing in Vietnam? Did my own anger and righteousness keep me from seeing the situation in its full complexity?

When my youngest sister and her husband, a young career military man, visited me several years ago, I was again challenged to see the human being within the soldier. I learned that as a farm boy, he'd been recruited to be a sniper.

One night toward the end of their visit, we got talking about his work. Though he had also been trained as a medical corpsman, he could still be called on at any time to work as a sniper. He couldn't tell me much about this part of his career — he'd been sworn to secrecy. I'm not sure he would have wanted to tell me even if he could. But he did say that a sniper's work involved going abroad 'bumping off' a leader and disappearing into a crowd.

When you're given an order, he said, you're not supposed to think about it. You feel alone and helpless. Rather than take on the army and maybe the whole country himself, he chose not to consider the possibility that certain orders shouldn't be carried out.

I could see that feeling isolated can make it seem impossible to follow one's own moral standards and disobey an order. I leaned toward him and said: 'If you're ever ordered to do something that you know you shouldn't do, call me immediately and I'll find a way to help. I know a lot of people would support your stand. You're not alone.' He and my sister looked at each other and their eyes filled with tears.⁴

There haven't been too many divisions deeper in the psyche of our society in recent times than our conflict over that war in Vietnam. But Fran Peavey's story shows that, with care, even a pacifist and a sniper can find some common ground, in their humanity, in which they can flourish together as a family.

✧ THE CONNECTION THAT IS RESPONSIVE:

'Therein lies the hope for all humankind'

John and Denise Wood show how we can develop that kind of connectedness across the divides that arise in the context of the controversies we face in our ordinary everyday lives:

John and Denise Wood are known for their abilities to bring people together. The Woods' bespectacled faces — beaming with an energy that defies their thatches of grey hair — have become familiar to people of all walks of life across Pasadena.

As chairman of the City's Centennial Committee, John, 69, worked with all segments of the community.

As Director of the Office for Creative Connections at the All Saints Episcopal Church, Denise, 68, works full-time to improve the quality of life among Pasadena's diverse population.

With their aristocratic bearing and refined accents, the Woods seem a somewhat unlikely pair to be at home in the poverty pockets of town. But building bridges between different races, nations and political groups always has been in their blood. . .

John and Denise's vision is deeply rooted in a conviction that moral values are not human inventions, matters of personal preference or personal inclination. It is this spiritual conviction that is the source of power which underlies their activity in the city of Pasadena. Importantly, however, their conviction is seldom expressed in sectarian terms which would only divide rather than unite the diverse constituencies that they seek to mediate.

This vision has been [applied in four ways]:

First, John and Denise are *wonderful listeners*. This is true at two levels. Before embarking on a project they do their research, which is a form of listening to all parties who are touched by a particular issue.

But there is another level to their listening, which is what has enabled them to return again and again to people from whom they need assistance. A conversation with the two of them inevitably allows room for your personal hurts and concerns.

There is something very pastoral about their interest in people — or might one say very human?

Second, they *refuse to be confrontational*, even though the very nature of the political realm in which they are involved is, by definition, a struggle over power. Part of being good listeners is that they attempt to hear the concerns of persons on opposing sides of an issue and then appeal to 'the common good' in seeking a creative solution to a problem.

Political realists will find their approach naive. And where Saul Alinsky, for example, would organise a march or demonstration, the Woods would invite the opposition over to dinner. It seems like a strange way to do business unless one's vision of human nature allows for the possibility that deep in every human being is a desire to throw off the character armour that falsely protects us from fears about our own finitude.

Third, the Woods have a *bountiful expectancy* that refuses to accept despair. The net effect is that people around them seem to dig a little deeper and find the internal resources to work for common solutions. Cynicism is a word whose meaning they have never learned. They seem to hold a certain anticipation that people would rather do good than evil, if they can only be supported and nurtured in their struggle with the demons of compromise.

Fourth, John and Denise are *honest in their assessment* of people and issues, *but they avoid blaming*. Most of us criticise others because of the feelings of importance that it gives to us. The Woods seem to derive their power from another source. Their conviction and analysis of issues consequently have a ring of objectivity to them that provokes others to examine their motives before propounding personal philosophies and programs.

While not exhaustive, these four qualities of character and conviction are, I believe, the foundation on which the various projects described are built. The actual method of their work has focused on creating coalitions in which people can seek the common good in their city.

In many ways, their contribution to Pasadena has been to serve as the catalyst for bringing people together who share common concerns.

What they discovered repeatedly in Pasadena was that there is no absence of agencies or goodwill, but people from parallel groups often do not know each other, or

else never get together to think more broadly about how their individual efforts might be combined to have a more strategic impact on the city.

The Woods' unique role was that they represented no interest group. They could think for the whole city. Their friendships with hundreds of people throughout the city, many of these friendships having been nurtured over leisurely dinners in their comfortable Pasadena home, enabled them to connect to each other people with common [aims] and moral commitments.

In addition, they were the moving force behind the formation of partnerships which empowered these individuals to seek higher aims than would have been possible had they pursued their own particular ambitions. They did not seek to engineer competitive agencies; instead, they sought ways to bring institutions and individuals into complementary relationships, which on many occasions involved interest groups joining together in common projects.

Denise Woods' career, and particularly her years in Pasadena, was not the result of careful planning, any more than were the achievements of her husband.

They were both very conscious that whatever they accomplished in and for Pasadena was the outcome of the organic growth of friendships developed with many people. Her latest project that opened up for her in May 1983 was the result of just such a friendship — one with Don and Lorna Miller.

Don is associate professor of social ethics at the University of Southern California's School of Religion.

When John and Don were serving on the vestry at All Saints Church, the idea emerged of the church making a major contribution to the city to mark the centennial of All Saints.

'I remember how Don came up with his idea of listening to people,' John recalls. 'The next question was how to figure out who would undertake to find

out what people were thinking. Don had the idea that Denise was the one. The idea came out of the blue, but it seemed irrefutable. The next task was simply to convince Denise!

In June of 1983, George Regas, the rector of All Saints, formalised Don Miller's idea and asked Denise Wood to take nine months to research the quality of life in Pasadena and to write a report on her findings as All Saints' centennial 'Gift to the City'. Regas made no suggestions as to how the work should be done, leaving that up to Denise.

Perhaps because Denise was a lifelong educator, she chose two avenues of approach. One was obvious — to study material already in existence relating to the city — and so she became a familiar figure in city hall.

The second was more original, for she chose to interview a wide variety of people, always one-on-one and by appointment, to ask them their perceptions of what it was like to live in Pasadena. With her tape recorder or notebook in hand, Denise tried to go with no hidden agenda of her own which she was trying to prove, but with an open mind and a desire truly to listen to what the other person wanted to say.

Those whom she interviewed often would keep her twice as long as the scheduled appointment; frequently, they urged her to go and see so-and-so. Denise took their advice and day after day continued her journey through every part of the city, talking with people of the most diverse background. . .

Every Thursday at an early hour-and-a-half breakfast in an office at the church, Denise had the privilege of meeting with three creative, unusual people who had generously agreed to become partners with her in this project — Lou Fleming, a gifted writer of editorials for the *Los Angeles Times* and formerly the head of the *Times*' Rome bureau; her friend Don Miller; and Denis O'Pray, a dynamic young cleric newly arrived on the

staff of All Saints Church.

Together, this quartet reviewed what Denise had learned during the previous week and talked over what she should do next. Denise admits she was conscious that the three were busy individuals and it forced her to encapsulate what she had heard. But their intense interest in what she was reporting kept her energies from flagging and her sense of hope alive.

When George Regas first commissioned Denise on behalf of the church to start this research project, he said he expected her to summarise her work in a report. The deadline for submitting this report was coming up in February 1984. By then she had interviewed more than one hundred people and had a stack of notes and tapes. With the help of her three counsellors, Denise went urgently to work and completed the report in time to present it to a meeting of the church vestry.

As the four were finalising the report, the thought crystallised in their minds that there was an urgent need to continue Denise's work. For O'Pray, the commitment was to answer polarisation in Pasadena, but for Denise the imperative was to face the needs of its children.

Once, while Denise was driving with Miller and O'Pray down Orange Grove Avenue wondering together just what shape that continuing commitment should take, into Leon Miller's mind came the thought 'creative connections'.

'I realised,' he said later, 'that what Denise was doing was much more than listening to people. In the course of that listening, she discovered that a lot of people in the city did not know that others were thinking similar thoughts. So part of her role was as a kind of gadfly to connect people informally.'

And so it came about that Denise incorporated into the final section of her report to the church's vestry the proposal that they create 'an Office for Creative Con-

nections' to continue the work of research, but also to draw together the many individuals and agencies she was finding who wanted to improve the quality of life of Pasadena.

When she had finished presenting her report to the vestry, they not only gave her a standing ovation, but enthusiastically approved her proposal. So the Office for Creative Connections came into being with Denise named its first director. The vestry also underwrote the budget, providing salaries for a director and a part-time assistant along with office space and services. Five years later, Denise looked back at this time and said, 'It is wonderful the way that this church sent us out freely into the community, waiting to see what would be the fruit of this effort, making no demands that the work fit a certain pattern.'

Published in book form under the title, *Experiencing Pasadena*, Denise's finalised report revealed Pasadena as 'a community in pain', as well as being the City of Roses. Poverty, hunger, homelessness, family violence, unemployment and substandard housing were powerful realities which Denise documented with anecdotes and statistics.

Through it all, Denise described what she called the 'green shoots of hope' — activities where the quality of care, leadership and commitment, much more than the dollars spent, made a crucial difference in bringing hope into people's lives.

There was a wide range of resources already active and vital to the city which Denise described, followed by two specific suggestions in the section, 'This We Must Do', where she focused on two imperatives she felt were crucial to the well-being of the city:

1. Pasadena must not be allowed to be a polarised city — one part poor and one part rich.
2. The quality of life of all of Pasadena's young people must command the highest concern.

Denise concluded *Experiencing Pasadena* by making clear the ongoing commitment of the Office for Creative Connections which would have four major functions:

1. To *listen* one-on-one in order to keep aware of people's current perceptions;
2. To *connect* individuals and groups who, by better understanding each other's aspirations, could make a vital difference in the resolution of the city's problems;
3. To *speak* out on current issues related to the two imperatives outlined in the report; and
4. To *act* by bringing into being from time to time programs or enterprises to improve the quality of life of the city.

The Office for Creative Connections would operate in conjunction with many individuals and institutions who were already active and showing their concern for the quality of life of Pasadena.

Publication of this book catapulted Denise into public life, for it was widely circulated. Soon she was in demand as a speaker and her advice was sought by an increasing number of organisations and individuals.⁵

The connections she was able to make with people once she became so well-known enabled her to put influential and determined people of goodwill in touch with the needy. These ranged from the mayor of Pasadena and his staff at city hall, to a highly experienced social worker with a great deal of energy, to parents who had had children taken away from them, to a dynamic, articulate woman from the affluent end of town who had never had dealings with non-whites, to children who had suffered abuse. She was able to make connections between these people and encourage them to cooperate in important endeavours.

On the release of a new book by Denise Woods, the *Pasadena Star-News* on June 24, 1987 had this editorial labelled, 'Growing Up':

It is all too easy to despair about the world's woes over which individuals seem to have little or no control. The seemingly unending list of problems make it difficult to imagine that solutions to many of the most pressing social problems begin at home.

Denise Wood, the author of two reports on life in Pasadena, has zeroed in on as big a chunk of the overall problem as exists under one roof — children.

Armed with the cold, hard facts about modern society's most defenseless victims, Wood is confronting head-on the outmoded conventional wisdom with which society approaches so much of what is wrong in the 80s and is struggling mightily to bury the rationalisations by which so many adults choose to ignore what is undeniably a growing cancer threatening the very existence of the family.

Her primary tools for unearthing creative solutions to the underlying causes of gangs, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, youth crime and joblessness are hard work and hope.

The messages of Wood's new book, *Growing Up In Pasadena*, are a direct offspring of the conclusions of *Experiencing Pasadena*, her first report on the quality of life in the city. Reminding parents that what happens to all children is important to everyone is an eternal verity to which too little energy and too much lip service is too often paid.

Growing Up In Pasadena is a clarion call for mobilisation in a time of bewildering fragmentation. Wood's timely exhortation for togetherness is itself part of the solution, for it reminds us all of the universal need to 'love thy neighbour'. Therein lies the hope of a brighter future for all humankind.⁶

Denise and John's response to the city of Pasadena has been a very inspiring example for Ange and I as we have considered what kind of response we ought to