

THE FUTURE OF THE TOWN MEETING

One way in which we have functioned is to do and then figure out what we did. I recall at the Guardians meeting, when someone wanted clarity on a trek, the response was, "We don't know yet because the treks aren't back."

We need to think together about where we are going with the Community Forum, what role it plays, and what its future is going to be. It strikes me that the title of this talk, "The Future of Town Meeting," should be the "Future of Human Settlement," or the "Future of Humankind." It is about the spirit of human beings.

I want to say a bit about the global data from the past year. At the 1976 Global Council we said that we would have the initial phase of Community Forum in India. That was done, with 41. We said that we would initiate in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, and that was done, with 32. We said we would have a demonstration phase in Sydney; that was done with 14. We said that we would do initiation in Suva. That was done with 27. We said we would initiate in Europe; that was done, with 26. We said we would have demonstration in Kinshasa; that was done with one. We said that we would accelerate in Nairobi, and that was done with 22. We said we would have initiation in Caracas; that was done with 3. We said we would only do research in Lima but we did a Town Meeting. We said we would only do preparation in Cairo but we did two Town Meetings there. We did what we said had to happen in the phasing of Global Community Forum in the past year and that shocked me. I did not know that this had really happened.

I want to talk about possible strategies for the future but first I want to say a word about "releasing discoveries" that I experienced this year, discoveries about the masses and configuration of forums.

The discoveries were first about what Community Forum is not. In the midst of several campaigns, it is difficult to get that clear to yourself -- what it is and what it is not, because we are wearing so many 'hats' at one time. I said to myself, (1) It is not a consult. We have consults with the Human Development Projects spending three or four days working through clarity on proposals and tactics. Community Forum is not a mini-consult. The emphasis in Community Forum is not radical clarity on the contradictions or the proposals. (2) It is not training. It is not a time when we step aside and spend a great deal of time explaining to people the methodologies we are using and making sure that they get it. (3) It is not formulation. It is not, in the first instance, raising the question of "How many colleagues come out of the Town Meeting?" Finally, it is not the launching of the Primal Community Experiment.

Rightly or wrongly, once I got that said to myself, I had to say, "What is it, then, if it is none of those things?" My first response then, was: It is eventfulness in uneventful locales. It is the happening which gives people the possibility of seeing through to just what might be if they were able to get it together; to see what human community and the participation of human beings might be.

It struck me that finally what Community Forum is, is a resolve. It is a resolve to care, to be responsible for this community, that people shall again participate in their decision-making. It is bringing self-consciousness to that resolve. More often than not, that resolve is articulated in the Town Meeting itself, with such words as: "We must have another Town Meeting next quarter, next year. We must always have a Town Meeting." The number of places that have actually picked up on that resolve is increasing.

The other discovery that I had to remake is an old one. It is that Global Community Forum is a singular campaign: Just as there is one Global Social Demonstration which is all of the projects, so too, there is one Global Community Forum, which is in all of the nations. There is a Town Meeting, but there is one campaign, which is about human awakening across the globe. Unless our emphasis is upon the totality of that campaign, we will get sucked into Community Forum being "consult, training, formulation or primal community launch," and we will be in trouble relative to the massive sweep of human awakening, which is the task of this particular campaign. I was particularly impacted yesterday when Mr. Owens of U.S. A.I.D. said that the key issue in both developed and developing nations of the globe is participation.

Now, the future. As I looked at the Community Forum actuation timeline from last year, it stated that North America is going to do acceleration for 1976-77 and 1977-78. Not until 1978-79 was it going to move to mass impact. From what we discovered this year, globally, not just in North America, this whole timeline must be moved up. This is the time for the mass impact of community human awakening across the globe. This is the time we need to do that. We are about thinking in terms of the big picture. We need to think beyond a particular Town Meeting to massive sweeping waves, across the geography. I had to get my mind beyond one quarter and my work with this particular state or that particular town, and think in two or three year sweeps.

I'm still struggling with how social change takes place. How do you change the milieu? My image now is a series of waves across the terrain. You would do Town Meetings, sweeping across the globe, two or three times, until an awareness of this kind of participation becomes part of the milieu in which people act and becomes the way in which planning gets done in the community.

Now, what does that mean? It means rapidity is critical right now. There is a global readiness! It is not just Mr. Owens, not just us, but there is an awareness of the cruciality of the participation of local community and local man in the decision-making processes across the globe. This is a more acute awareness than we have had for a long, long time. I do not know how long that acute awareness will remain but our task has always been to be ready to respond and move on the trends that are present. We must, therefore, move beyond one single touch with a community in depth, to rapid, quick, awakening events across the whole terrain. Because of the rapid expansion of Global Social Demonstration, Global Community Forum is the softening up, the cushioning, the awareness that needs to take place in all areas where Global Social Demonstration is replicating and is being initiated this year.

Mass Impact is needed as a demonstrable sign; a sign so that people see the conviction of belief in the potential of local humanity to be its own solution. Those signs need to be everywhere, quickly. In the United States, we are riding upon a wave of interest in the Town Meeting -- not "our Town Meeting -- but in the whole idea of participation. The time of the Carter administration gives us a kind of rider that we must not negate or waste.

Now, how in the world will we do this across the globe and do it quickly? We discovered in our task force that approximately one third of the visited communities have Town Meetings. That is better than it was a year ago. One of our colleagues figured out a year ago, that to do 5,000 Town Meetings at the rate we were then doing them, we were going to have to visit 45,000 communities. With what we now know, with the growing track record and the awareness of networks about what happens in Town Meeting, I believe that we can cut that to one in two this year rather than one in three.

I do want to say this about towns that are visited; they are part of the awakening. For awhile, when we weren't having any Town Meetings, I had a wonderful story that I told myself. It didn't really matter if those communities held Town Meetings because they were made conscious of Town Meeting because you had visited them. You can tell yourself incredible stories that support your failure. There is a value, nevertheless, for the communities that have had to come to terms with the question of participatory democracy and the question of engagement of local citizens, whether they say "yea" or "nay." That is part of the mass awakening taking place now.

A second thing is, we need intensification of Town Meeting. We need trans-rational, replicable plans that can be used anywhere in the globe and that would be possible to give away. The time is coming soon when community forums will move out of our hands and into the social structures. That is a quantum leap for us. It means bracketing a number of "precious values" we have about this Town Meeting or that Town Meeting.

I want to read to you some brooding on what we need to be about. First of all, we must have rapid, massive coverage of the geography. This, I believe, is the first priority of the year. We need to have focused geographical campaigns. We need to do those in a delimited period of time. At no time should a particular thrust be more than 13 weeks in length. One of the learnings of the last two years comes from Sun Tsu. The protracted war is very expensive in terms of troops for the result of the number of "hills taken."

The turf of the campaigns should be commonly understood political units--the county and the townships--and their equivalents in whatever country we are in. We must do massive coverage in a determined turf, in a plan to sweep the whole thing. It would be tremendous and is probably absolutely necessary that the entire U.S. map be covered in the coming year.

Another thing that will make it possible to do this massively across the globe is that we venture with a team doing somewhere between ten and 25 (depending upon the terrain) Town Meetings per quarter. It can be done. However, a team alone, apart from a corporate thrust, in a campaign, cannot do ten to 25. There is no way to

sustain your activity, your spirit, your clear analysis. It requires a corporate effort of three or four or more teams functioning together in a common thrust to make that kind of move. That would be absolutely crucial for this kind of massive work.

One of the discoveries of the past year is that we need to visit every town that is going to have a forum every week. Wherever we lost communities in the New Jersey campaign is where we were not 'the presence' every week; not a meeting-- that is the presence. It is obvious to us what that is so; because of the lethargy and despair in communities today. They are excited for ten minutes, you leave, and they cannot believe what the possibility is. That has to be recontexted, made real to them every week. Therefore, a circuit has to be so constructed that it would be possible to visit ten to 20 towns in a week, once you get the initial "yes" from those towns. That is about two to three towns a day which is relatively simple to do. Perhaps that is more terrifying than anything else, but I think that's right.

From our experience this year--and I think this is true globally--we should, perhaps, put our emphasis on the communities, the small towns and rural areas. We should self-consciously say to ourselves, "Next year, the cities." We are launching four major special audience programs this year which, given the year to see how they go, may, in fact, be the key to the cities. The work being done with LENS, the modules of training, the work in the schools and the Women's Forum may be the key to breaking open the cities.'

In New York, we beat our heads against the city for two and a half years. We did the city because we said that it is the major contradiction in society. Now, whether we were right or wrong is not the point. To know a major contradiction and to decide it is the time to move on it are not one and the same thing.

We need to look at the assembly dynamic. We had 11 assemblies this year. Someone asked what does the assembly do? That is part of the experimental edge of the coming year. What is it the assembly does? What is its intent? We have some data on that. One thing an assembly does in a geographical area is to reveal a network of care, the 'college', if you will. It reveals the people across a given space that together know that they care about the future of community and the future of mankind. I like to talk about it as "instant globalizing." My discovery in the two or three assemblies I am familiar with is that there is a cry underneath the assembly. That cry is "What we have discovered in terms of the network of engagement and care must not die!" It was not a cry of "Please come to my community and help me out." It was not that. But . . . "We must see further how to engage our being in this work." It is instant collegiality with the Institute of Cultural Affairs; instant collegiality with the methods and instant readiness to go to new territory and make the Community Forum a possibility there.

The leap that is required, globally, will not be difficult for the world. It will be very hard for us. We need a new understanding of catalytic action. For two years we sat in the back of seven-week steering committee meetings and watched one steering committee after another come and go -- I mean in the same town! We need to understand that catalytic action is seeing first that action happens in the town in order that eventfulness can take place. For two years we presupposed two things were necessary before a Town Meeting could take place. One was finding a cadre of people who cared enough to meet for seven weeks, for four hours. That is

tough to find in an unawakened town! It's not that it is not there, but in some places, people do not even know their potential. When a town says, "Nobody is the leadership, and nobody will take leadership and I don't know how this thing can come off," that is exactly the place where a Town Meeting needs to happen. It may be that we must take a more direct role in creating the needed eventfulness in order to deal seriously with what Bonhoeffer called the "ethical emasculation."

I've been attracted this year by the movie "The Circus of Dr. Lao," and actually acted it out in some places. I'm sure many of you have gone into a community and you put up the posters. Can you imagine Dr. Lao trying to form a steering committee and getting a decision to have a circus? He got help from two or three people in the town who 'saw through' and that's it! It was the awakening event that changed the community, not the preparation for it. I believe this is true for the future of Global Community Forum and it will require some quantum leap like this to do it.

It is obvious that the year past has given us new prowess that we did not have before in the art of maneuver, in the art of winning. In the year ahead we will be able to capitalize on what we've learned in these arenas. This is the hour. Maybe it means that we move all of our forces to Germany for four weeks or to India for a quarter. We need to open the doors of our minds to whole new ideas of what it means to allow the mass participation of local people for the sake of the creation of a new social form in society. Keep working on this because this promises to be a great year for the Forum.