

THE HAPPENING OF TOWN MEETING

That local man is awakening, is the first point that we've talked about all morning long, and he, as myself, experiences that the future and the destiny of the earth is now his life. The destiny of the earth is now my life. And that only happens when one deals with that part of the earth that he stands in called local community. And somehow, the awakened local human being now has a fire in his belly that will not go out. He just sees the rest of his life is about the task of creating the future. I think you all said that this morning, correct me if I'm wrong.

A few weeks ago I was visiting with my uncle. He was talking about all that he remembered in his life. He was remembering that historically the American people were known as the "can do" people. We can do it, we can do it, we can do it. A new frontier, we can do it. A new economic base, we can do it. Build new cities, we can do it. Boom, boom, boom. And for the last twenty years we just kept saying that. But, the story behind that had become: "I'm not sure." And all of a sudden we hear what we heard this morning and again we believe that we are the "can do" people. I suspect that that is our gift to the whole world as a nation. That we are the "can do" people. That is not only happening here and now. I believe it is happening across the earth. We talked about that this morning. It's happening in the Marshall Islands, it's happening in Japan, happening in Europe, happening in Asia. The only question, then, is how do we do it? How do we get done what must be done? What is the way?--What is the way?

A professor in the University of Cincinnati took me to task after she had been to a Town Meeting saying, "You've blasphemed the form of the traditional New England town meetings." I said, "How's that?" She said, "Well, people just got together and talked." I said, "Baloney! You had better look at some recordings of those meetings. They had a method, in those early days, of dealing with the future in those meetings. They had a way to get all the wisdom of the folk they had together to deal with the gut issues, so they could go out and get their practical vision under way the next morning when the sun came up. The question is, the way."

I finally discovered the depth paralysis of where we are as a people in terms of finding the way. Let me tell you a story that illustrates it. I was driving on an expressway and pulled up to a stop light. It's a six-laned highway with a little island in the middle--you know what they look like--and if you run you can make it all the way across on the green light. Usually you stop on the island. Standing next to the light there's a little four-year-old boy and he's pushing the light control button--you know those little things you push, I never believed they work, but you push them and something magic is supposed to happen, everything stops and you run across. He's just pushing like mad and he stops a minute and starts dancing around. Dancing around. Why is he dancing? I remembered my two girls growing up. There's a boy who's got a burning vision. What he's been told for the first four years is "Mature human beings control their bladder." But, to get his under control, he's got to get over there on the other side of the street. He's clear about his vision. The question is the method to get his vision into being. Now you take that boy, standing there going like this, and there must be 400 cars crossing this highway. Four hundred cars! There's his vision, over there, and he's pushing that button like mad and nothing is happening. I think we begin to experience what every local man experiences today in his local community.

Now, there's a group of foolish people around who say, "Let's try this way. Let's try that way. We're not just going to try it in one place, we're going to try it all over to see if we can find a method to make real that great vision we have of the future." They trot off to do this thing called, Town Meeting '76. And they throw it up in the air once, and it flops. They're foolish enough to say, "Well, let's try it again because someone's got to get that vision into being." And there are other people over there watching them, you know, saying, "Those people are crazy. But, maybe they've got something. Let's go over and look at it." So they go over and they become a steering committee and try this thing. And they throw it up in the air again, and it starts flying, and the buttons begin to pop that green light on. And, pretty soon, the way is become clear. The way is become clear. And you all know what that looks like. That the way that you get your vision in being is to stand before the raw reality of your situation. That's what that morning workshop is all about. That you are clear that if you don't get that green light on there's going to be a puddle on the ground. You're clear about your situation. That's why the mood shifts, I think, in those Town Meetings. Those mornings are hard.

Then, at noon, you dare, over against the raw situation in a community, to dance because you've decided to move, move, move. Can do it, can do it, can do it. You begin to dance. And you rock into those workshops. Have you all experienced that talk in the afternoon, after lunch, as just kind of an interuption? That's just because you want to run into those workshops to get those proposals into being so that your vision becomes reality. And you symbolize all that with a story, song, and symbol. And somehow you have on your hands a changed community. Or, better, in that eight-hour period you have become the new vision. You have become corporate wisdom. You have become the honoring of the individual. You have become depth analysis of the situation. You have become the practical means of implementation. You have become the new form of the community that is coming into being. You are the new community in that day.

So, in one sense, there is nothing more to do after that one day. The happening stands on its own. All that needs to be done in that whole community is done that day. But, on the other hand, things happen. We had one community call us up after a Town Meeting and say, "We've got to have follow-up." We say, "OK," and we literally can't staff it because our staff is all out of town. I was talking to my twelve-year-old daughter about sending her over to do the workshop. But, in the midst of their anxiousness to have us back there, it happened. Our staff wasn't even there. New leadership comes about. This community has a hundred organizations. Before their Town Meeting we did a one hundred organization workshop. Somebody mentioned it this morning. We did not know that there were that many people who cared gathered together in this community until we listed all the organizations. And then to have them, in one day of Town Meeting, experience working together, is a profound new happening. And they continue to work together. All kinds of things happen after Town Meeting.

One little story from Walnut Hills. I live in Walnut Hills, which is one of the hilltop communities in Cincinnati. Cincinnati has no straight streets--you're either going over a hill or around a hill or through a valley--and communities either live in the valley or on a hill. There are 122 communities in greater Cincinnati. Everyone wants to do their own Town Meeting and Walnut Hills is one of those. It's a changing community, 80% black. It was one a great place. Two presidents once lived there. Fourteen mayors lived there. It was once the place to live and is now in great transition. It's gotten ahold of itself. It had a Town Meeting way back in September. And then we started our

concentrated work outside of Cincinnati so that we weren't around much, but we would hear things. I did not know anything was happening in that community except for conversations here and there. Then in December I got a week to stay in the office and was invited to two or three kinds of events. Out of the Town Meetings there were three focuses: on youth, crime, and church involvement. I think they had 17 proposals but these were the focuses, the intents. I discovered that twelve churches were now working together and they had never done that before. They had tried for the last six years to get together, and now they were corporately planning their mission activity in the community. I discovered that the committee that we finally called the Friday Committee had pulled together about 18 agencies and were beginning to work on the whole question of crime. And I discovered that we were being requested to do a youth Town Meeting for the youth of Walnut Hills, where we would have 500 ninth and tenth graders from six schools who would create their proposals. Two corporations and one foundation are interested in providing the necessary staff and expenses to implement those proposals through the existing agencies of that community. And that's now underway. And that just happened.

There seems to be, now emerging, a method of follow-up, as there is a method for the day of Town Meeting. It seems to be something like this: You perceive, or try to identify, the intent of those proposals. What is the real underlying intent of those proposals. And then, you don't go out and do all those proposals. If all of you, after you did your proposals, would go home and lay out those 17 or 20, you would say, "My God, that'll take forty years. You literally can't do those." But, what would happen if you began to get a little catalytic event happening that would begin to spin those proposals into being into the community? So, you do them but you don't do them. Well, maybe that's a vivid insight into what the follow-up method is. That you create signs of possibility of implementation of those proposals. You have a hundred organizations waiting around to get them all done.

I've been watching steering committees more and more these days. A couple of them died right in my arms, but the ones that didn't die just kept going. I found myself a bit awed by what was happening in those committees. I've been in committee meetings for a long time. Something different was happening in these steering committees. What is the role in the community that that steering committee is playing that's not been played ever or for a long time? Somehow they're playing a new kind of role in the community that is a role absolutely crucial to the future of that community.

That is, when you get 15, 20, 30 organizations around the table for a seven week period somehow all the healing that needs to happen in that community gets happened symbolically in that meeting. All the old fights between those organizations somehow gets healed as they face a common task in the future. That is an incredible unifier. You unify the entire community in that one little room. A sign of new human care for that community. But more, I'm finding, it bridges the gap between all the cynical stories you tell yourself about how it's impossible to do anything in this community. Deep cynicism! Doubt! And sometimes the public story of that community is, "I do not believe that the future is possible in any significant way in this community." On the one side. On the other side is the yearnings you talked about this morning. The deep yearnings for something to happen. Between those two the steering committee bridges the gap. Out of doubt, into belief.

I see it from watching those people on steering committees and noticing the qualities I see in those people. They are people that make solitary individual decisions. They literally pack up their problems of their families or their companies or whatever in order to be there--a firm, deep decision to be present to the possibility that the Town Meeting event is. They just pack up all those troubles and plop them over there and come to their steering committees and forge a new way of the future. They are willing to risk a whole lot and they know that there aren't any awards except the award of engaging every bit of wisdom and energy they have. That's probably the only reward worth having. That all the wisdom I have and all the energy I have is being given away toward the possibility of this community being a community of greatness.

And I've experienced in myself, and have seen in those people, the drivenness. Just driven to care--driven to care about the future of that community and their nation and the world. You've probably said it to yourself. "I wish I didn't, but I do care for the whole world right here in this local community." The spirit of this nation is being forged in those steering committees. The new spirit of this nation, and therefore, I think, every nation, is in those steering committees. That we have become, again, the "can do" people who have found a way to move. Move it, move it, move it. Well, I think that's what you said this morning, and if that's what you said, I'm with you.

Let's just get on with it, huh?