

## THE MEANING OF THE MEETING

Global Community Forum was initiated in the Spring of 1975 as a program of the Institute of Cultural Affairs. It was designed to bring together residents of local communities for a day of planning and was adopted by the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Administration under the name "Town Meeting '76". Since that time 500 of these events have been held in the U.S.A.. In Canada the program is called "Community Forum Canada" and in Australia, "Community Meeting Australia".

During the course of these programs, profound changes have taken place in the lives of participants and their communities. A responsive chord has been struck that may well be crucial for understanding the times of change in which we live. Several faltering attempts have been made to understand the profound happening that takes place during these events, but none as yet has quite grasped either what happens or what it suggests about the future. The following pages are offered as another interpretation of the eventfulness of a community forum. Here it is suggested that these meetings are occasions in which sociological reconciliation occurs, events in which human settlements become human community overcoming the sociological separation that alienates man from man and group from group throughout the world.

All existence is characterized by separation, giving each part its own identity. In nature, this is simply universal fate, and questions of morality are not involved. But in human relationships, the dimension of guilt is added through the consciousness of suffering and willful participation in it by every person alive. People perpetuate their own alienation. Such alienation exists not only in individuals and their various aggregations, but is primarily a social phenomenon. This situation becomes institutionalized in society and is accepted as the norm. It is seen dramatically in the unending warfare of nation against nation, race against race, community against community, group against group. The resulting hostility blocks participation in a common purpose.

Yet there is no doubt that reconciliation does sometimes occur across the gaps of separation, allowing the course of civilization to move forward. Various communities establish and maintain themselves, including within their structures the dynamic of tensional unity embracing all forms of separation. Gaps, though they cannot be removed can be bridged, allowing reunion to be structured and sustained in the life of the community. This unification happens in a great variety of ways, often unexpectedly. When it does not happen, and hostility is allowed to predominate, separation increases and the community disintegrates, committing hidden or open suicide.

The dynamics of separation and reconciliation are always present in communities. Separation shows up in every dimension of life, as is seen in family collapse, increase of crime, alienation between different age groups, rivalries among service agencies, and division between union and corporation. It is manifested in statements such as "Don't expect anything to happen if you join that group," and "We've tried everything and nothing works here," and "Who cares, anyway." One of the symptoms of separation is "apathy" -- which when probed reveals a state of profound despair -- because the community is

painfully aware of its separation and it senses itself locked into a perpetuation of that seemingly hopeless situation. This is nothing new, it has always been and will always be an aspect of community life. Such separation is a part of all of life.

Yet in the midst of the state of separation, reconciliation can and does occur. It happens when there is a gathering and healing of fragmented groups; it happens when people sense that the community is theirs and they can effect significant change; it happens when those who have been trapped in patching up immediate crises begin to dream and plan for the future.

However, this reconciliation is not something that can be forced to happen. Communities hold endless meetings to unite for a common purpose. Sometimes it works; more often it does not. Neither does it happen when the community feels it has no need for it, either because it has glossed over the suffering and pain of separation with some illusion or because it has limited itself to relating in harmonious groupings. Reconciliation takes place when the community is experiencing the deep pain of its separation, when it appears that everyone is apathetic and does not want to participate in anything at all because of their sense of ineffectivity and meaninglessness; when in its despair one group violates another part of that community. Sometimes it happens that this gulf of separation is bridged. Sometimes the fragmented groups experience being reunited with each other in a wholly new way. When that happens they experience a reunion with all of life.

Since today in every part of the world drastic social change has accentuated the separation within communities, the question of reconciliation has become more urgent and inescapable than ever. Can the citizens of a community be released to participate creatively in the course of history? Is there any healing for the paralyzed, or hostile, or poverty stricken existence that seems to dominate community life today?

Community Forum is a one-day happening which enables a representative group to look at itself, at the symptoms of separation as well as the contradictions which perpetuate these symptoms. Those who gather at the forum represent the actual makeup of the community. If there is separation among races, generations and ethnic groups, then that same separation shows up in the Community Forum. Participants first assemble for an introduction to the day in which singing and an address on the human situation creates an unexpected unity, however brief, across the gaps of age, sex, race, nationality, social status, occupation, religious belief, idealogical position, etc. The intent of the opening session is to allow the participants to see themselves together as a significant part of the world, and to get a glimpse of what the future promises.

The first workshop brings out the articulation of the objective challenges facing the community, or the blocks in the way of comprehensive progress for tis people. The method is designed to produce discussion of the community's actual overall situation as a gift from the past rather than allowing the mere sharing of present prejudices about it. This insistent opportunity to affirm reality is the first essential element in the happening of sociological reconciliation.

A festive interlude at lunch provides refreshment between the first and second workshops during which people come to terms with both the limitations and the possibilities of the community's situation. But the interlude functions as

far more than a brief respite. Local entertainment provides for a celebrative honoring of the very community whose painful separation had been disclosed during the morning.

The second workshop is designed to enable a projection of the realistic possibilities given to the community by the contradictions already articulated. The method is intended to produce deliberation on the community's real opportunities as a gift of the present rather than permitting an exploration of pessimism or optimism. This occasion to project possibility is another essential element in the happening of sociological reconciliation.

In the final plenary reports are made and the completed document is presented. Through a representative number of people who express the change of attitude that they have experienced, the whole group becomes aware that something profound has happened to them all and, representatively, to the whole community. There is clear conviction that the power-flow of corporate creativity has been touched and that an illumination has occurred at the center of the complex interior relationships and external structures to which the name "community" has been given.

The forum's profoundly important outcome is reconciliation within the community involved. A happening occurs that enables the people to look one another directly in the eye. Police and citizens, for example, find it possible to bring themselves face to face in a newfound spirit of understanding; young and old, or members of different races are able to view one another with sincerity instead of exchanging furtive glances. Fear of one another is diminished.

The methods used guide divergent community groups and organizations into dialogue. Participants engage in a problem-solving process which stimulates listening and response on the part of all present. Thus local citizens often are surprised to discover at the forum's end that alienation they have known, sometimes for many years, is overcome. Their attention to each other, through the methods employed, occasions an almost miraculous dimension of reunion and futuristic resolve.

The forum is experienced as a profound happening for most participants -- a happening in which sociological reconciliation occurs. It introduces to one another those who care deeply about their community and it reveals their collegiality with each other. It does not create their care, but reinforces it with a sense of common concern that already existed but found no way to express itself.

No requirements for action are placed on the people or community at the end of the forum apart from whatever they may demand of themselves. And no religious or moral presuppositions are inherent. The very absence of such requirements or presuppositions enables the event to occur and be accepted for what it is. People find in themselves a new freedom to exercise their decision-making power. Perhaps they were waiting for government or an agency to "do something" and now find themselves saying, "We can do it." Or a group that was feeling cheated or victimized by an unnamable, unidentifiable force discovers that the true power for effecting action is found within themselves or hopeless "gripes" got transformed into challenging ideas or participants suddenly decide to attend the next city council meeting.

Another result of the forum is that groups and organizations discover they have common interests and experience a new sense of community among themselves. They discover a common ground for future enterprises. Not only do business people and employees discover that they share identical interests, but men and women discern, perhaps for the first time, their universal concerns, and the community itself begins to reimage its environment as something to be respected, as a source of wellbeing for its citizens.

An important aspect of all this is that the people involved come to realize the relationship of their community to the world's economic, political and cultural structures. They find themselves released to participate in activities beyond their own self-interests. This release comes through a true acceptance of their community in the world, and an affirmation of that community, for all its failures and deformities, as a unique and wonderful phenomenon. The citizens sense their community as a "great place to be alive," and this acceptance releases new vitality as well as a less "parochial" attitude. Partly responsible for this is the program's inclusion of methods for exploring and retelling the community's history. With their past accomplishments and failures acknowledged, citizens can start thinking together creatively about their future.

Methodologically, it is structured workshop methods that provide the framework within which this event of sociological reconciliation can happen. These methods involve the participants in a process of serious analysis and planning. It involves everyone present including people usually considered to be too illiterate or too academic or too eccentric or otherwise incapable of engaging in such activities. Provision is made both for hard-headed rationality and for unpredictable intuition, for the discipline of logic as well as the discontinuity of new "insights" and illuminations. What happens is a corporate event, rather than a conglomeration of individual discoveries. The use of provocative questioning techniques and structural writing contributes to this and helps make it impossible for the forum to run the risk of being "just another meeting."

Local community leaders enable the method to succeed. These leaders come together as a steering committee representing the diversity of the citizens as well as those who care deeply about the community, and who hold a glimmer of hope for its future possibilities. The very process of setting up the Community Forum, often reveals to this group that it can act out of the image of victory rather than defeat, and this process in turn reveals possibility within the community.

Community discussion and action groups exist in many forms, addressing themselves to this or that issue with varying degrees of effectiveness. Global Community Forum differs from these in its intention to deal with the center of human relationships in a given community, and to release corporate creativity toward facing all challenges at once. This, in the eyes of almost everyone in the community, even the most enthusiastic, is clearly impossible. "Apathy" is generally supposed to have taken such a grip at the grassroots level that nothing of significance is likely to happen, especially in a one-day meeting which is not issue-oriented.

For this reason the presence of strangers, an element from outside, is an important part of the procedure. This role is played by the consultant team who, as well as being familiar with the methods, are independent enough of the community

to be relatively objective about what can or cannot happen. They are in a position to provide a dimension that is virtually impossible to generate internally, whether this is defined as originality, affirmation, bold thinking, absolution, global vision or some combination of all those or other similar factors. The consultants are important not in themselves -- indeed they might remain wholly invisible during the forum -- but for what they can trigger through a kind of detached involvement in the community's life.

What is happening with the Global Community Forum can always be explained and analyzed up to a point, and needs to be. However it should be said in conclusion that finally what transforms a human situation cannot quite be accounted for; it is a mystery. What moves masses of people from "apathy" to new enterprises and creative undertaking is a mystery. Historians and journalists never quite explain it. How it happens that at a time of social disintegration and indifference and hostility this profoundly human and healing event of "sociological reconciliation" can be occurring finally escapes adequate explanation or even description. It is happening, however, and every effort is worth making, to allow it to happen more and more.