

PROFOUND HUMANNESS: MYSTERY

Global Priors Council 7/25/77

I've spent this past year working in Social Demonstration in Kawangware. This was the year I discovered that I was finally not in control. I didn't begin the year intending to discover my own frailty and finiteness. I began the year intending to do Social Demonstration and I did do that. Social Demonstration was done to the point where I thought I could do no more and could not go another step. In this kind of radical effective engagement, I discovered what it meant to die, bit by bit, slowly by slowly, illusion by illusion, and to be given back, how or why I finally cannot explain, a drive, an energy that knows no limits. It was also a year where I saw objectively people's lives changed, knowing that it was through us, not because of us, that humanness happened. And finally, it was a year of no escape. No escape from the demands of the community people, from my own exhaustion, from my own ineptness. It was a greatly annihilating year.

This lecture is going to resemble the other two which have preceded it and the next nine which will follow. If you're talking about profound humanness, you are talking about one reality. In order to get clarity on this phenomena of our time, we need to pull it apart, peel it away like the skin of an orange, or dissect it like a frog to examine each part closely for the sake of clarity and then put it all back together again. The diamond with twelve facets illustrates this. There is no way to examine one of the facets without getting the reflection of the other eleven, which finally give the diamond its brilliance. If you take one of the facets away, you no longer have the exquisite diamond you began with. Likely, you have something totally different, something inferior. By Friday, I am convinced we will emerge with a clarity we didn't know was possible. And that clarity I intend for an intern in Kawangware, who is a twenty year old Muslim girl. She and I have had exciting conversations trying to discover what all that stuff we do in Daily Office and the Common Meal is about. This clarity I intend for her. I discovered in living with her that her experiences of profound humanness are the same as mine. But she has no way to talk about them. I intend this week to be one when we discover how to allow every human being to have the tools to talk about what it means to be human, and to become self-conscious about one's own profound humanness.

Mystery as profound humanness has happened this year. It is that which divests you of all you think you know, divests you of your own will-power, destroys your confidence, tears open and smashes your idea of self, and replaces it with new energy and vitality that is unexplainable. That for me is the experience of profound humanness.

This past year in Kawangware, I became aware of the Unknown as never before. I think it had to do with working with people from another culture. Now let me add quickly that this is a humiliating statement. Once you wake up, you are awake forever, no matter where you are: in Kawangware, in Japan, sitting with your family or here in this Council, unless we decisional opt out for unreality. For you see, to talk about the encounter with another culture as being that which occasions self-consciousness is ridiculous. But that is what happened. It would be as appropriate to talk about my encounter with my husband, or with a colleague, or my sister, or anyone, as to talk about an encounter with another culture. When you are awake, the mystery is occasioned at any time, in any place. Mystery as profound humanness is experienced when the mundane explodes before your eyes, as in the movie "Dr. Lao," when you watch the mundane transformed. It throws back at your visions of the future, linkages with the past, and a great awareness of the way life really is. It occasions the awareness of oneness of all creation, for you see that all of life is one series of interrelatedness. It happens when you least expect it.

I discovered this one time in Kawangware when I was sitting in the library. My assignment this year has been to type catalogue cards for the library. A Kawangware colleague is the librarian. She is a community woman who was trained at an educational institute to be a librarian. She is doing a very fine job. She has assigned me to type

catalogue cards because she does not like to type. I was sitting in the library at 5:00 one afternoon, totally exhausted after a day of running around the community dealing with one problem after another. I had sixteen cards to type before 7:00. I was sitting there, making error after error, not caring so long as I got those sixteen books out of the way. I glanced up and saw her sitting at the table, checking out books. At that moment I saw her as a preschool teacher where she began, when she couldn't even lift her head to talk to me. I saw her as she went to the Kenya Institute of Education to be trained as a librarian. I saw her sitting behind the table at that moment. And then my mind went beyond that. She was sitting in the library with fifty people checking out books, and that is an incredible number of people in a community like Kawangware. Then I saw her as a community person doing the Dewey Decimal System and understanding it. It flashed before my eyes that the library has become a sign of permanency for the people of Kawangware. All this was in one moment, not three hours. It was as I glanced up from my typewriter and saw her in my state of absolute exhaustion, that the awareness was there.

The danger in that kind of happening is sentimentalizing it into something which would be nice to have but can never be. What puts it in this kind of awareness, the transformation of the mundane, is you discover that no matter how small the act is, effective action has repercussions as if it were in a pool reaching wider and wider than you and I ever dare dream. Even the smallest act of putting up the decor straight in the preschool, or teaching the people how to do that, has implications for all mankind. The smallest act becomes a necessary keystone in the civilizing process.

Mystery, as profound humanness, is acknowledging the existence of the radically unknown. It is not self-depreciation. It's not having done my homework. It's becoming aware that I am radically crippled by my color,

my educational background, my American mindset, and my neuroses. I have discovered that all my years of university training and talking about mass education finally taught me nothing about how to teach 200 preschool children all under the age of five, sitting on a cement floor row by row in a room 25' by 30' with two teachers who have a second grade education. I hadn't a clue, not a clue. It's not that I couldn't find the right book or remember the right short courses, I hadn't a clue as to how to teach them writing. Or, if I had a bright idea, I knew I could forget it. Bright ideas weren't going to get these children pencils and paper to enable them to write.

This awareness was brought to me startlingly at one of the preschool meetings. One of the teachers said, "Now, Lela, I really do not understand how it is we are going to teach these children writing, let alone health, when it takes us a solid half-hour just to get them into the classroom." I had no answer. The great educator had no answer. But, in the midst of that common awareness, I resolved to figure out what authentic mass education looks like.

I'm sure those of you who have been in a place where they do not speak English can appreciate this. The parents' meetings in Kawangware are held in Swahili and translated into Kikuyu which leaves out English. So I sit next to a preschool teacher with my elbow in her ribs asking, "What did he say?", "What did she say?", "What just happened?" And that's not so bad if it's just once. But it's week after week and month after month. It was a horrifying experience to discover I was not in control after spending most of my life trying to be in control.

Another illustration: a colleague in Kawangware came one day looking for Jim and she was frantic. She caught a hold of me by the wrist and we went through two floors of the building looking for somebody to translate. Nobody was there. She didn't know what to do. She started talking to me in her three words of English and couldn't communicate what the issue was. She started spouting at me in Swahili. (She has decided I speak Swahili because I can say, "good morning," in Swahili.) That didn't work. She started in Kikuyu and that didn't work. She became more and more passionate until all of a sudden she stopped, looked at me square in the face, threw up her hands, turned on her heels, and walked out. She knows what it means to have the unknown shatter your very life. When the unknown tears into your life and you dare to acknowledge its presence, part of you

dies. Part of the wonderful illusion that "I'm indispensable" withers away and you are left with an overwhelming sense of uselessness.

In the midst of trying to teach preschool teachers how to build rational models, I spent a long time trying to figure out what a rationale looks like for the preschool, using the wisdom that had been gotten out of a brainstorm. Then I spent a long time figuring out how you would teach it. At the end of presenting this particular model, I asked, "Do you have any questions?" There were no questions. Then I asked a question to isolate what we were going to teach in the third quarter in history. I got every answer conceivable. I discovered that they didn't even understand what I had been talking about. At first I decided that it was because they were Africans. That's always an easy cop out. Then I realized that it had nothing to do with the fact that they were African. It had to do with the fact that I did not understand how they were approaching the same reality I was approaching.

Finally, you know that you do not know and they know that you don't know. There's freedom in that. You are free to do what is necessary and trust that we might have to find another twenty ways to understand each other.

Mystery as profound humanness is inexplicable fear. It can either sneak up on you unaware or drop from the sky. You get assaulted, you know you've encountered the Mystery as the adrenaline starts to raise. Your heart begins to beat very fast. Every bit of you becomes paralyzed. I wonder how many cobra strikes around the globe went awry simply because our fear-filledness paralyzed us. You can always tell when that happens in a group. In the midst of the discussion you can feel the defenses when things become clear. There is a hush and all of a sudden there is a breakloose of bickering, a way to escape what is happening. This has happened many times in Kawangware. Once we were talking about getting lights on the square and someone said, "All right, what is our decision?" Suddenly, everyone started arguing. What we realized was that we were fighting against our fearfilledness. We all experienced the possibility of putting lights in Kawangware for the first time. When we got that said, we were able to deal with it.

This awareness has nothing to do with understanding a rational 4 x 4. It is not just beyond your grasp like a new idea or difficult to understand like a theoretical textbook. Nor is it simply being afraid to walk down the streets at night. Rather, it's like standing on the top floor of our building in Kawangware, looking over the blackness of night and hearing a scream for hours. It's like standing on the porch and watching. This is so horrifying that it paralyzes you. You're paralyzed not only with the situation, but your own inability to deal with it. Now, I am not suggesting that when there's a scream in the night, you run out the door. But the very fact that you don't run out the door, you can't run out the door and this is not what you are there to do simply intensifies the awareness. This also has to do with not being in control.

Finally, Mystery as profound humanness is the experience of a propelling, driving fascination with all of life. Has it ever dawned on you that everything you do lately has a powerful effect on those around you and happens in spite of you. Not only are you not in charge of your limits or the mundane breaking through between your eyes, but you are not in charge of your wins either. This happened in Kawangware often when you are walking along the road stepping over the sheep and goats and watching people. All of a sudden you hear, "This is the day we have, this is the day we have. We can live this day or throw it away. This is the day we have." It's the preschool children in the village doing the ritual in English. You realize we did that. Then you realize we did not do that. It was done.

It's like being on a development call. We went to the Canadian High Commission, and we were told that it was an in-kind call. So we got our materials list together and prepared to give him a proposal. We walked in and discovered that: 1) it was not in-kind materials that he was giving away, but money; 2) he had never seen anything written about us at all; and 3) for some reason that day, I couldn't talk. I was stumbling over my feet, and nothing went right. At the end of the call, he had me read off the budget figures required so he could add them on his calculator. He then said, "I see you are requesting \$16,000. Well, I think we can handle that. "I

could see that it had nothing to do with how we presented the project, how we talked, or what the dynamics of the call were. It had to do with something Other. When you realize that your demands are not yours, part of your ego is rendered up. You know that it is in spite of you that this happens. You don't have to worry about it. You prepare, but you don't worry. To begin to worry about my impact on people is to negate and block the inexplicable power and turn it back onto myself.

In Kawangware a woman speaks the most phenomenal English you could ever want to hear. You cannot understand it. She has decided that English is not a problem and therefore, she makes up words when she doesn't know the words. She talks and talks. If you understand, that's fine. If not, that's fine too. She comes to all of our meetings. We had a battle planning session recently where the community people came for a weekend session. We were talking about the fact that only they could do replication and go to India Replication School, even though it cost \$4,500 shillings. They were going to raise the money. I looked at a woman and said, "Who is going to do Town Meeting in Kenya and who is going to be in the Replication School?" She sat for a minute and then said, "I am, me". The whole group applauded. They saw at that moment radical possibility in being able to do what we had to do. And we were filled with awe and fascination. These events happen to us every day as we are radically engaged.

There are those events where the Mystery is so overwhelming that reality itself is thrown into shadow. That is the most profound. When I heard that my mother had died from a car accident, I was in Chicago. I was working on an OEO proposal. In the midst of this, life was so relativized that in standing before that death, I saw my own death. The irritating small things became totally irrelevant. This is a time when we have no personal problems.

Furthermore, the time of standing next to my mother's coffin was a place of power. This is a time when the category, "A place of power" is extremely important. Whenever insignificant little things begin to become major items, I go stand at my mother's coffin. But it's not just that. Looking in a mirror does that. I see my mother looking back. Being confronted with my own death these days has to do with having a birthday, or looking at the fact that my hair is turning gray. My own death becomes more real and problemlessness becomes a reality.

I've been a human being a long time, but this awareness only happened this year. Why? It has to do with engagement, with risk, with impossibility, with expenditure. If we don't get out and risk and involve ourselves radically in doing, profound humanness does not occur. Only when you are up-against your own ineptitude, the impossibility of doing what you've set out to do is your consciousness open to the onslaught on your profound depths. When you hide from life, waste the one life you have in doing rather than effective action, you are not in the position of being slaughtered time and time again until as for some of us, your whole being is shattered. Only after you have spent hours and hours, days and days, into which sweat, blood, and tears have been poured in a model and see it turn out totally different than you anticipated, can you say, "Truly, it was not me."

You become caught in a vortex, a whirlwind of the inexplicable, driven for no explainable reason, save your concern for suffering, to create the effective action, or series of effective actions, which will awaken men to their possibilities, either through Town Meeting or Global Social Demonstration. Now you've got your infallible model and are ready to do your action. In the midst of doing your plan everything shifts out of focus and when refocused, what you had intended didn't get done, but something totally different. A January blitz on development raised \$9,000., but also grew up our interns. We didn't do it, we raised money, but it got done. Not in control, but that gives you radical permission to re-engage.

Do you know why we had the best year of our lives? It's because we discovered all over again in very practical everyday living that life itself is that which we cannot understand, is continually destroying us, not all at once, but day by painful day. If we had stopped at this awareness this would not be a victory year, but rather our death knell. But we became aware that that destruction, that negation, gave rise to the recreation of self - a totally new

being who knows there is nothing that can be depended upon. And that awareness released in us a power, an energy that we cannot explain, over which we finally had no control and more importantly, we said yes---yes to our nothingness and yes to that inexplicable power. We became the people of the mystery. How do I know this? Because you're here --- that's all --- you made it.

You know why you can't talk about last year? Because you in your old terms of "my wish, my desire, my dream" did not do Social Demonstrations, Town Meetings, and ITI's. Something happened, as I experience it, in spite of me. How can you then explain it rationally. Its a weird story we would tell.

I set out this year to do:

Wonders and miracles,

And wonders and miracles got done,

Were accomplished,

But I didn't do them.

What happened to me this year was:

I was reduced to ashes.

The winds of change scattered those ashes,

Used those ashes

To occasion profound humanness in others.

What spins were set off for you? Where did you get pushed?