

GCF: CHANGED LIVES

Why don't you try this little fun ritual with me. It is a ritual that comes from the Upper West Side of New York City. Upper West --Don't Jive --Let's Strive. Those are some of the kinds of rituals, the kinds of things that you get these days out of the events called Global Community Forum. I would like to speak this morning on the experience of changed lives in Global Community Forum. I do not wish to emphasize strategies, as much as I do wish to emphasize the fact that across this country, these last few months, I have seen people transformed - communities take a new turn.

Three stories hold that experience for me. One has to do with a community in Beaumont, Texas. On June 5th a community in Beaumont had a Global Community Forum with about 180 people. I missed my plane and did not get into town until 10 pm. The steering committee had met at 7:00 for a few minutes and decided to come back at 12:30 that night to decorate the building. That was quite shocking. We all got over to the building around 12:30 that night and twenty-one people showed up just to get it in shape for the next morning. The next shock of that particular Town Meeting was the fact that it was going to start at 8 and everybody was going to meet there at 6:30. I said, "Okay."

It was an all black community and there were no youth at the Town Meeting. As a matter of fact, I think that the youngest one there was about 25 or 26 and the oldest one there was about 95 or so. It was a great happening. They began the morning with singing the Negro National Anthem and we must have sung it for 45 minutes before the actual Town Meeting day itself began. And this kept going on all day. They didn't sing anything that was in the book. They handed out the book but they wouldn't sing what was in it - they had their own list of songs: all gospels. They sang about following Jesus and having a Hope and if you dared lose your hope or if you dare lose your vision then you will perish, and those kinds of things. It was quite a striking Town Meeting.

That steering committee had worked together to pull off that event and every single one of them knew what their job was and had decided that they were going to have a great event. The MC and I went around to every workshop. I was amazed at the fact that every single person present--even the lady that was 85 years old--was participating in the workshops. I think what happened was that, first of all, we developed a base of trust. We told them that we were not the CIA or anybody like that; that we were not going to take their proposals or anything that they said and show them to the government or to the police. Once they got over that, we started putting some answers on the board and showing them what we were trying to do. Every single person in those workshops was participating and you know--you could not stop them. They just kept going on and on and on. It kept going like that the whole day.

The second Town Meeting I want to talk about was in an upstate New York city. We arrived Friday, my colleagues met me at the plane and said, "We have a real live Town Meeting for you." The MC had decided she was not going to be the MC for the day, first of all, and they had arranged that I would go over, talk to

her about the role of Mistress of Ceremonies and try to get her to do it. Then, the workshop leaders were to planning to meet and the Steering Committee was not planning to meet on Friday night. You would be tempted to say that it was a totally impossible situation.

In good faith, I went to see the MC, who happened to be the executive director of the YWCA. We greeted each other and she said something like, "Oh, I see you have on your red, white and blue bicentennial, hey?" I smiled and said, "No, I'm here to have a Town Meeting. We talked --and began talking about the role of the MC. Her biggest complaint was that the songs in the songbook were not the songs that her people would sing. I said, "Well, fine. You don't have to sing the songs in that book. Singing is what is important and if you have other songs that people can sing -- well, let's do it!" So she pulled out a little book of songs that the Y sings and we spent the next hour and a half singing campsongs, trying to figure out the right songs. That is how the whole weekend was.

Saturday morning came, and we arrived about eight. Now, before the Town Meeting begins, there is a ten or fifteen minute pause and you just think, "Is this going to happen or is it not?" And you go into prayer. At least I do. What happened? At 10:15 there were fifteen people there. The thing was supposed to start at 9 a.m. At 10:30 there were still only fifteen people present and by that time, I was worried. I called in the workshop leaders who had just met that morning, and a couple of my colleagues and we went into the back room. I said, "Now, what should we do?"

The workshop leader, who was with the Urban League, started saying she didn't know what she was getting into and so on and so forth, and as far as she was concerned, we could cancel the whole day and go home. Everybody began agreeing with her: "If I had known, I would have stayed at home." It was impossibility again. I looked at my colleagues and they had blank faces. I saw very clearly that the responsibility for that Town Meeting was on my back. I had decided that we needed to try having it with the fifteen people there. I had talked to several of them, really feeling kind of guilty about the whole thing, telling them what the day was like, and they were waiting patiently.

We had three alternatives. Somebody suggested that we go beat the street for three hours, drum up some more people and start the Town Meeting at 1:00. Someone else suggested that we cancel it altogether. Then someone else suggested that we try just the mini, demonstration Town Meeting to show the people what it would be like and then have them go out to recruit another one and try it in three weeks. We could not decided what to do, so I said, "Well, why don't we take it out to the group?" Very good idea.

I walked up front, introduced myself, explained the circumstances and gave them the three alternatives. They looked at me and the general response was "Hey, lady. I got out of bed at 6 in the morning to come here and you are not going to tell me that you are not going to have this Town Meeting." I said that was fine

with me. Now that postponing it was out of the question, I gave them something else to stew over. What if we tried something like a four hour construct, which would allow you to see what a Town Meeting is like. They said "Okay." I said "I guarantee that at 2:30 you will be home." This was at 11:00 and I knew that would never happen, but said it anyway just to give them permission to go ahead.

We finally got started and it must have been quarter to twelve before we got into the first workshop. One workshop. The gal from the Urban League got up. She sort of knew the methods, she had sort of been trained, and she started but kept going off track and you would have to get her back on. Around 1:00, I said, "Don't you think we should eat if we are going to keep to our 2:00 timeline?" And they replied, "Hey, look," (It was really humiliating), "these issues are important to us and we need to articulate what they are, and if we have to be flexible with this timeline, we will be."

Well, I swallowed and said, "Okay," but inside I was clapping. We went on and when they finally broke for lunch, the entertainment did not show up. Have you ever been to a Town Meeting where the entertainment did not arrive? What do you do? The MC was walking around. She was leaving the next day for a national YWCA conference, had not done any packing and she was threatening to go home. You were trying to keep your MC spinning on one wheel and giving people some sort of celebration for lunch on the other. During the silence, I decided to go ahead and do the New Human spin. Then in came the TV cameras, filming me doing the talk to 23 people. It was on television that night. We finished the Town Meeting at 4:30.

The Steering Committee had disappeared Friday night, but somehow between Friday night and Saturday night they had met and decided that they were going to give us \$600. The whole day had been a miracle and seventeen people who I had not seen before showed up at the celebration Saturday night. They were just ecstatic about the Town Meeting Day. I don't know where they had heard about it, but they did. The MC went around the table person by person, asking "What do you think of the Town Meeting?" Everybody had to get up and give a speech. Then she said, "I think you guys ought to have another one." They agreed: "Yes, yes, yes." She said, "Well, I have to go to a conference. I'm leaving." The director of the Y then asked, "When are we going to meet again to plan this Town Meeting?" Well, those 23 people decided to have at least two more Town Meetings in that city. The day had changed their lives.

The third story is of my experience in working in the city of Newark, New Jersey. Working in the big city is hard work. Town Meetings are not easy to set up. First of all, people in the city do not trust any outside group, but I guess you know that. If you are black, they really don't trust you, and they certainly do not trust your white colleagues. We were at a disadvantage everywhere we went. We discovered, however, that we had to establish a base of trust with some of the women. In Newark, heads of households are 80% female, and we had decided we wanted to do a Town Meeting there. This was after two sponsorship meetings where the

establishment and the grassroots people met together. The grassroots people decided they wanted a Town Meeting in the Central Ward, where the riots had occurred in '67, and where now, there were only public housing projects. Two people decided that they would do this Town Meeting and they pulled together a great steering committee. Every week you would see new faces at the steering committee meeting, but they wouldn't come back after about two weeks, and there was a constant change of personnel.

Two things happened at their Town Meeting. First of all, only 100 people showed up. The number was not significant but the fact that no agency people were there, was important. There were just grassroots, project, public housing kind of people. They came in saying, "There is no hope." That is all you heard the whole day long. "There is no hope."

At the plenary, a young gal got up and read the story of the Central Ward. Many black entertainers, including Redd Foxx and Melva Moore, have come from the Central Ward of Newark and that Central Ward has a history that had made it a key ward in the past for the city of Newark. As the story was read, people started crying and there was no way you could stop it. Something had happened in spite of all the chaos. The following week I got three different phone calls from three different people on the steering committee. Every call went something like, "Welcome back. We missed you on Saturday. That was the best time of our lives." It became obvious that what we consider failures are for local community, successes and in their eyes, we are a miracle. That is the kind of transformation that takes place.

In the big city there is a big yearning that has to do with community. People who are stacked up in those housing projects want community. They don't know their next door neighbors and they only meet them when they come to something like Town Meeting. "Oh, you live next door to me?" "I didn't know that." The other thing that happens is with organizations. The organizations that have come up in this country since '66 have been ones of grassroots leadership. They have become the establishment now and they think that they know how to care for the people, but they are floundering and this makes them call into question their effectivity in caring for the needs of the community.

At the Harlem Town Meeting July 17, all people who were part of organizations or worked for agencies refused to go to workshops. And this was not the first time that has happened. Wherever you go you will find agency people who stand outside figuring they are too important to go in with local people and dare to deal with the content of the workshops. They do not sense that local people have any wisdom. As a result, they are still caught in this thing of doing things for people.

In Harlem they had their own caucus outside the workshop. People were trying to get them to go in and they would not. At the celebration Saturday night, this was brought up. The agency people almost said, "Well, we didn't go there to be mixing with those people." So part of our task in the city is to be sure that the question for organizations of their effectivity with local community is raised.

You will hear local folks say, "What is that organization, anyway. They never give me nothing. We don't trust them." That is the attitude. The basic response of the people is "NO. We don't want to have anything to do with the city. We have to do it ourselves." And that is the key for me. Local man in the community sees "We have to do it ourselves." They say that over and over again. Read the proposals. Read the challenges. They talk about apathy. They talk about lack of interest and people are saying over and over again. "We have to do it ourselves. And we can." I think that is the realization. People in Town Meeting have realized their own power.

A lot of local people and some agency people attended the Chester Town Meeting not too long ago. One psychology student there kept calling into question the process and the methods of the day. This went on and on while the poor workshop leader kept managing to stand back up and try it again. Finally, I went in to work with the group. This student continued raising questions like "Who were we as the ICA, were we the CIA?" and other unhelpful questions. Finally I said, "Now, do you believe that you can change this community?" He just looked at me, and I said, "If you did, you would be writing your proposals now. Do you believe that you can do that? Do you believe that you can make a difference?" I kept repeating that. The student just looked at me and started writing. He got his proposals out. He had been throwing bombs and the whole group said, "We are responsible for what is happening here. Why don't you shut up." They began working around him and the group came up with some proposals. They saw that they had the key to the future of that community.

There is a whole new sense of interdependence. I am always amazed at the organizations that don't know each other. They begin to see in the Town Meeting that they need to work together, that there are ways they can work together, and it never occurred to them before that they could work together. It has always been a personality problem and the mission or tasks of the organizations have been forgotten. Through Town Meeting, the organizations see the need to work together and they see that one organization cannot make it without the other.

It is interesting to show up as an orchestrator. What do you tell yourself to keep going in the midst of these TM's? Jesus comes as a friend here. He told the demons in the leper colonies "Get out, get out." Well, I walk into a Town Meeting, see the demons and say "Get out, get out." The role of the orchestrator has to do with allowing people to risk their own wisdom in a Town Meeting, or with the steering committee, giving them the courage to go ahead with the Town Meeting. You show up at the Friday night steering committee meeting and people are all nerves. Somehow, through your presence--that is the Blue--you can say, "I am here to demonstrate with you, to you, that you can have powerful event in your community tomorrow. And this is the way we are going to do it." From that point on, Friday night through Sunday morning, all you are doing is demonstration.

When it is all over, people say, "Hey, we did that!" At the celebration, one of the questions you ask is "What were some of the funny things that happened?" You get responses like "All of a sudden we ran out of paper and all of a sudden there was paper." The orchestrator has the key role of seeing how, by being present and

in one sense never saying anything, people see changed communities, and people experience themselves as having a chance to make a difference in the community. That is the greatest happening of Town Meeting. You can see people risk and decide.

In the New Human spin you say, "Have courage, just dare, dare to take a bit of responsibility. Dare to make a proposal. Nobody cares whether it is right or wrong. Do it." And you see old women, old men, saying "You know, I have something to offer." You see young children saying "I have something to offer." You see the adult saying, "I have something to offer." They experience community as they have never experienced it before. And you get caught up in that. What you want to do in the span of one day is just to explode the possibility of taking responsibility for the community or having people see that they can dare risk one more step and change the quality of their community.