

ENGAGEMENT

This talk is about engagement. Let me begin with a few phrases. Engagement is a happening served by the Global Social Demonstration Campaign. Engagement is not, however, synonymous with the campaign. Engagement is a reality of humanness. In its profound dimension, engagement points to something far beyond human development projects. Engagement is a relationship to life itself and is inseparable from awakenment. In fact, so powerful is the phenomenon of awakenment and engagement that together, as they converge in life, something becomes manifest in history that mirrors the very adventure of life itself. If someone says to me, "I am awake," and I see that person is not doing anything, I realize that that person is not speaking the truth. In the same way, if someone is doing something and is not awake, that person is not engaged.

The important question is, "What do we mean by engagement?" In an awakenment happening, like a Town Meeting, there is nothing more exciting than the glory of suddenly seeing things that have never been seen. Have you not all experienced in a Town Meeting that some people just become unglued? They seem to hang from the ceiling and often do wild irrational things in that event. It is as if an 'Ah hah!' takes place. In that kind of event, people experience the possibility of doing something that is significant. I remember my own journey in this whole arena. I will never forget the awakenment event of my life. I was one of those who ended up hanging off the ceiling. An 'Ah hah " kind of thing happened; it drove me to rush out the door swimming into all kinds of meaningful and significant activities. My operating image is something like this: as you are swimming in the ocean of life, you experience the waters getting cold. Then, something happens and the waters grow warm and you think, "Wow! Isn't this great?" It is only later that you discover that you just swam into the mouth of Jaws! The initial experience is so overwhelming that you do not pause to ask yourself why it is no longer cold in the water. Then suddenly it happens: you experience an illumination of what has happened and what is required of you. It is as if you have passed by a mirror and caught a glimpse of yourself. You realize that something has happened to you, and your expression of 'Ah hah " becomes, "Oh, my God" You know then that you are hooked and that never again will life be the same. For you see things as you never saw them before. You also find that you see things that nobody else sees. When you try to talk to people about what you see, they relate to you as if you are from another planet. You have been awakened to the significance of the awakenment that has happened in your life. When that happens, engagement has begun.

When one has been awakened to the point of engagement, a decision must be made. That decision is either yes or no, and you experience that everything up to this point in your life has been for the sake of this decision that you are about to make. One of my colleagues told me that when she was young, one of her teachers decided to fund her college education. When my colleague finished college and secured her first job, she began to repay the loan. When she offered the payment, her teacher said, "You owe me nothing. I just hope that you catch the vision." At that moment, my friend insists she knew her life was on the line. When you experience that your life can make a difference, you become very thankful for all of those people whose engagement in life has enabled you to grasp this possibility. What a wondrous adventure it is to be awakened and then to decide to be engaged. It is like having an atom in your hands and beginning to probe its meaning. You discover it contains a billion of little darting bursts of energy, representing intricate relationships, schemes and connections. That is the adventure of being awake and deciding to be engaged in our age. It is a truly unique time in history. The seven revolutions of the globe are swirling; new relationships are being created and revealed that have never been seen before. The disparity between the 15% and the 85% of the globe's people has increased consciousness of the new swirl of relationships. The media and newspapers continually raise questions about how to think, how to act, how to care, and how to be a person. The only way anyone can make sense out of all these relationships today is by engagement in a strategy that is rooted in the burning issues of our times. Anyone serious about engagement must ask themselves, "How do I intervene in the complexity of life? Where is the focus of being alive and being human in this time?" We have decided in our strategy that the focus of humanness is community whether that be natural or surrogate community. The local community is the place where the questions, issues, challenges, joy, and pain of our time and life itself are most exaggerated. We have dreaded to interject something in the local situation to explode the possibility of being human today. That is why we decided to do the human development projects. They represent our decision to participate in an aggressive act: that of giving shape to startling, substantial excellence in visible human development. Possibility must be visible; it has to be seen. The programs and

structures must be visible; for that reason, communities develop industries, launch preschools, implement beautification and undertake land design efforts. But visibility lies far beyond programs and tactics. When someone asks me, "Is the project you're working with complete? Are all your programs done?" I have no basis for response. The programs and tactics are, for me, not the criteria for completion; the criteria is far beyond that-it has to do with the human dimension. Far beyond the programs, I look for awakened people engaged in awakening and engaging other people. That is the criteria for project evaluation.

Nellie Rogers is a ninety pound woman in Ivy City who cooks for the preschool. Somehow she finds herself doing much more than simply cooking for the preschool. There are site visits all the time. For a while, we thought we should know in advance about the visits so that Nellie could be prepared. We were concerned that she would be upset about last minute plans for luncheon guests numbering anywhere from two to eleven people. I have been watching her closely recently, and I have decided that she absolutely loves it. Certainly she grumbles on the surface, but deep down she loves it. She completely throws herself into her work, and each time discovers that preparing and serving those luncheons is the most significant thing in the world that she could ever do. She creates ecstasy out of nothing. When we look for something beyond the programs, we see what is happening to the human beings involved in these programs. They grasp the significance of what they are doing and understand in a brand new way what they are about. Doing is fantastic and needs to happen, but doing is not the same as engagement. Engagement is the immersion of people in the significance of their doing.

I had the privilege of being in Kapini, Zambia this last year, and I was so excited by the substantial excellence of the community node which includes the auxiliary house, the preschool and the guild meeting space. But finally what shocked me was the constant movement of people in and out of that node as if it were Grand Central Station! I got the feeling that those people were so regularly at that spot because they had discovered there a new possibility -- a new dimension of being human. To whatever extent the people in Kapini grasp that, that is the extent to which the completion of that project becomes a reality.

The auxiliary is the key to the engagement of people in a project community. I believe that the first interjection of new human community that local residents behold is the community that we plop down there. That is the source of their reference points; that is where they begin to see what lies beyond the programs, the structures and all the activity. The auxiliary literally mirrors what it means to be alive and what it means to be human in community. This is all very exciting, but my point is that engagement carries with it a great price. We experienced that price, and we know the people in these communities will sooner or later experience it as well. When they decided to say yes to that "Great Day in the Morning," what a wondrous possibility has been broken loose for the world and its communities. In that decision the totality of life is released and that burst -- that swirl of energy becomes evident. All of the familiar and comfortable patterns of life are called into question-- all of them, every one of them. It is not just the way I relate to the space outside and to the community that alerts me to this change. That is only the first demonstration of startling substantial excellence. When you realize yourself to be engaged, it is all of your space that becomes significant and transformed; it is space wherever you are that is altered: in the preschool, in the community center, in the basement. You discover that space, and your pattern of response and relationship to space, communicates your understanding of the significance of life itself. How one relates to space, time, celebrations; how one relates to phases of life; how people relate to being young or being adult; how one patterns all the dimensions of life--all these are at stake and are called to participate in the phenomenon that I am calling engagement. For me there is no "normalcy" anymore. One must decide what the normalcy is that communicates the significance of what one is doing.

We live in what used to be a school in Ivy City. It has since then been made into something else, but when we first moved there, everybody still saw it as a school. Late one night, in this fairly typical inner city ghetto where the policemen diligently keep their eyes on things, a helicopter began swirling around the house. Within thirty minutes, five or six squad cars from the nearby police station pulled up in front. Soon we heard banging and knocking and yelling, "Open up in there." You see the pattern of living in a school does not fit into society's screen of normalcy. We came to the door and tried to say, "We live here. This is our home. We are not vagrants or squatters. This is not a drug distribution center. This is our home; we live here." The pattern of living in a school was a new one, and people were being forced to take a new relationship to it.

When I was traveling with an Australian colleague this year, we met a young woman on the plane. She thought my colleague was pretty fascinating, particularly his accent, and kept inviting us to come and spend some

time with her in the city after we landed. We kept politely protesting, "We'd love to but we are really here on business." She queried dubiously, "You're here on business, on Sunday? Well, when you get finished, maybe then you could join me." We kept trying to explain to her that we were here to do something different, something that would not allow us to spend that kind of time. But she just could not understand why anybody would consider spending their time on Sunday doing something other than going out and having a great time. When we got to the airport, she gave me her address and phone number and said, "Well, if you can get away, just call." You see, changing your pattern and relationship to time is part of revealing the significance of the doing that you are doing. When that happens in a community, you know something is going on.

A man named Lawrence Glasgow lives on a street in Ivy City where the houses are going up for sale. In the District of Columbia when property is put on the market, the residents have first rights to purchase it-. When Lawrence learned about the plan to sell, he went from door to door, up and down that street, informing his neighbors of what was about to happen and saying, "Let's get together and talk about it." Then he got on the phone and called a colleague who volunteers time as a housing lawyer and explained the situation. They set a time for a meeting, and then they came up to the community center and said they needed to use some space on a particular night at a particular time. I could have held onto that moment for the rest of my life' It represented a totally different pattern of relating to a crisis. It was not the usual response, "I am going to get my family and get out of here as soon as I can." Nor was it the pattern of going to the auxiliary and saying, "Those people are going to do this to us, and what can we ever do?" It was a different pattern of handling a crisis.

When human beings have decided to be engaged in the significance of their doing, all of their relationships shift. There is literally nothing you can assume about anything after that. Relationships between men and women, between women and women, and between men and men, between elders and youth, between people of different races and colors all become redefined by people's understanding of the significance of what they are doing. I was struck when an eighty-year old woman in Inyan Wakagapi began to talk during the end of a structured conversation I was leading. She was not directly answering any question, she just started to talk. Before long, a man on the other side of the room started to talk too, and soon, they started asking each other questions. I could have just fallen through the floor. A conversation began to take place, because that eighty-year old woman decided to open her mouth and talk. That is what I mean by a change or a shift in a pattern or a relationship. After that event, she pulled a necklace out of her purse and walked up to me and said, "This has been in my family for generations. I want you to have it." I was totally undone. There is nothing in my grasp of what is normal that allows a family heirloom as precious as that to be given away. But she did, she gave it away. Something profound is going on in that arena. I am discovering that relationships shift. I realized there is no way anymore that I can dare to think there is something about my relationship with my husband that allows me to let the guard down with him or forget that I am still on stage, or think that I can dump all my cynicism, despair and hostility on him. What a difference it makes when you decide about that in your relationships with people. And what a difference it makes in human communities when people decide that other people, even the ones closest to them are not prey for every anxiety, fear and hostility about life. One is on stage twenty-four hours a day regardless of how one feels. When somebody is coming to the door in five minutes for a site visit, how you feel is not the question. You either get the space prepared and the food ready, or you do not understand the significance of that happening. When you understand its significance, then you pour your life into what needs to be done. In the project these days, I keep an eye on when people speak and when they don't speak, and how and what do they say, and how they come to meetings. With all patterns, relationships, and decisions, engaged people decide where to be intentionally intentional. In Ivy City there is a fantastic man named Ike. But Ike has developed a pattern of response: whenever life gets hard, he gets drunk. That is the way he relates to life. We have a certain problem in Ivy City which is part of the background for this story. People from outside the community come in and dump trash in our neighborhood. That is beginning to change a bit, thank God, because there are different patterns beginning to develop. We had a big campaign to clean up the lot right across from the community center. One morning, a truck driven by a stranger approached. The stranger proceeded to pull out an old sofa, a tire and a broken-down tricycle, and he just set them all out there on our nice clean lot. Well, Ike saw him. By then, it was after 10:00 a.m., and you can imagine the condition Ike was in. But something registered. He sauntered over and said, "Hey, you can't put that stuff out there." You have no idea what a difference it would make to that community if the pattern of, "Hey, you can't put that stuff out there" started happening across the board. We still see community people who just sit and watch strangers come and put their junk out on a clean lot. But not Ike. The man looked over at him, saw Ike was obviously out of it, and shrugged him off. So Ike went into the house, got a broom and ran across the street waving that broom and yelling, "You can not put that out there." And hurriedly the man

picked up his old broken-down sofa, his tricycle and his tires, put them in his truck and drove off. I do not know how you measure this in terms of completing a human development project, but I am convinced it requires that you get at the patterns, relationships, and decisions whereby people act intentionally, intend what they are going to do, and know why they are doing it. It involves, for example, grasping the significance of having people visit your community and seeing that as a glorious opportunity and not an intrusion. When people decide that the experience of being used for the sake of enabling people to be awakened to the possibility of community is the best way they can be used, and when they decide to be used, then precisely that way the community is awakened and engaged.

In the midst of this there are certain dangers. One is assuming that doing without grasping the significance will sustain people. Local people will get excited about doing just like we do. We can get excited about doing something because that is what we are doing for a while, but if at some point in the journey we fail to get said to ourselves why we are doing what we are doing, we get bored, angry, upset and frustrated. So do local people. We must not assume that once people have grasped the significance of their doing that we do not have to help them to create another whole reality or structure that allows them to remember that they grasp that significance. We cannot assume that they will remember it forever, just as we cannot assume that about ourselves. Furthermore, we can not assume that others will automatically understand the significance. We are subtly demeaning the capabilities of local people and denying the possibility there.

There is another young man in Ivy City who is sometimes a pain in the neck, He is still very much caught up in the very loud and very boisterous style of the sixties. One day, we discovered that the community person who had been assigned to host a site visit could not be present. So we called up this young man to host the visit and talked about why it was important for the globe. Just before the guests arrived, he showed up with his grubby jeans on to find out if the site visit was really going to happen. He just could not believe that he would be asked to host a visit and to tell the story about what was happening in Ivy City. We assured him that the site visit was going to take place and that his presence there was very important. He went home. I have lived in Ivy City for almost three years, and I would have sworn that this young man's whole wardrobe consisted of dungarees and sweat shirts. But when he returned, he was decked out in his three piece suit. It was just fantastic. So was his role in the site visit. This illustrates how dangerous it is for us to assume that people will not understand the significance of what they are doing; or that they will not understand the costs involved; or that they will not be able to handle the costs, the crises, the sense of emptiness, the sense of being mistreated, the sense of being abandoned, and all the other things that accompany a life which is engaged. People can handle it, and we have to figure out how we can trust their ability.

All of what I have been saying is an attempt to illuminate what it looks like for communities to be engaged in awakening the world to the significance of being awakened and engaged. That is what a human development project is. We do radical actuation in terms of programs and structures because that is how the world measures actuation. However, we measure actuation some place else. Our task has to do with actuating the league in history, the band of people who care. The league in our time comes from both the 15% and the 85%. There are no educational qualifications. There is no depth theological training required. All that is required is that one throw oneself into doing, grasp the significance of that doing, and radically engage in life. And when someone does that, that is actuating the league. It is a glorious chance to be involved in the "Those Who Care" engagement.

We have used the word "Paravocation" to describe this engagement. Paravocation is that dynamic which enables people to see and to act out the possibility of being about a task that is deeply significant to history itself. When you experience that engagement happening in your life, you see that whatever you do, you are acting out that significance. This is true whether it is typing, sweeping the streets, doing a development call, doing a Town Meeting campaign, doing a Human Development Project, being a lawyer down town, making a presentation, cooking in the kitchen, sitting in a room, or standing up in front of a room. All of the doing of life is subsumed in the doing of the significance of life; that is engagement. It is a solitary decision in the community. In a Human Development Project that is engaged there is a community of solitaries. Such a community has a core of solitary human beings who have banded together to allow a demonstration of human community. In the "Those Who Care" engagement, we see the creation of the new activity and the new mythology of what it means to live a human life.