Community and Possibility – An Inner Journey

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Mother Teresa said, “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” The vision of the Interfaith Council of Southern Nevada (IFCSN) is to do just that – change the world by creating ripples of peace, religious and cultural education, and generative dialogue. If we cannot change the world alone as Mother Teresa said, how do we change it in community? How do we create the transformative ripples of change? It begins with context or looking at the models in which we live our lives. “Nothing in our doing or the way we go through life will shift until we can question, and then choose once again, the basic set of beliefs – some call it mental models; we’re calling it context here – that lie behind our actions” (Block, 2009, p. 15). Getting into those deeper levels of context are at the heart of a community of belonging; a community of belonging honors both the wisdom of the individual’s inner teacher as well as the collective will of the group.

The interdependence of the individual and the group dance together in a slow progression towards change. Even when we have a deeper understanding of our inner truth, we often fall short of living up to the potential of what we know both individually and as a community. Parker Palmer writes,

Seldom do we live up to the truth we are given, but that does not mean we must cease speaking the truth. Instead we must be obedient to the whole of our truth – including our frequent failure to live it out. If we can do that, with ourselves and with each other, the words of truth will continue to be given, and we will be given the power to live them more fully. (Palmer, 1993, p. 45)

IFCSN is no exception to this slow form of transformation of both the individual and community, as well as the progression of learning to live from inner truth. It is the rhythm - community and individual, living truth and falling short of it, learning from our lessons and still seeking possibility - that creates organizational transformation. Through access to the inner teacher, declaration of possibility, invitation, and accountability, IFCSN and I can be transformed into a lasting ripple for peace.

The focus of the organization’s programs is primarily educational with the emphasis on breaking down barriers by building interreligious and cultural communications. The first is Camp Anytown where, twice a year, the IFCSN brings sixty-five Clark County School District high school students to Camp Lee Canyon to break down stereotypes based on race, gender, socio-economic status, and religion. This program has a camp director that works twice a year to organize and implement it. Once a year, United Way of Southern Nevada hosts a fundraiser for camp called The Mayor’s Prayer Breakfast, which essentially funds one camp per year. The records for the camp, dedicated camp volunteers, and inner workings are all separate from IFCSN, which has no current records of attendees or demographics on the camp delegates. When I attended camp and stayed for the first weekend, the camp volunteers said that they never really see anyone from IFCSN even though most knew that we funded the program.

The second largest program is the Fall Forums, which are an opportunity for the Las Vegas community to listen to dialogue from different local faith leaders. Each week, for five weeks, a different topic is discussed on a panel representing a variety of religious traditions including Christianity, Islam, Baha’i, Judaism, Paganism, New Thought, and Humanist among others. The panel discusses the topic from each of their faith perspectives, and the audience has an opportunity to ask questions. The forums are led by a long-time board member and volunteer who has developed her own community to support the event. Much like the camp, there are no current records of volunteers, contact information, or lists of previous forum topics available to IFCSN.

The third program is our monthly community discussion groups, which are held at alternating places of worship. Like the forums, the discussion group is hosted by two long-time board members and topics are decided in advance for the discussion. This meeting is for anyone in the community to talk about their faith traditions, beliefs on the topic, and learn about the ideas of others. The meeting is hosted at noon, which has had some challenges for working individuals. One longtime attendee offered to facilitate an evening meeting. When I asked the two existing board members about the idea, they were resistant to allowing someone who was not a board member to facilitate the discussion. I offered to pair the potential facilitator with a board member, but they felt it needed to be someone who came from IFCSN leadership.

The former executive director and program manager for the organization had limited capacity toward the end of their tenures due to illness, and the organization had no dedicated office leadership for six months after their departure. When I became Executive Director in March, the mail and phone number had not been checked in six months, so bills were past due and people had not been called back. The office had been moved a year prior, but it was still in boxes and the computer no longer worked. There were no financial receipts since 2013 and no accounting for the past few years, in part, due to a stolen computer. Half the documents for the organization where stored online; otherwise, many were lost on the stolen computer. There was no database of donors, website links and videos were not working, and no listed volunteers for the organization beyond the board members. There was no record of budgets or strategic plans since 2009.

Currently, the website links and database have been merged. The 2015 spending has been reconstructed, and 2016 budget created. The next camp will have an online application that integrates with the IFCSN database. The new database also supports QuickBooks, can manage events, includes donor tracking, does our email communications, and can also manage grants. I am currently exploring an AmeriCorp sponsorship or UNLV internship program to provide additional office resources as I am the only paid office staff and work part-time.

Organizationally, IFCSN is a network organization built primarily on relationship ties to the local community and larger interfaith networks across the United States. The board consists of twenty-seven members who are local leaders in different aspects of religion, community service, and spirituality. It is a diverse population representing many perspectives, educational backgrounds, and community ties. It meets only quarterly for an hour and a half. From the ties of this base network, IFCSN creates many of its programs and has the support of many faith communities. I found it challenging as a new board member last year to get to know the community. Many people have been on the board for a very long time and have a wonderful community amongst them. With the board meeting only quarterly and the large size, it is challenging to get through the agenda with little time left for community building. Just two board members contribute financially to the organization. Up until recently, there was no executive committee.

IFCSN struggles like many network organizations to create cohesive community. Like many network organizations, it also struggles to reach out to create new partnerships.

Network organizations also have a tendency to become more limited, rigid and inflexible over time. One reason for this is that ‘once organizations have chosen partners, they tend to spend less time seeking other partners.’ A lot of effort is typically put into finding suitable network partners…. Once organizations find suitable partners they are not as likely to put new effort into finding additional ones. As a result, networks tend to contain the ‘same old’ organizations who are not likely to bring new ideas or new skills to the table. (Conrad & Poole, 2012, p. 221)

The network that has been established is strong, but there is no information on what religious communities have participated in the organization over the years. Different board members have created separate networks, but none of the information is readily available in any database. The challenge with this network organization is to create a cohesive community by bringing together all the various separate programs such as camp, the forums, the monthly meetings, and the individual networks into a communication structure with the main organization. Each network exists on its own and functions appropriately in itself, but it is not inspired to be a part of the greater whole.

We are in the midst of creating a strategic plan, which is a useful tool, but visions and plans can only go so far for cohesive growth and a community of belonging.

The challenge for community building is this: While visions, plans and committed top leadership are important, even essential, no clear vision, nor detailed plan, nor committed group leaders have the power to bring this image of the future into existence without the continued engagement and involvement of citizens. In most instances, citizen engagement ends where the plan is in place. The implementation is put in the hand of the professionals. In concept, the master plan provides some parameters for development and the use of space, but in real life it usually is called to let the arguing begin. For all its utility, it rarely builds interdependence or strengthens the social fabric of a place. (Block, 2009, pp. 78-79)

The strategic plan will be useful in creating a definition of our goals, but not necessarily a cohesive community; a plan is simply a chisel in the toolbox of organizational growth, but it does not have the power of the transformative hammer of possibility.

Possibility is a far more powerful tool in the transformation of organizations. Possibility goes beyond vision; it a statement that pulls us into a new future without being stuck in problem solving the events of the past. Block writes,

The challenge with possibility is it gets confused with goals, prediction, and optimism. Possibility is not about what we plan to happen, or what we think will happen, or whether things will get better. Goals, predictions and optimism don’t create anything; they just might make things a little better and cheer us up in the process. Nor is possibility simply a dream. Dreaming leaves us bystanders or observers of our lives. Possibility creates something new. It is a declaration of a future that has the quality of being and aliveness that we choose to live into. It is framed as a declaration of the world that I want to inhabit. It is a statement of who I am that transcends our history, our story, our usual demographics. The power is in the act of declaring. (Block, 2009, p. 125)

Declaring what is possible for us both as individuals and as a collective community has the power to not only transform, but build something unique as a patchwork of its citizens. We have the potential for a significant new funding source starting next year, so it is the perfect time for IFCSN to begin conversations on possibility.

Possibility leads to the question, “What is possible for me as an individual and for this organization?” The answers to that comes from access to the inner teacher, which requires slowing down long enough to listen to the light of the Divine in our hearts and minds. One of the things that most struck me deeply at the monastery was the silence from the prayers at compline in the evening to after the prayers of lauds in the morning. Having space to simply be quiet was a powerful force in that community.

The good the Benedictines pursue is wholeness and an enhanced and unitive relationship with God, with each other and the human race, and for them this is a liberating experience. The Benedictines claim they approach the unitive relationship through the practice of purity of heart – that which creates humility. Purity of heart does not occur from reflection or from memorizing someone else’s words; it is knowledge developed from personal experience and practice. It requires a personal experiential journey that engages work on the inner person, serving the brothers, and modeling oneself after Christ. (Horsman, 2016, pp. 2-3)

This pursuit of purity of heart, the Truth, or the inner knowing is fundamental, both for our own wellbeing, but also for the authentic movement of IFCSN. Given the time constraints of many of the meetings, it is difficult to know how to slow down the rhythm of this organization long enough to really listen to what is being called from within individual and what is being called from us in community. Robert Greenleaf writes,

William Blake has said, ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything will appear to man as it is, infinite.’ Those who have gotten their doors of perception open wide enough often enough know that this statement of Blake’s is not mere poetic exaggeration…. A qualification for leadership is that one can tolerate a sustained wide span of awareness so that one better ‘sees it as it is’. (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 41)

Our job at IFCSN is to cleans our door of perception wide enough to see the infinite in possibility of the ripples of peace.

Block writes, “Through every possibility begins as an individual declaration, it gains power and impacts community when made public” (Block, 2009, p. 125). The movement from inner teacher to outer community is essential to communities of belonging. When we find the courage to speak from our own possibility, it gains momentum and opens others into their own declaration of possibility, which exemplifies healthy interdependence. “Interdependence is about acknowledging and accepting our dependence on others and consciously embracing and working with that reality. We act interdependently when we know and faithfully accept that cooperative collaboration is the most fruitful way to make progress and better ensure success” (Horsman, The Individual & Community Relationship, 2016). The challenge with IFCSN is the network lacks healthy interdependence as seen in the stand alone programs; healthy interdependence comes when trust is built within a community, from consistent time in the quiet, and the inspiration of a collective possibility.

Getting the organization to the conversation of possibility requires invitation, which means creating the opening for conversation, whether people choose to engage it or not. It is a way of being hospitable and welcoming.

Real transformation occurs only through choice. It cannot be sold or mandated. This is particularly true with transformation in community…. In authentic community, citizens decide anew every single time whether to show up. Of course it makes a difference if people do not show up, but we keep inviting them again and again. If they do not choose to show up, there are no consequences. They are always welcome…. The freedom of choice without consequences is also its source of power for when people do freely decide to show up, it means something more. (Block, 2009, pp. 114-115)

Invitation is a fundamental way of being in community and exemplifies a willingness to live in a collaborative way. With IFCSN, the invitation to engage possibility must be made at every opportunity. I would go a step further and say that invitation is modeling a way of being that allows us to be a witness of Truth for each other much like the Benedictines at St. Andrews Abbey. “For Benedict, however, obedience means obedience to the Truth; the Latin root for the word obedience is *audire*, meaning ‘to hear’. Benedict urges the member of a community to hear – to listen carefully for the Truth as it is present in each situation” (Horsan, 2016, p. 2). Being obedient to Truth means inviting Truth both from myself and others at every interaction.

Another challenge of a network organization is accountability. Conrad and Poole write, “It is often not easy to determine who is responsible for what in network organization” (Conrad & Poole, 2012, p. 221). Accountability is the idea that each of us is a participant in the organization whether actively or passively engaging it. “Accountability is the willingness to acknowledge that we have participated in creating, through commission or omission, the conditions that we wish to see changed…. Community will be created the moment we decide to act as creators of what it can become. This is the stance of ownership, which is available to us every moment on every issue, even world peace…” (Block, 2009, p. 127). Ownership allows us to become authors of our own experience and knowing that each of us is creating the world we are in and the organizations we partner with. With IFCSN, some of the signs of lack of ownership include the board not supporting the organization financially with very few active committees.

Additonally, accountability leads to commitment, which is different from a promise. Commitment is not contingent on the actions of others, but asks, “What am I willing to give to the community?” Block writes, “Wholehearted commitment makes a promise to peers about our contribution to the success of the whole…. It is a promise for the sake of a larger purpose, not for the sake of personal return” (Block, 2009, p. 137). IFCSN is committed to peace and dialogue in our community, but I do question the commitment of many of the people in the organization simply because of lack of engagement with its programs and no financial support. I believe much of that lack of commitment comes from not having a clear declaration of possibility.

In terms of interventions, I will certainly create a clear and achievable strategic plan, but I know that I also desire to look more deeply at our community’s declaration of possibility. We have a board retreat next weekend. It is an opportunity to create community, but more importantly, it is an opportunity to discuss what is possible for IFCSN. I do not have the authority to shape the agenda of the retreat itself, but I know who I am being, what I am speaking, and the power of my actions model a way. So my first intervention is that I am clear on my personal declaration of possibility for myself and the organization. Kara Keating is the embodiment of Divine Truth welcoming peace in the world. IFCSN is connected to Truth, moved by peace, and creating kind communities.

The second intervention is about making space for the inner teacher both organizationally and for myself. Other than the board meetings, I do not remember a time where I have prayed in the other meeting that I have had. I have definitely prayed before going into some, but I have not invited others into that powerful experience. The only way to transform both myself as a servant-leader-in-training and the organization is to create space for the quiet. I can only transform the context of myself for which I am aware of and that awareness comes through prayer, meditation, and mystical practices. Parker Palmer writes,

The shape of our knowledge become the shape of our living; the relation of the knower to the known becomes the relation of the living self to the larger world. And how could it be otherwise? We have no self apart from our knowledge of the self, no world apart from our knowledge of the world. The way we interact with the world in knowing it becomes the way we interact with the world as we live in it. To put it in somewhat different terms, or epistemology is quietly transformed into our ethic. The images of self and world that are fond at the heart of our knowledge will also be found I the values by which we live our lives. (Palmer, 1993, p. 21)

The only way to change my values and to open myself to Truth is to be quiet.

My intervention is to pray at every meeting and be the invitation to prayer for others. One profound practice for listening to the inner teacher is Lectio Divina. Horsman writes that there are four stages of Lectio Divina and the dynamics of ignatian transformation. Deconstruction which is being fully aware of the situation. Choice which is asking now that I see differently, what do I do about it? Reconstruction which asks the question, how must I respond? Integration which is choosing to live your life differently as a result of the new knowing (Carey, 2010, pp. 8-12). I can only transform what I can deconstruct which comes from contemplation. Once broken open, I have choices on how I respond and create my life. Furthermore, these dynamics of ignatian transformation happen organizationally. I can create a safe invitation for the old to be deconstructed and for new choices to emerge.

The third intervention is based on what Block writes, “What gives power to communal possibility is the imagination and authorship of citizens led through a process of engagement. This is an organic and relational process. This is what creates a structure of belonging” (Block, 2009, p. 79). I believe that I am the invitation by who I am being when I am with people. People have the freedom to choose to engage the organization or not. No matter what they choose, I am ready to welcome them. In terms of the various separate programs, I need to continue to simply invite them into the greater organization.

The fourth intervention is about accountability. There is a poem by Mary Oliver that I love dearly called the Song of the Builders:

On a summer morning

I sat down

on a hillside

to think about God –

a worthy pastime.

Near me, I saw

a single cricket;

it was moving the grains of the hillside

this way and that way.

How great was its energy,

how humble its effort.

Let us hope

it will always be like this,

each of us going on

in our inexplicable ways

building the universe. (Oliver, 2016)

I tried encouraging the board president to use this poem at the retreat next week, but whether he does or not, I keep asking myself and other people in the organization, what are we building? This question is in part a conversation about possibility, but it is also a conversation about accountability. I am not asking what am *I* building, but what are *we* building. I do not think anyone has the answer to that question quite yet, but my intervention on accountability is to continue to ask for *we* of community to build this IFCSN ripple.

Gandhi said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” My interventions for the IFCSN is the transformation of myself into embodying the community I wish to see. As a servant-leader in-training, I must embody possibility by my own obedience to the Truth. I must be open to my own process of ignatian transformation and hold a safe invitation for the transformation of others. I must be open and engaged in every interaction that I have in the community. I must continue to ask the questions, “What are we building together?” and   
“What is the possibility?” In order to have the ripple effect of changing the world, I must first change myself.

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