

THE FACES OF COMMUNITY

- Frieda Shim

A foundation by definition is the 'lowest load bearing part of a building', the bedrock or substratum of a structure'. This is familiar terminology, familiar territory. It is the place to which we return regularly through Centering Prayer, right to the substratum of our beings, descending to find the foundation, from which we all are created, what Cynthia Bourgeault, calls the 'bedrock of spiritual intelligence'. So the very choice of name, 'The Foundation for Human Development' is not by chance, it is a significant signpost to the journey which we as a community have chosen to embark on, a descent to the 'bedrock of spiritual intelligence'.

At the centre of the external face of this Foundation, is the portrait of a remarkable woman who began a dream with an endowment, a small office and a little donated, second hand, Nissan March. A giant in her own right, though small of stature, she is one who is both signpost and sign to a deeper life. One who has faithfully seen the dream through, to what it has become, an actual building containing a large Wisdom School, an oasis in the middle of a city filled with contraries, a place where people come to find true centre. Alongside this central figure emerge all the others who form the core of this Foundation, dedicated people inspired by the dream, who continue to give of their time, their gifts and their presence without counting the cost. The external face of this Foundation then, is a composite face, its expression, its contours forming a mosaic of all that is self-less, wise and compassionate in the human heart.

The internal face of this Foundation is Centering Prayer, and Community forms the contours of this face. The first aspect I would like to talk with you about is the

significance of Centering Prayer, the practice of a continual act of letting go. This Foundation for Human Development, through its programs, and first and foremost its dedication to Centering Prayer, is most certainly a place where a person is encouraged to plumb inner depths and to find a more conscious and creative way of living. I believe there is little or nothing more fundamentally important in the journey of a soul back to centre and its Creator, than learning to let go. Christ in the Gospels urges us in all different ways to 'lose ourselves in Him,' because it is only then that we can find Him. I have found that Centering Prayer and the Courses that are offered by this Foundation go hand in hand. In order to truly understand and enter fully into the teachings, it is important that we understand that there is the ego driven self, the little self, that needs to be released, so that the big self can find room to expand.

The movement as we know, is from ordinary awareness, to spiritual awareness and at the centre is Divine awareness. The beauty of it, according to Cynthia Bourgeault in her text 'Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening,' is that what goes on in those silent depths is none of our business; it is between God and our innermost being. St. Augustine said "God is closer to your soul than you are yourself." We may not feel anything is going on other than the continuous ridding ourselves of thoughts, but as Bourgeault says 'plenty is going on, as things are quietly but very firmly being re-arranged'. This is the inner awakening and the real business of Centering Prayer.

In Centering prayer we see the collapse of egocentric thinking as we practice to let go. We might feel frustrated, even frightened, because we are losing sight of the small self, the one that is familiar to us, things do not seem to be working out the way we thought they would. It is at this point, that people in the practice of Centering prayer, might become disillusioned and even leave, because things seem to be falling apart, all that we identified with as 'me' and held dear, seems to be slipping away and it feels dangerous

and unsettling. However once we continue with the Centering practice beyond these disturbances, we enter a desert, a dryness, but as we persist, we eventually develop in that desert, spiritual awareness that points us to the Divine indwelling, and the real 'I' begins to emerge.

A melting occurs through Centering Prayer, when in echoing the Psalmist, 'Deep calls on to deep', our love melts in with the Divine love and can then flow out into the world in our ordinary lives, in our day to day encounters with people and then in the extended community outside. This is how we become Eucharist, the Body of Christ in this world.

The second point of the internal face of the Foundation which I would like to comment on is the Community. What are the roots of community, and how do we cultivate them. Cynthia Bourgeault in her book 'Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening' stresses how important it is for Centering Prayer groups to keep reminding themselves that they 'are first and foremost Christian Communities.' She goes on to point out, 'they're not to be closed groups, or safe spaces, they must always give way, before the basic Christian imperative to hospitality and compassionate service'. Bourgeault further states that, 'the inner surrender of Centering Prayer is done not as, a group therapy session by clients whose goal is personal healing, but, it is prayer on behalf of the world and in solidarity with all other human beings.'

Ian, Timmy and Penny pointed out this fact beautifully in the last convention, each in their own unique way, that there is 'no interior descent into the inner world possible without the help of a community'. This is even more important in a world that has seen the disintegration of the family as we originally knew it, leaving in its wake a maelstrom of fear and disillusionment particularly among the young many of whom do not know any such stable structure. We have become people afraid of talking or living

authentically. We are now, so uncertain of embarking on any journey, least of all one that takes us face to face with who we really are. We need re-assurance, company to travel with us along the way. The community is the place where we can find companions with whom to share this journey. Creating a community where people can feel this sense of belonging that is critical to such a transformation taking place in people's lives, thus becomes very important.

The Foundation with Centering Prayer as its interior face, therefore, has to be first and foremost a community, before its teachings and its programs can find root in the real world. Sr. Paul is constantly reminding us of the fact that Centering Prayer is a prayer that connects directly with our day to day living, and she continuously points out, that the question is always 'How does this experience find its connection in our lived experiences.' An understanding of community and how it is to function, will be a stepping stone towards infusing our world with the essence of the Creator and sharing with all its inhabitants the subsequent fruits of solidarity and compassion.

So we might ask, what then are some of the hallmarks of an effective community? Jean Vanier in his book "Community and Growth" identifies factors that are the cornerstones of community. The first is, Community as a place of belonging. A place where people 'are earthed and find their identity.' A community has to work at building its sense of belonging to keep each person grounded or earthed as Vanier puts it. In this way, each person can find the courage to move deeper towards the truth, in the company of others who love and care about them.

My earliest ideas of community came from my family. It is in my original family unit, and then in marriage that I have found the greatest teachings on community and the best compass to the centre of who I really am. It is here in these units that I first experienced

the sense of belonging. The main factors in this community of my family, that I could identify facilitated my interior growth, were the openness and the unconditional caring, that nurtured a deep sense of belonging that allowed me to grow. I had a sense of belonging, because we did things together, there were the norms of my family that as children we conformed to, there was fun, heated discussions on the meaning of life, tears, frustrations, angry moments, moments of great examples of unconditional loving, and I grew with this sense of belonging.

In this the community of the Foundation, it is not enough that we learn to encounter the Divine through Centering Prayer and this is then simply for our edification. The world community needs to know this is a possibility for all of them too, an opportunity to live life differently and authentically. I believe that our Foundation must look closer at the building up of the community in order to create this sense of belonging. In our marriage, we had to find ways to build up our confidence in our little community. One such way we were taught and we found to be profoundly useful to this day, was to re-examine the daily teachings of Christ and His Disciples in the Gospels in the context of our Marriage. This for us was like the *Lectio Divina* which we do in our Centering Prayer groups.

The significant thing initially I had to do to build our marriage was to centre myself and start the journey of getting rid of ego; to confront my faults, my fears, my masks, and find deep within me my identity as a married person. This was extraordinarily difficult in the beginning, it was such a vulnerable position to be in, just like the struggle I felt when I first began this Centering Prayer pilgrimage. But we were in it together, we had been commissioned with the task of changing the world and we needed to get on with it. As our sense of belonging grew we learnt to trust little by little, more and more, which made us free to plug into the Grace of Mercy that is always available to us all.

For all of us living out there in the real world, this process of working out our day to day living challenges, trying, failing and getting up again, constantly making a decision to build our world up and care about others, becomes a sign of hope for others struggling along too. So a sense of belonging is very important and creating a community where people can feel this sense of belonging is critical to such a transformation taking place in people's hearts. People need to feel protected and safe when they are beginning the journey of self-discovery, and we can nurture this sense of belonging in simple ways. We can learn to appreciate difference, accepting the fact that though one community, we are individuals, with different ideas and ways of thinking.

In addition, we can be prepared to share in solidarity with each other. Solidarity leads to healing and wholeness. The feeling that you are not in this quest alone gives you the sense that there is an intimate, unseen link between us as children of the same God. It puts a prayer shawl around shoulders shivering with cold. Solidarity can be as simple as sharing the washing up at the sink with others on silent retreat. Solidarity is sitting together for Centring prayer, or gathering together as we are today. It is sharing experiences of fear and loneliness, of joy and hope, so that when we are battling out there we know there are others who are aware and who understand and care, and when we are happy there are others who rejoice with us and for us.

I have found that serious illness or other serious misfortune can bring a person into solidarity with others in a way nothing else can. This is because one finds in the poverty of illness and misfortune, the understanding that we are really not that different after all from each other when stripped of the props of our lives. This is somehow not a frightening place; it is strangely comforting to know that we are bound tightly together by the same hope to get well, hope to be whole again. In suffering we are all conscious

of being immersed in the great mercy of God. This is spiritual solidarity at another level.

Recently, when I read the words of Cynthia Bourgeault in her book 'Mystical Hope,' the truth that 'hope is not pinned to outcome.... it is a permanent connection to the wellspring..... Mercy is the water in which we all swim.....It is a bond that holds the created and the Uncreated in a realm together, an infallible link of love'.

So, helping people to feel safe, accepting difference, solidarity, are some of the factors that create in people a sense of belonging as they journey to the centre of who they really are. A sense of belonging can then be the liberating factor that allows us to rid ourselves of the ego and to find the courage to go out and heal our world by living our lives authentically wherever and whatever our calling.

The other important factor in the building of a community is to recognise the importance of openness. Communities are truly communities when they are open to each other and to others. Openness to each other, I believe it is what Sr. Paul calls presence. Being fully present to others with no agendas, no thoughts of the past or of the future, only the present moment. Listening with openness to what they might be trying to tell us. In the Gospel of the Sower, Jesus says 'Listen those who have ears'.

In Community, openness to others allows them to share and grow in self confidence. It lets others know they are important and they get the courage to unmask themselves to others or just to themselves. This task is not an easy one, because it is not easy, to discover the truth about ourselves. Openness can also mean holding others and situations in our hearts even if we have no solutions or cannot be physically present on their

journey with them. Sr.Paul often asks us ‘to hold others in our hearts’ in their different situations. This is enough, like Our Blessed Mother Mary, who often had to hold things she could not change or even understand in her heart.

Sometimes with our children, particularly the adult children, we have to learn how to hold things in our hearts like our Mother Mary, as we have no solutions. Their situations are sometimes unfathomable, and as Dexter and I sometimes say we are just too old to attempt to decipher the tangles in their youthful, energetic, crazy lives. Openness in this sense is indeed a wonderful thing it can lead to peace and freedom. We just listen, hold it in our hearts, lie low and very often they just drift away to solve their own stories, having felt better to have reported all matters to people with open ears and hearts, and we are now free to go about our small uneventful lives in peace.

“Community life Jean Vanier tells us, is ‘inspired by the universal and open to the universal’ so we have to be careful that in giving a sense of belonging that we remain open and not closed in on ourselves as if we alone have the true answers to life. Communities have to be always conscious that their way is not the only way to God, they are not a chosen elite, and as Jesus pointed out to John in the Gospel reading a few Sundays back, people cannot be excluded because they ‘are not one us.’ The mark of a solid Community is its welcoming spirit. A ‘come and see’ welcome.

There is a certain largesse, that John Vanier points to in his book ‘Community and Growth’, a bigness of vision that takes us away from insularity and opens our mind to something far more profound and simple. Vanier says, and I would like to quote extensively here,

‘In community, we announce the goals and spirit that unite us. We recognise together, that we are responsible for one another. We recognise that this bonding comes from God and that it is He who has glued us together like this, in a covenant of love and mutual caring.’ But we are not the only ones called and anointed by God, many other people are called in different ways. True community is the breaking down of barriers to welcome difference and it is always for individual people first. It is for people and their growth. True community is never an end in itself. It is always the people in the community, and love and communion with God that are the goal. In community people are always called to become more, it is not as if we have come together to produce something or win recognition for a cause outside. A community is, ‘a place of communion, where people care for others and are cared for by others. ‘

We must also make this community a place of rejoicing, a reflection of the wedding feast of the lamb, to which we are all invited in the end, or people will not find us attractive. All of us have to make our lives too about the joy and celebration of life, or we could appear dull and boring and initiate despair instead of hope. However, the truth must also be told, that life like marriage, is not just a honeymoon, it is also a time of loss of individual independence and the movement into interdependence especially as we get older. There is also loss experienced in a community such as this. Centering prayer reveals our egoism to us, it calls us to die so we can bear much fruit, and as all the inner pain surfaces we need to know that community is a safe place, where people truly listen to us, are open, caring and welcoming to us, a place where we belong. A place where we can gradually accept that ‘we are broken but we are loved’, and we have a mission to go out to change the world. Then our community becomes a place of liberation and growth, our light can shine out in the darkness of a world in distress, ‘a Divine spark’ as Sr. Paul quotes.

So, in conclusion studying the faces of this community reveals a wealth of underlying truisms. There are the external faces which we honour in love and deepest gratitude. There is also the inside face of Centering Prayer which ultimately calls us out to Community. A call to creating a sense of belonging, a call to openness, welcome and caring. Because as Bourgeault says that Centering prayer without community is not real prayer at all.

- and now Mark will take us to the heart of the matter, what that call to deeper living really entails, that in-depth call for all of us to martyrdom and descent.