

The Longing for Wholeness - Restoring the Health of the Commons

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In a recent seminar, participants were invited to share the story of how they came to be there. “What was the sequence of meetings, chance encounters, people and choices that brought you here at this particular moment in time?” was the question. The process was expected to take 20 to 30 minutes. Two hours passed before the last story was told. In the silence that followed I was reminded of the poem "Revelation" by Robert Frost, in which he writes, "So all who hide too well away / Must speak and tell us where they are." Frost's words serve as a reminder that when we speak from what is most personal we also discover what is also most common amongst us.

This sharing of stories brought to mind several recent conversations. One was with an executive director of a national association representing several thousand city and county governments and leaders. He spoke of his memories of sitting on the front porch while growing up in West Texas. “Sometimes there were four generations on that porch,” he said “as well as friends, neighbors and any visitors who might be passing through”

“What changed?” I asked. “Air conditioning” he replied “Once air conditioning came to town everybody either got more busy – or stayed inside.”

For Stan, an oil company executive, the front porch was a bar in Jakarta. “What I remember most about those conversations were when people came with questions that had no answers” He explained. “and the strangers that came in sometimes brought a fresh perspective from their travels as well.” For both Stan and Bob these early memories of meeting had left a deep imprint, a reminder that perhaps as Edward Thomas said; “words exist in the mouth - and in conversation - not in books”.

As the world spins faster and faster, how do we sustain a sense of authentic connection in the midst of quickening and unpredictable change, not just "hide away" but instead reach across the divide to create a sense of cohesion that can bring nourishment and meaning to our community. I believe it comes from recognizing how vital inviting, welcoming, accessible pedestrian friendly public spaces like farmer's markets, cafes, park benches, town squares – even donut shops – are in strengthening as the physical heart of the community and contributing to its sense of well being. Unfortunately too often these park benches all face in one direction, the parks and markets compete with cars, loud music in cafes competes with the quiet rhythm of conversation and gradually the spirit of the front porch is lost.

The Neglect of the Center

These spaces ‘in-between’ where deep listening occurs and where our stories may be told might also be referred to as “the commons.” In years past, each community had a commons—an open, unfenced area where everyone was free to raise crops and let their livestock graze. Located at the intersection between the market economy and

communities of gift exchange, the commons also served as a central and unique gathering place where music, art and the community's story encouraged the free exchange of ideas. Because it was a "free space," people could take whatever they wanted from these interactions. As time passed, however, some believed that if they did not take, others would do so in their place, and so they started to take from the commons without restraint. This taking began innocently enough with crops and firewood but soon expanded to include anything of personal use, from artifacts to ideas. At its core, this taking from the commons reflected a growing public attitude of a loss of respect for—and therefore a growing attitude of neglect of—public space, based on the belief that such actions did not matter. Because nothing was given back in return, the commons was soon depleted. This loss of generosity was one of the tragedies of the commons. In a contemporary context we see this same neglect with the use of personal stereos, cell phones and other devices that draw our attention away from public space to personal need. While this may seem insignificant individually, collectively it signals a further turning away from the wholeness of the world around us. This in turn leads to what writer Jedediah Purdy has spoken of as "the atrophy of public things and the celebration of private life."

Creating a Community of the Imagination

What we could not know at the time was that, by turning away from the world of free exchange and allowing public space to atrophy, we were also turning away from the source of our own imaginative life. For centuries the commons had served as a community of the imagination, a space of collective presence where the full ecology of the human experience had infused human conversation around the fires, the native councils, on village greens and countless other forms. It was the one place where we could make a "full appearance." That is where our gifts and sense of self, our desire for belonging and place, our spontaneity and ability to be alive in the moment and our love of expressive language and story—all of the dimensions of an active imagination—could receive full public expression. What needs to be heard now cannot be heard only by individuals. It cannot be heard until we restore this collective space for deep listening, and where we can be fully present to its effects.

In this context, what distinguishes the commons is its immediacy. It is not for problem solving, consultation or conflict resolution. Although it may serve any and all of these purposes, the commons is for now. By suspending action, it serves as a safe vessel for engaged listening and presence. By weaving together the many diverse threads in community and organizational life, it offers a space for deepening collective awareness and for surfacing implicit and often hidden sources of meaning and connection.

Our culture is between stories now. The story of the future is emerging out of a biological model that is more nuanced and pluralistic, and therefore more comfortable with uncertainty, surprise and change. As a community of the imagination, the commons emerges naturally in conditions of uncertainty and rapid change where we must set aside secondhand knowledge in favor of firsthand experience. It is an environment where we

must engage with one another in a tactile way through feeling, sense and touch. In this setting words serve not just to only to convey information but as nourishment for the hungry soul.

The Open Stage

In this context the commons can be likened to a musician's open stage. Unlike community, which often defines itself by, who does not belong, or work or family where we feel an obligation to build lasting relationships, the open stage is a musical conversation where strangers join together in a spirit of hospitality and 'impersonal fellowship' to meet the challenge of what is coming to be.

The real effectiveness of the open stage comes from its temporariness and the musician's ability to be alive to the situation at hand in a manner that encourages them to listen deeply and invent and reinvent their ideas as they perform with one another. In the commons the same spirit of engagement is called for except we engage with one another not with musical instruments but with words.

When members of a group feel free and secure to respond to one another with something that is not rehearsed or prepared beforehand, even if what we may have to say may still feel awkward and incomplete, then they have a chance to build upon other's ideas. This willingness to be alive to the 'unscripted moment' is what contributes to growing the commons.

It is this ability to 'reflect in action,' that is, to listen respectfully to others, particularly when we do not agree, while also listening to ourselves and noticing what is arising in response that invites a depth of inquiry and discovery that is greater than the sum of the parts. In other words the purpose is not to strive for common ground but to simply listen patiently together and see the legitimacy of other points of view. In time a 'third voice' may appear in the form of emerging insights that include all that has been said and add something more. And this is what lies at the center of the commons experience – the opportunity to be surprised by what we say and what we hear.

A second insight from musical conversations is that this process of engaged conversation is strengthened further when we are able to see and acknowledge each other's gifts and unique strengths. By acknowledging and inviting each to play their 'music' we are also recognizing that a group's strength varies in direct proportion to its diversity.

The practice of inventing together in the moment also helps groups overcome the fear they often experience when faced with unfolding events that are unfamiliar and unknown and for which they feel unprepared.

By suspending their hold on fixed ideas, opinions and beliefs - their repertoire so to speak - and entering into the flow of unfolding experience, they may be surprised to discover what music they have in them that has not yet been heard. And it is this music - the

unheard melody that will lead them and us towards creating what we truly want in the world together.

Finding Words to Live By

Too often we do not truly know what we want, think or feel. The expectations and knowledge of others tends to undermine the authority of own thinking and first - hand experience. The commons offers a breathing space where, in a spirit of generosity and open mindedness, we can hear ourselves talk again and feel valued for what we say.

We live in world of performance and fast knowledge. Many hold a longing for a deeper sense of authentic and spontaneous connection. In a society where everything is planned and oriented to outcomes and results we also hunger for an open unscripted space where new insights and possibilities – our music as it were - are free to emerge. For those the commons becomes a destination of last resort. In his poem "Revelation," Robert Frost writes:

We make ourselves a place apart

Behind light words that tease and flout,

But oh, the agitated heart

Till someone find us really out...

So all who hide too well away

Must speak and tell us where they are.

For each there comes a time when all who hide must speak and tell the rest where they are—to speak from an agitated heart ‘ Not all of us are musicians, but we have all been given the gift of language and can improvise with words. The commons is not only a space for language sharing but language creation – of finding words to live by. This search is the glue that holds the commons together. When we speak of what we deeply care about our words turn to song. Spoken truth has its own rhythm and cadence. The greater its bandwidth, the more likely it is that the dialogue can be a living process which will unfold in a manner that is organic and unrepeatable, particularly if it supported with a listening presence and an open and curious mind.

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