7

The crucial process of community development:

'To bring back life in all its completeness'

FROM TIME TO TIME WE SEE glimpses of possibilities and we hear what singer Bruce Cockburn would call 'rumours of glory'. But, as far as I know, there are no contemporary examples of perfect community societies. Nowadays, societies are only communities to a very limited degree. And our societies will only become communities to the degree we can manage to deconstruct them and reconstruct them, bit by bit, through a painstaking process of social transformation we know as 'community development'.

�֍ THE CONVENTIONAL DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
'Organised for the people, by the people themselves'

According to the Australian government, community development 'asks people to look towards areas which might bring improvement in lifestyle — whether that improvement be in the machinery of the government, the problems of. . . groups, or the lack of facilities in

urban areas. . . [It] covers an area as wide and diverse as the community itself and, fundamentally, it is involved in the problems of the people. It is a complicated process whose aim is to give people an opportunity to solve these problems. Community development depends greatly on the ability of the people to work together towards breaking down existing barriers and works best in an atmosphere of mutual. . . encouragement.'[1]

The Queensland Council of Social Services says that community development is 'a process of responsible and deliberate activity designed to encourage people in the community to come together to say what their needs and interests are and to promote these needs and interests. . . in a particular area'.[2]

The Queensland Council of Social Services says that 'community development' is imperative: 'It is our contention that state funds should not be diverted from the broad spectrum of [remedial] services, [such as] statutory child care or mental health services but, with federal aid, community development programs should be implemented.'[3]

Fred Milson explains that though the process ought to be supported by the government, community development ought to be organised for the people by the people themselves:

> It is a process where attempts are made to mobilise the total resources of the community for the protection, support and enrichment of [people] and groups [that are] part of the whole. From this single aim may spring various activities, including the spread of infor-

mation about existing provisions, the integration of social services and the inauguration of ad hoc committees and associations, acts of personal service and political action.
> Wherever there is a choice, self-help will be preferred to outside help. The criterion applied to all these efforts will be how far they [realise] the possibilities of the community's self-determination. They will be judged to have succeeded or failed by the practical demonstration in all feasible areas. . . that the community should define its own needs and organise [its own] resources to satisfy them. . .[4]

Rabindrinath Tagore envisages community development as a process that involves a total multi-dimensional renewal of society in terms of community:

> to bring back life in all its completeness,
>   making people self-reliant and self-respectful,
>   acquainted with their cultural traditions
>   and competent;
> to make an efficient use of [their] resources
>   for the fullest development of
>   their physical, intellectual,
>   social and economic conditions.[5]

�֍ THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:
'To know as we are known'

Community development has a philosophical foundation. According to Henry Bugbee, 'Philosophy is learning to leave things be. . . By "leaving things be"', he says, 'I do not mean inaction; I mean being still in the presence of things, respecting things, letting them speak.'[6]

'When we try to pick out something by itself, we find it hitched to everything in the universe.'[7] And when we learn to 'leave things be' they speak to us of 'our unity with everything in the universe. The great truth [is] that beneath the broken surface of our lives there remains — in the words of Thomas Merton — "a hidden wholeness".'[8]

'Unity is not something we are called to create; it's something we are called to recognise.'[9]

As Parker Palmer explains:

Since the advent of atomic physics, the popular image of physical reality has been one of particles floating in an empty void. Since Darwin and Social Darwinism, the popular image of biological reality has been one of individual creatures in bloody competition over scarce resources. Though they come from different disciplines, [they are] essentially non-communal, even anti-communal.

But at the heart of science itself, these images have been challenged and changed. Community, not competition, is the metaphor that most deeply informs the work of many biologists. Among physicists, the atom is no longer seen as an independent and isolated entity but, in the words of Henry Stapp, as 'a set of relationships reaching out to other things'. So Thomas Merton's 'hidden wholeness' turns out to be more than a fantasy — the connections of community are visible at reality's very core.

We can find this communal theme not only in modern images of the nature of reality, but also in modern images of how reality is known. In the popular imagination, knowing is seen as the act of a solitary individual, a knower who uses sense and intellect to apprehend and interpret objects of knowledge 'out there'. Not only does this knower operate apart from other

knowers, he or she is also set apart from the known object in order to guarantee that our knowledge will be 'objective' and pure. The popular image of how we know reality is as non-communal or anti-communal as is the popular image of the nature of reality itself.

But scholars now understand that knowing is a profoundly communal act. Nothing could possibly be known by the solitary self, since the self is inherently communal in nature. In order to know something, we depend on the consensus of the community in which we are rooted — a consensus so deep that we draw upon it unconsciously. The communal nature of knowing goes beyond the relations of the knowers; it includes a community of interaction between the knowers and the known. . . We now see that to know something is to have a living relationship with it — influencing and being influenced [by it].[10]

Given the communal nature of reality and the communal nature of the way we know reality, community development means relating to the world in a manner that is true to that reality and to the way we know that reality.

Parker Palmer goes on to say:

History suggests two primary sources for our knowledge. One is curiosity; the other is control. The one corresponds to pure, speculative knowledge, to knowledge as an end in itself. The other corresponds to applied science, to knowledge as a means to practical ends. We are inquisitive creatures, forever wanting to get inside of things and discover their hidden secrets. Our curiosity is piqued by the closed and wrapped box. We want to know its contents and, when the contents are out, we want to open them, too — down to the tiniest particle of their construction.

We are also creatures attracted by power; we want knowledge to control our environment, each other, ourselves. Since many of the boxes we have opened contained secrets that have given us more mastery over life, curiosity and control are joined as the passion behind our knowing. Curiosity sometimes kills and our desire for control has put deadly power in some very unsteady hands. We should not be surprised that knowledge launched from these sources is heading toward some terrible ends, undeflected by ethical values as basic as respect for life itself.

Curiosity is an amoral passion, a need to know that allows no guidance beyond the need itself. Control is simply another word for power, a passion notorious not only for its amorality, but for its tendency toward corruption. If curiosity and control are the primary motives for our knowing, we will generate a knowledge that eventually carries us not toward life but death.

But another kind of knowledge is available to us, one that begins in a different passion and is drawn towards other ends. This is a knowledge that originates not in curiosity or control but in compassion or love. The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken worlds. A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation, but at reconciling the world to itself. The mind motivated by compassion reaches out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, the act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, allowing the other to enter and embrace our own.

Curiosity and control create a knowledge that distances us from each other and the world, allowing us to use what we know as a plaything and to play the game by our own self-serving rules. But a knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in com-

passion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality and accountability. In such knowing, we know and are known as members of one community, and our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community. . .[11]

Community development is all about practising the truth of this knowledge of our community with reality, applying it to the community that in reality we are developing.

Parker Palmer goes on to say:

When we examine the image hidden at the root of 'truth' it turns out to be more immediate and human than the words we use to describe this knowledge. . .

The English word 'truth' comes from a Germanic root that also gives rise to our word 'troth'. With this word, one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust in the face of unknowable risks. We find truth by pledging our troth, and knowing becomes a reunion of separated beings whose. . . bond is not of logic, but of love.

In the words of St Gregory:

Love itself is knowledge;
the more one loves, the more one knows.'

In the words of Abraham Heschel:

It is impossible to find truth
without being in love.

To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder. To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with. . . goodwill.

To know in truth is to allow one's self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes that any true relationship brings.

Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known. Both parties have their integrity; one cannot be collapsed into the other. But the knower and the known are implicated in one another's lives. Even in separation, the two become part of each other's fate. In truthful knowing, the knower becomes a co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons, creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known.[12]

The poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, struggles with the implications of practising this 'truthful knowing' of 'community with other persons, creatures and things' in his poem 'Please Call Me By My True Names':

I am the mayfly metamorphosing
    surface of the river,
and I am the bird which,
    when spring comes,
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily in the
    clear water of a pond,
and I am the grass-snake who,
    approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child of Uganda,
    all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
    and I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl refugee
    on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after
    being raped by a sea pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.
I am a member of the politburo, with
    plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man who has to pay
    his 'debt of blood' to my people
dying slowly in a forced labour camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes
    flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears,
    so full it fills all four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
    so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
    so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
    so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
    the door of compassion.[13]

Desmond Tutu, the non-violent activist archbishop, articulates the importance of practising this 'truthful knowing' for developing a 'community of faithful relationships' in a microcosm like South Africa. There, people have tended to deny the truth of our common humanity and, consequentially, tend to discount the significance of the essential interdependence and complementarity of the human family.

I, along with of hundreds, if not thousands of people who gathered to listen to him speak in King George Square,

in downtown Brisbane, can well remember the words he told us that Sunday afternoon on 10 October, 1993:

In our African language we say
    'a person is a person through other persons'.
I would not know how to be a human being at all
    except I learned this from other human beings.
We are made for a delicate network
    of relationships, of interdependence.
We are meant to complement each other.
We are the 'rainbow people of God',
    people of many kinds, of many colours,
and it is only as we are together
    we realise our identity, our destiny.

Having said these words, the archbishop got us all to raise our hands, wave our arms and chant 'We are the rainbow people of God.' And, as we did so, it became so. Rich and poor, black and white, old and young, women and men, believers and unbelievers alike were caught up in the consciousness of the truth of our community with one another. And, as we laughed and we cried, we prayed we might continue to make it so.