RELATIONAL PRINCIPLE

Building nourishing relationships is at the heart of community building.

Any gardener aiming to maximize the potential of a planted seed ensures that all essential elements are present in the right amounts, at the correct times, and working together synergistically. It does little good to pour a month's worth of water into the soil in one day and then provide all the required sunlight the next. The careful attention given to a seed is known as cultivation, and the results are worth the effort. Similarly, the tender attention we give each other in our relationships must be cultivated, as a well-cultivated relationship has great potential.

My son and I worked together on our porch roof, completing the task in two hours when it would have taken me eight hours alone. He positioned himself on the roof, made measurements, and called them down to me. I cut the pieces, handed them up to him, and he nailed them in while I prepared the following pieces. Collaborating required patience, flexibility, and sensitivity—qualities I wouldn't have needed if I were working alone. However, working together improved our productivity and allowed us to spend more time with my son.

Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.[1]

The saying "two heads are better than one" does not mean that either head is infallible, but rather that they are unlikely to make the same mistake simultaneously. Brainstorming typically requires two or more people, as a group can generate better ideas than an individual could. Problem-solving is also more effective when multiple minds are engaged in the task. A teamwork-focused environment fosters learning, where mentors pass on skills from one person to the next.

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The primary benefit of working together is building relationships. When a community engages in a shared mission, it naturally creates a healthy environment for interaction, communication, and trust-building, which extends beyond the specific project at hand. A common purpose is essential for community progress.

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[1] C.S. Lewis, *Introduction to Athanasius' On The Incarnation*, p2

The Amish recognize the value of communal work events, which they call "frolics." Typically, frolicking occurs after work, but the Amish have long understood that a community working together toward a shared goal is a happy one. As a result, when a frolic is announced—whether it involves quilting, canning, or barn building—the community eagerly anticipates it. "We look forward to [barn] raisings," remarked one Amishman. "There are so many helping, no one has to work too hard. We get in a good visit."[2]

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While admiring an old cathedral in Montreal, I was reminded of the massive Douglas Firs of the West Coast. These trees exude an air of majestic power. When a tree reaches such an enormous size, it requires very little cultivation. In fact, the thick bark protects it from most threats, except for chainsaws. Similarly, it would take a lot to demolish that old cathedral, even though it ironically no longer has a congregation.

On the other side of the world, I visited Pastor John in his church. It was not a cathedral and could easily be overlooked if you happened to pass by. However, Pastor John's seemingly unremarkable building was where a growing number of young people were discovering their purpose. What struck me most about his church was the people.

Pastor John was focused on cultivating individuals rather than just a building. His community was filled with people who were eager to gather and enthusiastic about serving. One member started a sewing school for disadvantaged women, while another opened a medical clinic. Members were dedicated to changing their work habits and behaviours to be more other-centred. Although Pastor John's church was not grand like a cathedral, it held far greater potential to spread positive change throughout the neighbourhood.

Just as seeds must be nurtured for healthy growth, people can be seen as seeds with immense potential. When cultivated, these "people seeds" sprout and spread throughout the community, fostering positive change.

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"The kingdom of heaven" is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field. Of all the seeds it is the smallest, but when it has grown it is the largest of the garden herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and find shelter in its branches.[3]

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[2] *The Barn Raising*, Gene Logsdon
[3] Mathew 13:31-32 Amplified Bible, Classic Edition

The interesting aspect of a mustard tree is that it isn't majestic, like the trees that line major roads or stand tall in parks. Instead, it resembles a large bush. In ancient Palestine, it was even regarded as a weed. Once planted, the small seeds would sprout everywhere, often overtaking not just the garden but possibly the neighbour's as well. The mighty cedars of Lebanon would have made a better metaphor for power and majesty.

However, Jesus chose to illustrate his point with a bush that grows like a weed. The intriguing thing about weeds is their ability to infiltrate the cracks and corners of sidewalks or retaining walls. Over time, they can cause more damage than any grand cedar could. Weeds can force concrete to crack and eventually lead to the collapse of entire buildings. Gardeners recognize that even the most unexpected seeds hold great potential.

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The Relational Principle can be understood by breaking it down into three key components.

The first component is potential. Community transformation starts with recognizing and nurturing the resources present within the community, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant they may be. Positive change is not solely about buildings or machinery; rather, it is the people who embody a community's strength and greatness. This potential must be recognized to thrive truly.

The second component is work. Work is essential for developing the ideas and passions of individuals. Engaging in community projects or striving towards a common goal is one of the best ways to draw out and strengthen people's potential. Challenges, or even crises, can enrich and fortify a community. Through work, we highlight existing social capital and potential connections. A shared purpose creates a nurturing environment where relationships flourish and skills are shared.

The third component is cultivation. Cultivation cannot occur without an atmosphere characterized by "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." In such an environment, humility and respect for one another thrive. While justice may be upheld, mercy is generously extended. The awe-inspiring structure of a cathedral may impress, but only genuine cultivation of relationships can bring about transformation. Transformative communities arise when individuals intertwine their lives within a well-cultivated, healthy environment.

Summary Statement:

To cultivate means to recognize the potential of people, bring them together with a common purpose, and foster relationships built on love, trust, peace, reconciliation, and joy. When we undertake challenging tasks together, we grow stronger.

Discussion

1. List examples from your life where a second person helped you accomplish much more than you could have on your own. Why were you able to achieve more together?

2. The term 'white elephant' in Southeast Asia once symbolized prosperity and wealth. However, in the West, it has come to refer to an expensive project that fails to deliver and is too costly to maintain. Are there any white elephant projects in your community? Make a list and explain why you would consider each to be a white elephant project.

3. Can you recall community gatherings where work and happiness were connected? How was this communal work different from the work you are required to do each day?

4. The phrase 'through thick and thin' originates from navigating a dark forest with trees spaced apart and bunched together. It has evolved to mean a commitment to persevere no matter the circumstances. What is the significance of commitment in cultivating relationships?