**COMMUNITY - COMMUNITY, COMMUNITY**

**COMMUNITY BUILDING - COMMUNITY CREATION,**

**WORKSHOP - SEMINAR**

**TRUE COMMUNITY**

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***STUDENT OF PSYCHIATRIST AND WRITER SCOTT PECK / ONE OF THE BIGGEST ENEMIES OF THE COMMUNITY IS TO GIVE OTHERS ADVICE***

***Why do most Christian communities function as pseudo-communities, and how can community formation be group prayer and personal healing? What can be our first steps when we feel lonely and deeply long for a community?***

We asked Edward Groody, who has been conducting experiential seminars all over the world, including Slovakia, for many years. In them, participants have the opportunity to experience a kind of "communication laboratory", to go through the various stages of building relationships and maybe even experience “true community”.

The author of the Community Building method (hereinafter referred to as Community Creation, ed. Note) is an American psychiatrist and the author of well-known books such as The Road Less Traveled, and or The Different Drum. It was in one of Scott Peck's lectures that Edward Groody had a visionary experience where he understood that working with this author and creating genuine communities would be his life's mission.

***You worked with Scott Peck, whose books influenced many. How did he affect you?***

I literally became an evangelist of the community. So much so that my close friends forbade me to use the word “Community” ! (Laughter). Thanks to Scotty, I realized how much I longed for this type of authentic connection, and community and that is needed in the world.

Dr. Peck was also very strict about telling the truth. I used to be an expert at how to look good - both my parents come from families of alcoholics, and learned to speak in such a way that no one would associate them with this problem. When Scott sensed that I was exaggerating, he immediately noticed it and made it clear to me. So at the age of twenty-seven, I learned to tell only the pure truth and not add anything. What I took away was the importance of integrity, in relation to people and to God.

***Today, the word community has many meanings that we usually think of: religious groups, neighborhoods, sports communities, communities of graduates, volunteers and geographic communities. What did Scott Peck mean by true community?***

Two things. First of all, true community is a specific *experience* that can last thirty seconds or even a month. It is a deep connection with one or more people, which is accompanied by an unusual feeling of security, safety and peace, as well as exceptional mutual respect. Some of the nuns I worked with lived in the religious community for twenty years, but they never experienced it. Some families never experience it. Yet, we all long for such an experience . We want others to see and know us. There is a yearning in the heart for peace and to be known. Instead, many of us only experience isolation, conflict or chaos in our daily life. This is true across nations and religions.

The second dimension of community is that community is a way of being and living according to certain values: connection with others, authenticity or unwillingness to settle for superficiality.

***So the obstacle on the way to community is superficiality?***

Not exactly. It's okay that we don't experience deep communication everywhere. When we buy something in a store, we will not share our lives with the store clerk. But with our family, romantic partner, friends and also spiritual relationships, we want to go deeper. At the appropriate time, take off our everyday mask and be deeply authentic. When someone asks how are you, to be able to be fully truthful.

The second meaning, then, is a lasting community as we constantly move from one of the four phases of the community building process to the next. We are committed to living in fellowship with ourselves and with the Holy Spirit, and authentically with others: sometimes deep, sometimes not. Sometimes authenticity looks like not sharing deeply, and at other times it requires risk.

***One can say that the community can also be experiences with work colleagues, or when gardening with a neighbor next to each other. Can a community emerge on its own or accidentally, or must we consciously strive for it?***

In some places, we may experience a certain level of trust and relationship, but in true community, there is great depth of communication and connection. The experience of true community may emerge accidentally, in this case it is usually as a result of a response to a crisis. When a tornado or snowstorm hits your street and you deal with the crisis with your neighbors, you will feel connected to them, care about them, even if you don't really know each other or like each other.

***In Slovakia today, people from different groups serve together at the borders, accommodate people from Ukraine and form help networks. Is Slovakia currently experiencing a community?***

Yes, that's exactly it. During a crisis, something happens that we call “emptying,” that is, we drop our masks and let go of our defense mechanisms. Then we put our political views and expectations aside. We live only in the present moment and then we experience community. I'm from New York, after the fall of the Twin Towers on 911, we experienced an incredible sense of community. It lasted about ten years.

***Ten years?***

Yes, because the crisis was so huge and deep. It didn't matter what religion you were or where you came from. The crime rate had even fallen. Well, it all eventually wears off. When the crisis is over, things usually return to the way they were before. However, we do not have to wait for the disaster to come and experience and re-experience true community. There are skills, and methods and principles to bring people back together.

***We are biologically adjusted so that we need others to live. Why do we need to learn to build relationships in seminars and it's not a natural reflex?***

This question belongs to God rather than me. But that's exactly why people often don't even try - it's hard to build deep relationships and true communities. This is also what Peck's first and most famous book is about, The Road Less Traveled: many do not want to be true Christians.

However, a key part of this Community Building work is that there are certain communication rules or principles that will lead us to the community experience. We need to learn these principles and develop certain skills so that we can experience it repeatedly, despite our past wounds or bad experiences.

**Aren't communities and relationships much more complicated than just learning a few rules of communication?**

Of course! Rather, it is about certain guidelines, skills or values. Using them is an art, not a mathematical formula. The advantage of the seminar is that it is designed to help you master them in an experiential way, gain wisdom and learn to distinguish when and how to use them. And to see that by following them, you can go through different phases of community and experience the power of genuine community.

**Isn't it really possible without a seminar?**

Someone doesn’t really learn to ride a bike by reading the instructions. You need to climb on board, pedal, and fall a few times. Last time a participant told me: I have been studying social work for three years, I have been receiving professional training in mindfulness, but in these three days I have learned more about listening than ever before, with all the education combined..

The well-respected poet Rumi says that our task is not to seek love, but to remove the barriers that prevent us from accepting it. And that's exactly what community building does. Here we can discover why we do not feel connected to others. And what are we doing that blocks connection with others, why we're so far apart. Many are very surprised when they put down their armor at the seminar and see what really is going on inside, and what their life really looks like.

**You talked about the communication principles that will lead us to the community. What are they?**

The first is to speak in the first person and use the so-called "I statements" (in English known as I statements). This principle is often well known especially by psychologists and social workers. And they often think they already know how to use it. But during the seminar, they find that it is difficult for them to use it for themselves rather than their clients. It means talking only about yourself and being personal and specific. And avoiding advice or commentary about others.

***Could you give an example?***

You can say: This pandemic is very difficult. Many have lost their jobs and we should stick together. Or you can say instead: I'm really afraid I'll lose my job. And I'm still worried about my children's health and their safety. Do you feel the difference? It seems simple, but using this principle all the time is very challenging. I can start talking using an I statement, but without knowing it I shift to a we or you statement, it's just a defense mechanism.

Another key principle is to speak only when you are “moved to speak,” when feel an inner urge or guidance, and not to speak when you do not feel it. Many participants at the seminar: learn about this experience of moved to speak for the first time: “Wow, I've talked all the time so far without being aware. Maybe I'll just listen and wait until the Spirit invites me to say something.” And others say, "I don't want really want to talk, but I feel an invitation, from Spirit" and they share something they never planned. I could go on, but only when you experience this first hand can you have a real understanding.

**So at the seminar, will you lock a random group in one room, give them these communication principles, and the result will be a community experience?**

Communication principles and guidelines help the group to go through the so-called four phases of community: from pseudo-community, through chaos and emptiness to the mystery of true community. It is not a linear process as the group moves through the stages. It is a kind of weaving, the threads of relationship, that has many nuances. I teach those who lead this process in seminars that their role is not to bring the group into a community experience, but into a phase of emptiness. This is because only the Spirit can lead the group from the stage of emptiness into true community.

**What do you mean by emptiness?**

Imagine yourself as a vessel. Unless we work hard on it every day, it is full of expectations, wounds, demands and desires. At the seminar, we have communication principles and also time to help us empty this container. We let go of defenses, protections, the ego so we can be fully present. In the Christian language, we would say that we prepare ourselves so that we are welcoming and creating space for the Holy Spirit to come. We remove the barriers and masks and clean the container from the inside, leaving only "me, the group and God." However, this requires vulnerability and a willingness to take risks from each participant.

***In the parable, it is said that when the evil Spirit finds his old house empty, he will take seven other spirits worse than him and return. Is emptiness a good thing?***

All great spiritual traditions speak of a form of emptiness that is positive and necessary. We need to be empty in order to be able to truly listen to someone without interrupting halfway through, or offering advice or fixing them, or shifting to my own thoughts and story. Daily prayer or meditation is used for this, but most people do not have this type of daily practice. Because of this, at the beginning of the seminar most people are not able to fully listen or be present.They are full of their thoughts, expectations, life demands and events.

***How do you know they are not able to listen?***

When someone shares something personal, others try to fix it. When they learn not to fix or teach again, they can go deeper and learn to be quiet with the person that has shared. It is not just silence at the sound level, it is a deep group silence where everyone is present and fully engaged in what the other is saying.

I once experienced that after one participant, shared very deeply, the group sat in silence with him for an hour. The group also needs to learn when it's time to move on so that another person can speak. And sometimes they say: we haven't stayed long enough with this person and his/her sharing. We could also call the process of community formation an experience of depth of presence.

***Many in our communities or parishes feel unheard. Or even though everything looks great on the outside, we don't really know each other and we don't talk about difficult things. Do you mean pseudo-community?***

Most Christian parishes and communities function as pseudo-communities. But we need to realize that pseudo-community is not bad.

***It's not?***

It is natural. We need a lot of pseudo-community in life so that we can go to work, take care of our family or interact with others about every day business. There is also a healthy pseudo-community in which there is no pretense, but simply communication that is not very deep. Talking about the weather can be very enjoyable. We cannot be in this deep mode of communication all the time, nor is it advisable to share our deepest thoughts or feelings with everyone. The problem arises when people stay in pseudo-community all the time and do not know how to go to deeper levels of communication and connection.

***How do we distinguish that this pseudo-community no longer benefits us?***

A healthy developed community knows when and how to move through all four phases of the community building process, and has the necessary knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, most churches remain in the pseudo-community forever. When you are asked how you are, you answer that you are well, even if your child is sick or angry. Each phase has its positive side and a negative side. The negative side happens when you stay in one stage too long and do not now how to move on from pseudo-community.

***Can the prescription that a good Christian should never be angry, or should never burden others with his/her problems be an obstacle o community?***

Absolutely, there are some cultural norms that can burden us. But I would also say that Community is an essential part of the Christian faith, it is a part of our DNA, the longing for true Community.

**What if I want to move deeper, but the rest of the community is happy with the way things are?**

I consider myself a contemplative Catholic, but when I met Scott Peck, I didn't go to church. I was frustrated that we didn't live as a community. I remember him telling me, "Your parish doesn't work as a community because you're not there." (Laughter).

Community is, after all, the essence of Christ's message. Christianity spread so quickly because people sat in a circle and risked, were present for each other, and spoke the truth, were vulnerable. It is up to me to say: I want more! This is no longer enough for me!

***Then comes the phase of chaos?***

This phase can be uncomfortable. But there are things we can do to move things forward. For example, I can be honest and use "I statements" – and share what I am longing for rather than accusing someone or the larger community of being fake, or dysfunctional. You can say, “I feel lonely, I would like moreto know you more, and you to know me better. I want you to know what is really happening in my life. I don't know if we have enough skills to handle it together, but someone can help us with that.” Saying it this way is less likely to trigger someone or make them defensive.

**What does the chaos phase look like during the seminar?**

Many people think that chaos means conflict. But chaos is more about chaotic communication when people don't really listen. In a pseudo-community, communication is superficial and we focus on how we are all the same. In chaos, we look for where there are differences between us. A common attitude that comes to light at this stage is, “You should do it like I do. You should believe what I believe and follow my advice. I know how things should be. I know how this seminar should go, what the faciltator shouldb e doing, what this participant should do. ” Yet, they are likely not to follow their expectations.

In the chaos stage, there is often a lot of teaching, preaching, trying to organize or make things okay. There are often projections: this one is unsympathetic to me, it reminds me of my father. Some people experience chaos as losing control, which again can be uncomfortable.

**Have you experienced seminars where there was really a lot of anger?**

Yes, I have experienced intense expressions of anger but also mild chaos, where people "just" didn't listen and wanted to heal others. People tend to get annoyed because they expected the workshop to include working on assignments in small groups, or doing formal exercises. After their frustration builds, eventually someone will compalin: Why aren’t the facilitators doing anything? And often, they will suggest that everyone stand up, say their favorite color, and where they come from, something like that. However, this will not lead you into the community. It may temporarily get the group out of chaos. But, the only way to the community is into and through emptiness.

**How do they get there? Do they get tired of chaos?**

In some groups, yes. But not in such a way that this conversation would exhaust me and I would give up. However, we cannot guarantee that every group will enter or fall into emptiness. But if we go deeper and deeper in our communication by following the workshop guidelines, a kind of window will open. And our experience is that if we open the window, the wind will come. There is no guarantee, but the Holy Spirit will come.

Creating a community is a journey into the unknown. I've led hundreds of seminars, but I don't know what will happen. The participants don't even know it. It's just us and God and we'll see what happens. At some point, the group also realizes: Ah, creating true community, means I'm willing to let go and take off my mask and risk finding out and sharing who I really am?

***There is a lot of talk about vulnerability and authenticity. How do you understand them?***

Many people think that I can best help my community by giving a lot of advice to others. But what really builds the community is to take risks and be vulnerable with others. At the right time and with the right people, say what you really have on your heart. It's not the only thing, but vulnerability moves things forward. Am I willing to give this group this gift? Because I don't know what will happen.

I can talk to you for for hours, give a day long presentation sharing my resume, etc. And probably, the next day you won't remember anything! Or in only a few seconds or minutes I can risk and be vulnerable about what's really going on in my life. You may not like me, but you will experience this sense that I see him, I know him, I care about him. And you will remember that person and the connection for a long time.

***How do you know the true community phase has come?***

Words participants often use to describe this experience is peace, joy, connection with others, love. It is also a rich, tangible and healing silence. Another hallmark of a true community is wonderful humor and deep harmony. And humor that is not at anyone’s expense. There is almost always some kind of wonderful synchronicities as well in the group.

Most are but not all community experiences are warm and fuzzy. However, there is always a great sense of honesty, caring and respect. Sometimes people report these experiences to be especially valuable also.

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We do not work with any alternative techniques or energy work in the seminars. One of the strongest "techniques" is silence. All of the great spiritual traditions, including Christianity recognize the power of silence. There are a number of Christian writers that have said that silence is God’s first language, and all other forms fail in comparision. The community experience has a strong spiritual dimension, one can thing of the community building process as a kind of group contemplative prayer.

***Do we need to be educated to participate in the workshop? Do we need community building to grow spiritually?***

No, you can enter the community building process the way you are. I have facilitated seminars with people from remote areas without education. I had to explain the principles of communication to them using different words and phrases, but they reached the stage of a true community faster than other groups! It's more about being honest and deciding whether you are willing to risk and that your really do want to connect with others.

We have been conducting community seminars with people in prisons or just leaving prison in Wisconsin, USA for nine years. Through these workshops, participants are able to make major steps forward in healing past trauma that has held them back.

**Isn't it a disappointment for the participants to have to return to normal life after such an experience of deep receiving relationships?**

I would turn it around. This experience shows you that *this* is normal and what normal can and should be like. We have just forgotten how to do it. One of the most beautiful things about building a community is that it shows you that what you have longed for is possible.

But ongoing community can also be viewed like a marriage. In the first years, I was also very naive: Ah, we will sit in a circle, we will follow some principles and the community will happen. It's a lot harder and it requires deeper skills. I needed to give up naivety that it should be easy. The seminar provides hope and a real experience that something like this exists. But to maintain a community in the long run, like everything else we need to keep on growing.

**What can be the first step when we feel lonely and long for fellowship?**

If we want to share our story with someone, we choose a person who is a good listener with care and invite him to lunch or a cup of coffee. Some pseudo-community conversation is okay! I can say there is something I would like to share if they are open to listening. It is important that I use an “I” statement, speaking personally and specifically. And when he/she wants to share, let's not try to give advice, teach him or fix him! (Smile). Let's listen and not try to say anything, simple care and be present fully.

According to Thomas Merton, our true selves are shy. By listening and not fixing or giving advice we make it safe enough for our deeper selves, our true selves to come forward. With others, we learn how we can create a safe environment so that the shy true self can share. And be seen and known.