

Building community—

ONE ON ONE

by Rafael Reyes III



“Excuse me, do you have a couple of minutes to spare? I would like to talk to you about . . .”

You have probably heard these words once before while shopping, or while walking on the street. They may bring to your mind the idea that someone wants to sell you something, or make you sign a form for or against a bill being proposed. You have probably crossed the street, lowering your heads and acting as if you did not notice their presence. It is the realization that one does not want to have a one on one conversation because it may take too much time, or that one is tired. However, by passing them on and not taking the time to talk with them, we also fail in one’s desire to build community.

Are we building community?

One of the dilemmas we are faced with today is that we are too tired to work on community. We work long days, travel long distances to arrive home, spend time with family and/or friends, only to do the same the next day. We are too tired to build community. Rather, we may think that we live in community.

However, “community” is not something that we live in. We live in neighborhoods and cities. Communities are the relationship we develop among neighbors in and out of our homes and churches. They are the relationships one makes as you go to your supermarket, in the park, or on dog walks. Community is the process found in HIRL’S, the acronym popular on social networks for “hangouts in real life.” It is the building of relationships when one is at work, church, home, and in specific locations where one meets with others. Community

is the feeling of relationships being made as we are in the process of making them. It is the process of opening ourselves to the lives of others, to be able to feel the reflections of others on ourselves. Community at best emerges from relationship, and relationships require time, work, and effort.

Community building is difficult because of the involvement of getting to know those around you, or maybe that we fear some of the people who live or congregate on their blocks. Even if we are building community, the next problem is who are we building with. Studies show that in poor communities relational ties generally don’t cross social class lines. In other words, the poor associate with the poor, the middle class with the middle class, and so on.

One on ones

Building communities that are engaged in challenging the concerns of their neighborhood and city in a positive way require “one on ones,” public yet personal interviews with other individuals that enter one into experience and in relation with one another. These interviews are personal in the sense that it often gets into quite intimate stories about someone’s life. Of course, it is always up to the person being interviewed what they are willing to share. It is here where we the person asking to share the others story prehends the other, feeling the others feelings as they relate their experience.

The interviews are also “public” in that the goal is not to generate an intimate friendship (although this may also be an eventual result). In part, the aim is for the person

to be a part of the building of community, giving them and the community more influence in making changes they would like to see. You want a “public” not a “private” relationship with this person in which one can build community.

The question is this, how can process thinking help shape our understanding of one on ones?

Whitehead, narrowness and width

In *Process and Reality*, Alfred North Whitehead talks about how actual entities achieve satisfaction. I will define satisfaction as a determination of something, whatever it may be. In order for there to be satisfaction, there requires both width and narrowness, which I will describe briefly, and show how they are helpful when thinking about one on ones and community.

Width is the need for variety in the data of occasion. Width contains within it the inclusion of a large number of contrasts of diverse elements in the satisfaction (PR, 166). I would describe this as the vast amount of data that we are taking in at every moment. There are large varieties of contrasting information being given to us. Width is that large backdrop of data that we are prehending to come at a satisfaction, a choice.

In order for there to be a focus or concentration, narrowness is used. Narrowness is the result of concentrating on individual emotions about individual components in the datum (PR, 110-12, 166). This means that in the vast amount of data that we receive, narrowness allows one to focus on a particular piece of data, and sense or feel the emotions of that data. It is the coordination of that feeling for use. It allows us to feel the particular subject matter and make certain judgements on that subject. Whitehead states that if there is a lack of coordination, then the components of the datum are trivial, mere components of datum with difference, but no feeling to particular components of the datum. As an example, triviality would be the indecisiveness of everything we take in. It is just all the information there with no determined opinion about how we feel about a particular subject.

Width and narrowness are important together for they form the intense experience of harmony for satisfaction. It allows us to make determinations on what we feel about

certain issues. It requires the individual feeling about issues in the wider context of our lives, with family, jobs, church and community.

This is where I believe one on ones then become effectual. The reason that one on ones are effective ways of getting those within neighborhoods and cities to build community is because they allow the prospective participants to stop and reflect on their opinions of particular problems by sharing stories. Here we find the narrowness within the width of the person. Narrowness here describes the single issue happening within neighborhoods that the organizer wants you the participant to come to a decision to. The width is how that particular issue is in relation to the sum total of the participants life, how it has affected, is affecting and can continue to affect them in the future.

Prehension and one on ones

Knowing that the goal of organizers is to get participants to reach a harmony for satisfaction, to make a choice, one of the ways in which that is performed is by way of prehension. Prehension, for Whitehead, can be described as a relation of feelings; it contains two sides, what is being felt and how it is being felt by the subject receiving it. In an example, the organizer may ask the participant to

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share a story while the organizer reacts to it by making connections from the story to the issue they are trying to raise. Prehension here is both the feelings of the story being shared by the participant, as well as the reaction from the organizer receiving the story. They both partake of it. As the organizer hears the story, they are prehending, feeling the feelings of the participant telling the story.

This in turns builds a relationship between the two, a relation that they both connect with. It is that relationship that allows for both the public and private relationship to take its course, and for the participant to enter into the process of building community.

Angela Davis in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* writes,

it is extremely important not to assume that there are “communities of color” out there fully formed, conscious of themselves, just waiting for vanguard organizers to mobilize them into action. . . [W]e have to think about organizing as producing the communities, as generating community, as building communities of struggle. (161)

Producing communities requires width, narrowness, and prehension to help shape one on ones as a way of helping the participant focus on the issue of discussion, how it relates to their own world, and become part of the process of change. Process thinking helps to build that relationality, turning neighborhoods and cities into communities of difference.

Resources

The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2007.

Aaron Schutz. “One-on-Ones.”

Alfred North Whitehead, David Ray Griffin, and Donald W. Sherburne. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Corrected ed. ed. Vol. Gifford lectures ; 1927-28, New York: Free Press, 1978.

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Persons-in-community

by John B. Cobb, Jr.

The idea derivative from process thought that I find most relevant to many social issues, is “person-in-community.”

Although in any moment the inheritance from one’s personal past is likely to be primary, each of those personal past experiences was partly shaped by what it received from its environment. Over time, we must recognize that how we think and feel and what we think and feel are very much a social product. We are not self-made individuals who are incidentally related to others. We are products of our societies who also, to some degree, transcend this social determination.

. . . Now let me say much the same thing in terms of discussions that are carried on in the broader community. There, some view human beings primarily as separate individuals. Society is simply the collection of individuals. This model is widespread in economic and political thinking. Marxists, on the other hand, emphasize the collectivities. In some Marxist thinking, and in characteristic policies followed by many Communist governments in the past, individuals counted for very little.

Process thought leads to a third way. Individuals are very important. They are, in fact, the only locus of value. The value of a society is the value of each of its members. Also, decision takes place only in individuals. On the other hand, these individuals are who they are, think as they think, and feel as they feel, largely because they are members of particular human communities. If we want to increase the value present in a community, we usually do better to improve the quality of the community and its life, rather than to focus on its individual members.

. . . The image [I find helpful] is a community of communities. Communities are essential to human health, but they can also be sources of terrible destruction. Nations are great communities, but devotion to them has led to terrible wars and even genocide over several hundred years. Local communities are of greatest value and importance, but it is crucial that they understand themselves as parts of a community of communities. The task is to find effective ways of instilling within each community its sense of community with others and of celebrating the community among the communities.

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