

# **Building Genuine Community**

**by Maurice Friedman**

## **Chapter 2**

### **Genuine Community: The Community of Affinity versus the Community of Otherness**

Pendle Hill—The Quaker Study Center

My most important experience in community during the *50s*, *60s*, and early *70s* was my years of living and teaching at Pendle Hill, the Quaker study center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, about which I spoke in the previous chapter. There was structure and order at Pendle Hill, yet there was individual freedom in the deepest sense. There were attempts to build real community between the staff and the one-year residents through common work, common study, common prayer — the daily silent meeting for worship in the barn, and the Friends Business Meetings that were carried out according to the “sense of the meeting” rather than majority vote and parliamentary rules. The spirit of community also carried over to the volleyball court where poor players and children were accorded equal rights with good players and adults.

#### **The Spirit of Sameness vs. the Spirit of Otherness**

To understand the authentication of the human in community and society, my distinction between the “community of affinity” and

genuine community—the community that confirms otherness—needs to be elaborated.

The community of *affinity*, or *like-mindedness*, is based on what people feel they have in common — race, sex, religion, nationality, politics, a common formula, a common creed. Genuine community, in contrast, does not mean that everyone does the same thing and certainly not that they do it from the same point of view. What makes community real is people finding themselves in a common situation — a situation that they approach in different ways yet which calls each of them out. The very existence in genuine community is already a common concern, a caring for one another. This caring begins with understanding from within the actual people present. Only then does it extend to gather other people in and then to a dialogue with other communities.

Any group activity is an example of this since it naturally splits up into people who do one task and people who do another. But beyond that, if people care about community, they can build it together even if they have different creeds, philosophies, or world-views.

To some extent I think that was true of the faculty at Sarah Lawrence College during the fourteen years I taught there. They were certainly enormously varied in attitude, viewpoint, philosophy, and creed, if any. Yet they all cared about the Sarah Lawrence way of teaching and worked together to make it succeed. This was true of the students as well.

When natural disasters occur, people who would not otherwise be counted as “like-minded” pull together for the benefit of the

*Gnadenthal* — a small German community an hour's drive from Frankfurt. *Gnadenthal* (Valley of Grace) is the home of the *Jesus-Bruderschaft* for which I once served as the sole faculty for a summer institute with students from ten different countries. Each successive visit since that time has deeply impressed us with the spirit of community that exists there.

We came to *Gnadenthal* at the invitation of Jens Oertel — my student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem when I was senior Fulbright lecturer there in 1987-1988. Jens' s father Gunter Oertel is the director of the *Jesus-Bruderschaft* that now has communities in three different parts of Germany as well as in Israel and Africa. In his essay "Places of Hope," Jen' s father Gunter Oertel gave beautiful expression to this communal spirit. "Places of hope can arise," he said, "where new interhuman relationships grow and the external reality of life is given shape." He then pointed to the genuine meeting of persons of different origins, coinage, and language. Aware of the secular world that surrounds each of their communities, he nonetheless expressed confidence that their way of life can build bridges to persons who are oriented to a completely different world of values. "The essence of life — that we have learned from Martin Buber —is meeting, dialogue." In community, this means wanting to meet and understand the other as the person facing us, as Thou. Thus community unfolds in a basic rhythm of hearing and speaking, receiving and giving. Despite the economic crisis and the massive unemployment in East Germany, a dozen persons who had been without work for a long time were established in a firm work-

community. When we look carefully, we see that variegated communities are everywhere: the Green Party, the Rainbow Coalition, the United Nations to name a few.

### **Genuine Community**

Most communities come into being through the grouping together of people who have something in common. Yet the community of affinity will ultimately become exclusive and closed unless it evolves into genuine community, faithful and diverse at the same time. The ultimate context of real partnership is genuine community where there exists lived togetherness of truly unique persons, families and groups. Genuine communities come into being not simply through tolerance, adjustment, and compromise but through mutual confirmation.

It is beyond human capacity to confirm all otherness. But the genuine community should be measured by the otherness that it can confirm. If the "spokesman" of the group explains to someone who differs with him or her that that person is really not a member of the group because he or she does not fit the general stamp of the group, then that person will not only have been read out of the group, but out of existence itself as far as this moment and this situation are concerned. The obverse attitude is that of openness and trust. It is our lack of basic trust that makes us feel that we need to have the security of groups based on generalized affinity, rather than the concreteness of open meeting with real otherness that is present in every group, down to a pair of friends or a husband and wife.

A remarkable example of meaningful interconnectedness is

relationship in *Hennersdorf*, the *Jesus Bruderschaft* community in East Germany.

Another remarkable example of community that I came on is a Minnesota system of justice that substitutes a community circle for the traditional court that sentences criminals. Reasoning that jails and judges do not prevent people from committing crimes again and again, circle advocates suggest giving trust and kind impulses of ordinary citizens a try. They feel that by deferring always to professionals, we have robbed the judicial process of the wisdom and insight of the community. Community circles draw on that wisdom to craft unconventional sentences meant to be more instructive than punitive. Melissa, a 14-year-old who ran away repeatedly from her rural Minnesota home, was sentenced to write down five good things about each day. Melissa's parents commented that in court they had encountered only harried lawyers and intimidating judges whereas in circle "they found a dozen neighbors they'd never met before who are pulling for Melissa to reform—and, most important, who genuinely believe she can do it."

Although the circles also include judges and lawyers and professionals of other kinds, in the circles they are only a part of the group and speak with no special authority. One member characterized the circles as giving the little people, the common folk, some responsibility for making sure that their community is safe and that their neighbors are held accountable. Tracing the idea of circles back to Native American tradition, advocates point out that crimes are not simply violations of abstract laws. They are also affronts to the community. "So it should be up to the community to hold the offender responsible ---and to figure out a way to bring him back into the fold."

The only rule that holds for circles is that they do not act like juries. They deal only with offenders who have pleaded guilty. Beyond that the key to the circle is first-name equality and consensus. Everyone, including the applicant or offender, must agree with every condition of the sentence, which is usually community service. The victim too joins in the discussion, but only as a community member not an accusing witness.

Although judges review the sentences, the circles represent a deliberate rejection of the adversarial system. "It's not shame, blame and off you go." Citizens willing to counsel a crook week after week have a passion for rehabilitation that sets them in greatest contrast with the members of society who are bent on three-strike laws and ever-tougher prisons. The rate of recidivism is remarkably low. One statistic shows offenders who completed circles as committing 82% fewer crimes. Acknowledging that circles are not appropriate for criminals who present a real danger to the community, circle advocates think they can handle aggressors, including some sexual offenders.

Circle members work hard to mentor offenders—writing their resumes or putting them up in a spare bedroom. Circles have even spread to the schools where school counselors now convene student circles to deal with playground disputes. Some communities hold "healing circles" where crime victims can talk through their trauma with neighbors or even confront the perpetrators who harmed them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1999, pp. A1, A 18, A 19.

## **Building Community in Prison**

Through the two-year training program of our Institute for Dialogical Psychotherapy of which I was Co-Director during the fifteen to twenty years of its existence, I came to know Wilfredo Crespo. This involved several visits to the prison where he has worked for more than a quarter of a century both as chaplain and as counselor. During our last visit, my wife Aleene and I met with a select group of prisoners who had volunteered to be in a learning program with Rev. Crespo. We were deeply impressed by the presence and participation of the prisoners that we met with and the totally non-authoritarian leadership that Rev. Wilfredo Crespo provided. Here, in a federal prison—the most unlikely place imaginable—we found real community and real caring,

To appreciate adequately Dr. Crespo's remarkable and, so far as I know, unique achievement in working in the prison in which he is both counselor and chaplain, we must look first at his description of the difficulties that he faced in trying to build community. We cannot do better than read Rev. Crespo's own assessment of the problems he has faced in trying to build community during a quarter of a century of work with the inmates in his Metropolitan Correctional Center:

We have about 20,000 inmates coming in and out of the institution every year, creating a tremendous amount of movement, wear and tear on the building, and putting extra demands on staff. In this chaotic atmosphere inmates grapple with loss, fear, tension, and an uncertain future.

Programs offered to the inmates population often look better on paper than they actually are. Some reasons for this include high turn over of the inmates—they may start a program but never finish it—, many materials are not translated into Spanish for the Spanish-speaking population, staff get burnt out; and since staff often gets called on for other things, they end up simply giving the inmates a video to watch or a handout to read. The programs lack continuity, consistency, and integrity.

Basically programs have been limited to religious services and GED classes for inmates wishing to complete their high school equivalency . . . We offer programs for every religion present in our institution throughout the week and evenings. While I have been at the MCC, I developed a 40-hour drug program that focuses on the nature and effects of various kinds of drugs and their impact on health, family and society. I started AA and NA programs, anger management groups, abuse groups, meditation groups, poetry groups, and women's groups, men's bible groups, and critical bible groups, Spanish men's culture groups, and around 2002 [my wife] Maria and I started a Socratic [Dialogue] group.

The intellectual atmosphere in the MCC, and I suspect in other prisons, is generally quite limited. The quality of books available in our libraries leaves much to be desired in terms of intellectual stimulation. There is an overbearing atmosphere in the jail, one that corrodes, deadens and destroys the inmates' ability to think clearly, critically and responsibly

. . . in prisons and jails . . . base instincts surface and rule through sex, color, race, and power . . . . Prison is not a place where trust easily



develops, nor is it a place where inquiry of ideas is possible without fear or threat. In fact, prison is a place where one learns to play along in whatever way the officials expect you to and to keep both your feelings and your thoughts to yourself. Prison has never been a place where inmates take responsibility; in fact, it is a breeding ground for ...training in becoming a victim of the system and a fertile ground for disavowing one's responsibility for one's own life. In a relatively short time inmates learn the psychological language that will get them medications for depression and/or anxiety while earning for themselves a diagnosis that will follow them the rest of their lives.<sup>2</sup>

One of Rev. Crespo's stated aims is to provide a context for community development through which inmates can ask significant questions and wrestle reality with others. He sees his Metropolitan Correctional Center as "*working on zero ground, sacred ground.*" Recognizing that the prison is the place where lives are crushed and hopefully renewed, he wishes to provide a solid context for the experience of a real community. Through the men's groups and the Socratic dialogues that he conducts, he promotes trust and community growth among the inmates. In doing this he recognizes the importance of himself as change agent and leader as a role model for creative and developing community in the jail and an example for inmates who wish to mirror its qualities after they have left jail.

Because a majority of the inmates have less than a high school education and mental difficulties in addition, Bible study and group

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<sup>2</sup> Drs. Maria and Willy daVenza Crespo, "If God gave us free will, philosophy gives us the ability to exercise free will: Socratic dialogue for inmates in the federal jail in downtown San Diego"--a paper presented at the Second ASPCP International Conference for Philosophical Practice, Purdue University Calumet, Ma y 1 8-20 2007 This paper will be a part of the book that will come out of this conference.

meetings become an important door for experiencing healing and releasing pent-up emotions. Another door is the bar song groups in which the inmates and Rev. Crespo with them sing songs of remembrance, love, and loss that melt the walls between them.

In order to create a ministry specific to jails, Rev. Crespo trains volunteers to understand how to use body language, personal space and intermittent eye contact as vital skills. “During the small group process inmates learn and practice ‘boundary function,’ experience inter/intra group discussions about sensitive issues of faith and life.” Rev. Crespo says of the work that he has done in prisons for 32 years, “I really put myself out there and do everything I can to touch with humanity what I consider to be one of the most difficult populations.” I venture that what he does is unique. It is certainly not a technique that can be objectively applied in other situations. Describing his goals, he says that he really would like to know whether the inmates he works with experience community and are moved by the humanity of another.<sup>3</sup>

“The chaplain,” writes Wilfredo Crespo in his doctoral dissertation for Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, “by engaging inmates one-on-one becomes pivotal in creating a ‘real religious community.’” Dr. Crespo points to doors that only the inmates themselves can open through discovering how they interpret loss, shame, and guilt and wrestle with life in search of personal direction. The chaplain can create a context of trust in prison and offer inmates their first relationship in which truth and forgiveness are combined. “The chaplain/inmate relationship is one door where the inmate

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<sup>3</sup> I have based what I have paraphrased and quoted here on Rev. Crespo’s thesis proposal for his doctorate of ministry with Seabury Institute in Chicago, but I can guarantee what is here from my own years of acquaintance with Wilfredo Crespo and my own visits to his prison where I have seen him at work.

rediscovers himself and receives, as by grace, healing, redirection, and renewed faith and hope.” In addition, singing songs together creates a context in which it is safe for inmates to connect with others.

The Men’s Group, which meets on alternate weeks with the Socratic dialogue group, brings inmates together in the chapel to discuss books and articles that could stimulate them to experience community. Creating awareness of the self in relation to others, the Men’s Group provides inmates with a sense of a larger reality. Along with the Socratic group, it engages inmates in a dialogue where they can begin to experience trust, start being truthful, and learning to be open. Through being honest and open about the ambiguities of life and faith, the chaplain can steer clear of that attitude of certainty that becomes an invitation for the inmates to play the religious game and live superficially in prison.

In the conclusion of his dissertation Rev. Dr. Crespo makes a beautiful statement about the aim of the methods that he uses:

Every interaction with inmates, every crisis and even the smallest details of daily life in prison can be used as an opportunity or door through which I attempt to engage and wrestle with the inmate for an authentic meeting. I believe that with an authentic meeting a door opens to both of us to help us see each other as mutual, [a door] where honest discussion can begin about deep questions, pain and the uncertainty of how to respond.

### **Building Genuine Community Has Its Risks**

Genuine community has to encourage the maximum growth of the individuals, families, and small groups within it. The community must set limits where necessary, but, if it is a real community, if it has real communal concern, it can never just cut off the person and cease

to be responsible for her. It cannot offer only a conditional confirmation.

Venture and risk are a part of all life. Risk is implied in the very notion both of communal growth and communal authenticity. Today, however, the venturing on all fronts in order to break out of the un-lived life that has confined us greatly multiplies the risk. There is no simple formula that helps us, no either/or of risk or no risk that is of any value. Our *challenge* is to draw the demarcation line responsibly in each hour and situation: how much risk can this family, this group, this community take? This is not at all the same as that self-protection engaged in by the community in casting out the person who raises anxieties or threatens its happy harmony.

What I am talking about is the difference between the hysteria that fears to let others express dissent or even have a voice and the genuine limits of resources that can only be discovered by using them. The unbelievable venality and corruption that predominated in Bosnia and the new Serbian republic after the war between them are examples of how the supposed "community of affinity," on racial or nationalist lines, can lead the mass of people to death and destruction while favoring the moguls at the top. This is not a true test of community resources, but the question of how to bring the situation into some tolerable life for the many is.