

Hopeful Signs for the Future

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An amazing event took place the week of Memorial Day at Gethsemani Abbey in Trappist, Kentucky. Leaders from diverse parts of the globe, different cultures and races, men and women, senators, activists, ministers, academics, from religions including: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Jew; all came together and talked productively with one another.

And this was not merely polite or nice conversation. These people spoke bravely about real life or death concerns, economic differences, and the pains and challenges of leadership. Misunderstandings occurred. Cultural differences surfaced. Yet, participants described the experience using phrases such as "powerful," "a life milestone," "restored my hope," "a true experience of our connectedness," and "sacred."

The Merton Retreat 2000 embodied a dream of the late monk Thomas Merton, that world leaders might "gather in a spiritual setting for contemplation and informal and spontaneous dialogue." The challenge was how to create such an atmosphere that was more than just a gathering of interesting individuals discussing or debating ideas and issues.

A first goal of the retreat planners was to create a process that respected each of the participants as they were. In other words, a process that even with the best of intentions didn't attempt to change the participants in some way. Otherwise, how would the participants resist the urge to improve and change each other?

This may seem a confusing value. Isn't it good to help or improve someone? The problem is that changing another to suit my preferences or beliefs sets up a defensive posture in the other person. Most of us don't want someone to 'fix' us to suit them. What we want most deeply is to be known and valued for who we are. Give us a real choice and we may choose to change, but force it on us and we'll resist. Accepting one another first as we are creates safety and trust that invites us to share what's most important in our lives.

A second goal was to create a 'contemplative' atmosphere. Contemplation simply means 'to take a long, loving look at the real.' It's compassionately looking at what is before deciding what should be or could be. At one point in the retreat, it meant staying with the painful experience of the South African leaders, who are faced with 15 to 20 million young people infected with the AIDS virus in Sub-Saharan Africa. And if that stark fact weren't enough, add the knowledge that drugs for treatment exist in the first world, but are priced out of reach for most others. Looking contemplatively means to slow-down our rush to judgment, and to notice what we may be missing. We're often so quick to decide what this or that means and move to the next thing, that we don't realize how very much we're missing. For example, what did you the reader have for breakfast this morning? Did you actually taste what you were eating, or did you eat to get to the next thing? Many

of us listen with the same rushed attitude, preparing our responses as another person speaks. And then we later wonder where our misunderstandings arose.

Another key to the success of the retreat was the practice of asking participants not just to share their conclusions, but also the assumptions and experiences that led them to those conclusions. Rather than speaking in abstract images and sound bites, to slow down and help others to understand how I arrived at the beliefs I hold.

This in practice is a tremendously powerful and respectful way of treating one another. Rather than re-stating our positions with increasing forcefulness, it invites others into our experience and trusts that this deeper understanding is far more useful than mere debate.

Sharing my assumptions rather than just the 'truth' as I see it can be scary at first. But when was the last time that someone 'converted' you to their viewpoint just by stating it louder or more forcefully? Most of us are willing to consider other possibilities if they make sense to us. And even if we don't agree with someone's conclusions, it still changes the way we relate if we at least understand why they see things the way they do. A further distinctive quality of the retreat was its attention both to the individuals gathered and to the group as a whole. Working with the communal 'spirit' or 'mind' as something potentially greater than the sum of its parts revealed a richness that is often untapped in our lived experience of groups. The Merton Retreat group had a pure experience of the elusive 'team spirit' or 'community' that organizational leaders seek to find or create.

What was truly powerful about this 'communal spirit' was the fact that it didn't exclude those not on the retreat. Within that group the tangible awareness of connection to all people, and all creation, was unmistakable. Those who attended the Merton Foundation Board dinner Thursday evening, and the public dialogue on Friday spoke movingly of being touched by that same spiritual awareness.

This process has been described as 'contemplative dialogue.' It draws on both what is oldest in monastic traditions, and from some of the newest practices of learning organizations in the business world. Though it took place in a monastery, the possibilities it holds for building better understanding in organizations, communities, and between people is tremendously hopeful. If we are to solve the large complex issues that face us in the new millennium, building common understanding between diverse people and groups will be key. The global group that participated in the Merton Retreat and the public dialogue that followed caught a hopeful glimpse that the possibility does in fact exist. Thomas Merton would be pleased.

The writer, Steven Wirth, was a facilitator of the Merton Retreat, and is a Senior Vice President for Catholic Medical Centers of New York City. The Merton Retreat 2000 was a creative undertaking of the International Thomas Merton Center Foundation, with major funding by the Fetzer Institute.