

DEC. 1991

IN THE SPIRIT OF INCLUSION

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There is in the world today a vibrant new culture. It is young and rough, but its birth has been true and with proper nurturance its life and growth promise to be dramatic. It is the culture of inclusion.

The culture of inclusion begins in the affirmation that all human beings are gifted. This statement sounds strange to many ears because our traditional world reserves the adjective "gifted" for only a chosen few whose talents and abilities, usually in very circumscribed ways, impress, enlighten, entertain or serve the rest of us. The inclusion culture views giftedness much differently.

We affirm that giftedness is actually a common human trait, one that is fundamental to our capacity to be creatures of community. Gifts are whatever we are, whatever we do or whatever we have that allows us to create opportunities for ourselves and others to interact and do things together - interactions that are meaningful between at least two people. So, for example, if you are interested in an evening's fun of softball and you have six people on your team you have an opportunity to offer to several people, including some bystanders who might just end up watching. But you can't play softball without at least seven people per team. So when the seventh person comes along, that person's presence is a gift to many other people, even if she or he doesn't play very well.

Our presence is the fundamental gift that we bring to the human community. Presence is the foundation of all other opportunities and interactions - of everything that is meaningful in our lives.

Also fundamental to each person's presence is each person's difference. In fact presence is not possible without difference since even on a very simplistic level difference is essential to life. For example none of us would be here if the male and female difference did not exist. Meaning depends on difference as well since if we were all the same there would be nothing to share or contribute to one another. Therefore, not sameness but presence and difference are fundamental to life and community.

In addition to our presence each of us has a grab bag of other ordinary gifts that allow for us to create and participate in daily opportunities. From getting up, making breakfast, washing dishes or loading a dishwasher, talking on a telephone, writing on a piece of paper, listening to another person, getting from one place to another, enjoying some music, expressing an opinion, going to a meeting, playing with a baby or having fun with a friend, a variety of simple activities taking place in ordinary places on ordinary streets make up the fabric of the vast majority of our work, family life, private life and public contribution.

Beyond ordinary giftedness there is extraordinary giftedness, the kind that extends opportunity for interaction and meaning to a larger number and variety of people. One person is not just nice to be with but is a truly funny comedian; another doesn't just get around but dances on skates beautifully; another not only shows up for the PTA regularly but has ideas that are engaging and changing the face of the local school board.

Each person has a variety of ordinary and extraordinary gifts. The people whom we call handicapped are people who are missing some typical ordinary gifts. However such people also have a variety of other ordinary and extraordinary gifts capable of stimulating interaction and meaning with others.

In fact it is not just that walking is a gift and not walking is not a gift or that knowing how to put your clothes on right is a gift and not knowing how is not a gift. Rather walking is a gift and not walking is also a gift; knowing how to dress is a gift and not knowing how to dress is also a gift. Each creates the possibility of meaningful interaction.

The affirmation of giftedness creates the need for us to organize our homes, schools, work places and other establishments differently and this is what has given birth to the inclusion culture. In the past we became efficient at separating people into classifications of supposed sameness. Now we are struggling to build our community life up from the foundation of our enriching differences.

In North America the Canada geese fly south every fall and north in the spring covering thousands of miles each way. The birds fly in a V-formation, with one bird in front followed by two diverging lines of flyers. The lead bird breaks the wind resistance for the two behind who in turn are shields for the bird behind each of them down to the end of the line. But in the course of each flight the leader drops out of position to go to the end of the line and to be replaced by one of the following birds over and over again. In this way no one bird is ever leader so long as to be exhausted or to deny opportunity to another bird. In turn each bird is the guide. This a model of organizing a community so that the gifts of all benefit everyone.

In the schools we see classrooms of creative learning being founded on the support that children and teachers can offer to each other in the spirit of co-operation. In housing we see people forming inclusive, intentionally mutually supportive developments where vulnerable people anchor circles of caring. In decision making bodies we see people taking leadership in turns based on their energy, experience, desire and availability, being able to give way to one another at the right time.

Of course these efforts at inclusive community are isolated and foundationally weak. But the seed has been well sown. These efforts support each other and inspire others to change. The story of inclusion has a vigorous beginning and promises a very creative future.