

A Caring Community by Barbara Clifford; 28 October 2012

In my view, one of the most important elements of belonging to a church is the community spirit. Making friends and acquaintances, and meeting new people. Sharing worries with friends and listening to their troubles. Enjoying a spiritually uplifting sermon, whether it be from a Minister or a Lay Person. Getting a deeper appreciation of the people in our worshipping community and then spreading this deeper appreciation to those we meet when we leave church.

Recently, I went to a theatre to see "The Calendar Girls", a play about a group of ladies from Yorkshire who were members of the local Women's Institute. They shared happy occasions and sad occasions together, always supportive of each other's needs. One of them was undergoing great stress and sadness due to her husband dying with cancer, while another was suffering the agonies of finding out that her husband was unfaithful to her. But this small group of ladies listened and supported each other. Within their group they laughed together, exercised together, fund raised for their beloved Women's Institute. At the end of the film they raised money to provide a memorial bench at the hospital where the member's husband died with cancer. Their fundraising was enhanced when they bravely decided to break new ground for the WI by making the annual calendar a collection of monthly photos of them each stripping off for a tasteful but flesh-exposed pose connected with typical WI activities. Nothing stopped this group of friends in their efforts and in their support for each other until their calendar was captured by the local media, then an American film Director wanting the Ladies to star in a movie. All but one of them refused, the one looking for fame and enjoying recognition. Her friends did not like the person she was becoming in her role as focus for the group as she neglected her friends and family for fame. This only stopped when friends confronted her with her behaviour. The caring, in this case, involved confrontation in love and led to a change in direction.

Karen Armstrong in her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, writes "the late Albert Friedlander impressed upon me the importance of the Biblical commandment 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. ... Albert taught me, if you cannot love yourself, you cannot love other people either. He had grown up in Nazi Germany and was bewildered and distressed by the vicious anti-semitic propaganda that assailed him on all sides. One night when he was about 8 years old, he deliberately lay awake and made a list of his good qualities. He told himself firmly that he was not what the Nazis said; that he had talents and special gifts of heart and mind, which he enumerated to himself one by one. Finally, he vowed if he survived he would use these qualities to build a better world. ... Albert was one of the kindest people I have ever met; ... But he always said that he could have done no good at all unless he had learned, at that terrible moment of history, to love himself.

We have a biological need to be cared for and to care for others. Yet, it is not easy to love ourselves. In our busy world we are more inclined to castigate ourselves for our shortcomings and become inordinantly cast down by any failure to achieve our objectives and potential." End of quote.

So, what stops us from loving ourselves? Some would answer that they would feel better about themselves if they lost some weight. So a considerable amount of time and money is spent on dieting, in joining gyms, cutting out all the calorific cakes and biscuits and being a misery with our friends. After reaching our goal-weight, we stop. What happens then? Our weight creeps back unless we have actually changed something in ourselves, unless we have internalised new values about ourselves during the course of our struggle to lose weight. From an early age, men and women are taught that girls are pretty things and their value is tied to this social and personal sense of being good looking. As an aside, isn't it ironic that in the rich industrial countries we are trying to lose weight with little success but in the rest of the world starvation is as common as overweight and eating disorders are here.

I recently attended an international Unitarian women's convocation in Transylvania. The title of the conference, which lasted 3 full days, was "Keeping Your Balance in a Changing World". There were, of course, talks given by experts in specialist fields (all except one of them, women), workshops, panel discussions, seminars, and most of all an international community spirit. Some 250 women from America, Transylvania, Hungary, Germany, England, Belgium, India, Scotland, and Japan attended, amongst them some powerful ladies! Unfortunately an expected participant from Kenya, a trained Social Worker active in her Nairobi Unitarian community whom John and I met when we were in Kenya 3 years ago, was denied the papers necessary to travel and attend -- a sign that African women are still treated as second class citizens. But she had sent her paper ahead and this was read to all participants. Her main theme was the responsibility of empowering leadership by women, i.e. turning influence into actual decisions. In her own words:

"There is a growing and urgent need for women leaders in the world today because the time has come for us to take up our rightful positions in society and make a difference. It has been said before that the "woman's place is in the kitchen", but while we have been busy making sure our families are well fed, it has not been business as usual in the leadership front. History will judge us harshly if we fold our hands and sit back without making any gainful contributions to the governing policies of the different communities we come from.

.... I applaud the various women's groups and organizations globally that have successfully managed to bring together women of diverse cultures, ages and backgrounds to learn [how to] grow from and with each other. Sustainable peace is possible, and it is by coming together that we are empowered; it is by working together that we can make a difference. Peace is not just about conflict resolution and lack of war; it comes from within. And if we first and foremost appreciate our own individual cultures and personalities, then we are able to live at peace with others who are not like us-- after all it has been said before that charity begins at home. I reiterate, the time to develop the culture of leadership in women is now!"
End of quote.

Participants spoke about Balance in their lives: combining careers with bringing up families; fitting voluntary work and family needs into the same

space; struggling for an education in a poor community where women are not expected to achieve any learning in their lives. The speaker from Japan, Kathy Matsui, spoke about the usefulness of Literacy projects, funded by the Literacy Fund of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women -- supplied from donations collected from women in industrialised countries around the world, including our own National Women's League. These projects do more than teach reading and writing -- they encourage an attitude to education, a desire to be someone more than a subservient wife expected to be abused by her husband and family because she doesn't know any different. These Women are taught to Love and Respect themselves at the same time as they gain competence in literacy.

At the conference we were divided into several smaller daily discussion groups to focus on empowerment and leadership of Women within our churches. The groups were called Global Sisters and because they were small groups, we were given the opportunity to participate actively, and explore the qualities needed by our members to enable us to form caring communities. The three meetings of my Global Sisters group discussed our need to be vigilant of our own misdeeds and take responsibility for them. We need to address our own strengths and weaknesses honestly to achieve an internal balanced view of ourself. It is easy to recognise flaws in other people, especially those we are close to like friends and family but this should not cause us to like them any less, nor should it make us devalue ourselves.

We all have different strengths and abilities. Some are good speakers; some are good listeners; some are good planners; some are good at detailed work; some are sensitive to others' feelings; some are focused on tasks; some are good at helping others participate. A good community will be one where each is respected for the value they bring and each is empowered to contribute effectively. Again, this is not easy but if we can keep it as a goal, we can move towards it more easily than if we don't.

To summarise: The Community dimension of church is important. Community is based on supporting each other. We can only give proper support when we value ourselves. Putting other people down in order to enhance our own sense of value will actually disrupt rather than build community.

I close with a picture of two donkeys: Some years ago the Quakers published a poster showing two donkeys between two piles of hay. Tethered by the neck, they could not reach either pile as they pulled against each other. Only when they realised that if they stopped their pulling and took it in turns to share each pile of hay were they successful in what each wanted -- a full meal. Cooperation is not always easy and is sometimes much more messy than this poster would have us believe, but cooperation is better than constant striving to be in control.

Amen