

## Psyche & Soul 20

### TRANSFORMATION THROUGH COMMUNITY & COMPASSION

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The podcast last week referred to the massive disruption of life that covid-19 has ushered in. However, in the depth of this disruption that is quite overwhelming, lies the opportunity to create a more beautiful and humane world.

#### SEEDS OF TRANSFORMATION

As we are used to hearing, in every crisis there is an opportunity. The world as we knew is dead and a new world is struggling to be born. We are witnesses and participants in these birth pangs.

The pandemic has forced us to ask some fundamental existential questions, disquieting questions about the deeper realities of life which, earlier, would have been smothered under the relentless pace of our driven way of life. This questioning is paving the way toward transformation of life and priorities.

As Otto Scharmer, Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) writes in his blog: “As systems collapse, people rise. People rise to the occasion in an absolutely remarkable manner. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of volunteers have shown up in their own countries and communities to help their neighbors .... The resilience of the human spirit, the activation of immense profound love and altruistic action, and the deep connections humans feel to each other in such a moment of crisis are moving and awe-inspiring.”

#### A TIME FOR COMMUNITY AND COMPASSION

Social scientists such as Otto Scharmer, Bob Hanson, Peter Block, Margaret Wheatley and others are reaching a consensus that the way forward from the Covid -19 disruption is through community and compassion. Today, we do not know what the future is going to be, even in the next few months. The challenge is to stay together as a strong community to face what is coming. We are challenged to create the kind of space in which we can feel together and shape together the world that is struggling to emerge.

At a time when life is disrupted and social connections fragmented the greatest need is to build community. At a time when distress is commonplace and so many are wrestling with pain and fear, the need is to reach out in compassion. At a time when loneliness is at a peak, the need is to connect with one another. It is time to reach out in empathy, to be motivated by collective wellbeing, to move from “*ego systems to eco systems*” to use Otto Scharmer’s favourite phrase. Covid-19 has reminded us of our interconnectedness and interdependence. We survive or sink together. As Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*, what we need is the realization that every

member of our human race is brother or sister to every other member, no matter how distant or unfamiliar.

## **Bricks in the Building of Community**

- **Sharing Our Vulnerability**

We build communities when we share our vulnerabilities. The deeper we share from the inside of us honestly, revealing our pain, fears and anxieties, our uncertainties and insecurities, the deeper the others feel the need to share theirs. When we share our hardships and are sensitive to the hardships others face, experience one another's pain, we create a bond. We learn to listen deeply to each other. This sharing and listening result in a mutual opening and expansion of the intelligence of the heart leading to widening of the circle of compassion. Community happens.

- **Transcending Categorization and Exclusion**

Community building calls for trans-categorization thinking. Especially at times of crisis the temptation is to see people through categories – *us and them* (of all sorts). Categorization leads to judgment, contempt and exclusion. Instead of categorization what is needed is curiosity about others. We need to suspend old habits of judgment, have an eagerness to learn about others, see them with fresh eyes. We need to listen deeply and non-judgmentally. Curiosity and non-judgmental, deep listening will lead us to discover others are no different from ourselves and hence to inclusion and empathy. It helps us break down and cross barriers that divide the world into “us and them” and create an inclusive society.

- **Transformation of Attention**

Building community calls for a transformation of attention – from self to the other. We need to shift our gaze very consciously away from self to the other, to the world out there. We need to remove the blindfold of self-focus that prevent us from truly seeing the other as the other is and the situations in which the other is caught up, as they really are. It is this kind of conscious attention toward the other that awakens empathy.

- **From Competition to Collaboration**

Community building calls for moving from competition to collaboration. The questions to ask are: What will make all of us flourish, not just me? What is the shared future we want to create together? Transformation happens when we come together and pursue a common purpose– the wellbeing of all. When we do that, we turn crisis into opportunity. This calls for courage to let go of self-interest and parochial thinking, to be empathic and generous, to build bridges and alliances across differences.

- **Caring for the Earth**

Creating community calls for caring for our common home - the earth. As Pope Francis exhorts us in *Laudato Si*, we need to develop greater ecological sensitivity that heals the divide between us humans and the cosmos that we inhabit. Compassion needs to be extended to the earth that is bleeding through the uncaring and insensitive over-

exploitation of resources. Currently we are consuming 1.5 times the earth's capacity to renew itself, hastening its exhaustion.

- **Being a Peace Warrior**

Finally, to build community we are called to be a peaceful, conciliatory presence in the midst of violent situations. Accordingly to Margaret Wheatley this calls for cultivating virtuous dispositions and practices: compassion, courage, curiosity, kindness, understanding, empathy, vulnerability – and forgiveness. We are invited to access the deeper levels of our humanity where these abide and give them expression. For this we need to create moments of stillness, moments to connect to their source. We need to slow down and put a break on our driven life. We need to become more contemplative. Contemplation enables us to become more calm, peaceful and gentle.

And so, we are invited to journey on, chastened by the pandemic, courageously facing adversity and unpredictability, with changed perspectives and purposes, motivated to build communities of love through compassion, curiosity and courage.

### **Introspection**

- What is the call to transformation that we are individually and collectively sensing? How are we being challenged by this call?
- Which of the suggested means of building community appeals to you or you feel you have to practise more? Why?
- To which one practice will you commit yourself in order to create compassionate communities?

### **Prayer**

In the Letter to the Colossians (Ch. 3, 12-14) St. Paul speaks of some the qualities that help us build communion in community, such as compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience and forgiveness. We could read this passage and stay with whatever is evoked in us and spend some time in prayer, asking God help to build communities of compassion.

Have a pleasant weekend. Be well. Be safe. Be blessed.

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