

The Community Educator— A Call for a New Profession

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ABSTRACT. Modern life often prevents the mastery of the social skills needed to respond to diversity constructively, without destructive behavior. To identify those social skills, the first author conducted an intergenerational summer camp program 12 times over a 4-year period, using J. L. Moreno's sociometry to discover what was critical to the creation of bonding and love within a diverse group. She concluded that people in family or group leadership positions need to know facilitation, many forms of conflict resolution, and companionship skills, including the social value of solitude. These skills also have many professional work applications. A safe setting for people of all ages, where these advanced interpersonal skills can be practiced, is the 1-week "village" experience. The community educator profession is better described in spiritual/psychological language than in the language of conventional professional training. It is part of a life-long learning process. The design for developing community educators is based on the facilitation model of the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP). Susanna Eveson, an international AVP lead facilitator, introduced the program in Hungary where she and her colleagues developed and expanded the design described in this article.

TAKING THE ORIGINAL MEANING of the word *profession* from the Latin—a public avowal or acknowledgment of one's sentiments or belief, a declaration—we concluded the time is ripe for a new profession.

We are in a time of shifting paradigms, between scientific reductionism and holistic perceptions of viewing the universe. In a holistic way of thinking, culture is the gift of a particular group of people to humanity as a whole. What

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are we willing to accept from those who ushered us into the world, and what should be dropped?

We seek awareness through all kinds of knowledge, religion, theater, all forms of art and therapy, yet we try actively to avoid it at all costs. Why are we so afraid to know who we really are, and, if we decide to search, whose God holds a better mirror? Which playwright or preacher, what film or TV program can aid us? Who can show us images we can identify with? Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have been grappling with these questions from time immemorial.

The interconnectedness of the universe as a value can be seen in the work of artists, musicians, poets, and writers. Goethe wrote: "When we venture into knowledge and science, we do so only to return better equipped for living."

In our therapeutic attention to the personal healing of traumas, the world view (*Weltanschauung*) is often neglected. And yet the ways we see the world, our thinking, our beliefs, whether or not we experience being part of the *living biosphere that encloses us all, or feel alienated and separated*, produce the difference between personal healing and dis-ease.

In the reality of life, individuals and communities are often alienated from each other. Our culture, lamentably, encourages, fosters, or rather actively facilitates a lifestyle that is alienating and hazardous to our well-being, materially and emotionally, and disregards our souls. The yearning for less pain, less misery is more audible and visible than ever. Denial as a coping mechanism cannot suffice, because the results of our misunderstandings are staring, shouting in our faces. We all perceive that things are amiss. People want to participate: It is becoming a central issue of our time. People today have an impatient urge to have a say, a part in the processes that shape our lives.

We ask that you consider the new "profession," becoming a *community educator facilitator* and advocate for the development of persons in an earth-community context, what we refer to today as building sustainable communities. This holistic approach to life has a long history and appears all over the world in different forms. It has continued as a European/American minority tradition, counteracting the industrial-technological exploitation of earthly resources in the last 300 years.

The interconnectedness of the universe as a value and a world view can be found in the so-called mystical parts of the Judeo-Christian traditions, and the personalism tradition as expressed by Emmanuel Mounier, Peter Maurin, and Dorothy Day of the American Catholic Worker movement. Day expressed it as "a philosophy which regards the freedom and dignity of each person as the basis, focus and goal of all metaphysics and morals. In following such wisdom, we move away from a self-centered individualism toward the good of the other. This is to be done by taking personal responsibility for changing conditions, rather than looking to the state or other institutions to provide impersonal 'charity'."

The concept of the interconnectedness of the universe can be found in Goethe's writings, especially in his scientific works, and continues through Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophic philosophy, into biodynamic farming and contemporary environmentalism. The sociological writings of Karl Marx, particularly those that focus on the alienation of man from the products of his labor, are another expression of the yearning for a better tomorrow. Denmark's theologian/educator Grundtvig began the folk high-school innovations in the Nordic countries and championed the development of persons in an earth-based community context. J. L. Moreno's work in social psychology and psychotherapy is another expression of that tradition. In groups, each person is to be the therapeutic agent of the other, and we all participate, every moment, in the ongoing spontaneity/creativity of the universe.

On the American continent, the spiritual values of the Native Peoples, like those of indigenous people from all around the globe, stress how we are all alive and related. Chief Seattle's famous warning to the White conquerors of America, "Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself," is now being heard by modern environmentalists. David Abram, the ecologist and philosopher, brings our attention to the premise: "that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." For many, a holistic perception of the universe—the interconnected nature of humans, animals, plants, land, waters, and heavens—is a majority world view.

The dominant European paradigm, the separation of humans from the natural world, has influenced all of the industrial and postindustrial world. From that tradition, we inherited the belief that only human beings can have intelligent souls. Other animals, in fact all of creation itself, the earth and the heavens above, were created to serve humankind. This paradigm is now being challenged.

The community facilitator/educator's work focuses on developing a person's awareness of relationships in the context of an earth-community and on sponsoring the learning of social skills that make those connections positive ones. The work is part of a holistic view of the universe. That is, we humans need to learn the skills of connecting different parts of our separate worlds in positive ways, to celebrate life, which is bigger than all of us.

This analysis of which social skills are essential to the community educator's work is based on Moreno's concept of the role of choice in companionship, as described in *The Intimate Community Experience: An Experiment in Social Reorganization Based on Sociometry and the Christian Tradition* (Danielsson, 1979). The procedure was to study the dynamics of a 1-week intergenerational summer camp, an intimate community experience, to discover what social skills were needed to create bonding and love among members of a diverse group. The program was conducted 12 times over a 4-year

period (1975–79). Each experience involved 25 to 30 persons of all ages, as might be found in an extended kinship system, a not-for-profit organization, a community church, a synagogue, a mosque, or a small village community.

People in leadership positions need to know how to facilitate a group, employ many different forms of conflict-resolution skills, have an understanding of companionship roles, and continue their development of their own sense of unique personhood as a lifelong learning process. They can then live and work together in a cooperative and positive manner, connected as a series of families within a larger social unit through which their unique culture, meaning, and values can be expressed.

We will outline specific training programs in the social skills cited above and illustrate how the choice of a response to relationships can change both the individual and the community to their mutual benefit.

The goal of the community educator can be expressed through the metaphor of a garden. The organic or holistic gardener cultivates the uniqueness of each plant, knowing that that benefits the garden as a whole. Using scientific awareness of how plants interact or mature, the gardener places the tomatoes near the marigolds, which stop the bugs; the peas next to the corn so they can climb up on the corn for support. Carrots and radishes, both tiny seeds, are sowed at the same time, but with their different maturation rates, the radishes can be harvested early, creating space for the carrots that mature much later. Thus the gardener uses the inherent specialization of each plant to strengthen the garden itself as a living organism. Most important, the gardener knows how to transform the past life of the garden—including the weeds—so that it will become fertilizer for the new, tender plants. We need to develop the social equivalent of that organic process, the “emotional composting” of bad human experiences and histories, so that communities and people can nourish the future instead of replaying past negative behaviors.

Like a garden, the human community also consists of beings of different ages, with different talents and abilities, at different levels of maturity, and who are both male and female. The diversity of the members of the family is what makes it a family unit. A family is one form of a group. Villages are expanded family units that have a larger purpose. Sometimes that larger purpose is simply survival, so that the next generations can continue to stay alive.

But there is also the matter of culture, meaning, and values. For example, in the city of Geel, Belgium, for centuries mentally ill pilgrims made their way to the shrine of St. Dymphna, in the hopes of being healed. Perhaps they changed less than did the residents of the city, who developed, over a period of centuries, a unique foster family-care program. The most prominent citizens of Geel were involved in the foster care programs, as a statement of civic values. Social workers would pair a mentally handicapped person with a chronic schizophrenic in a foster home. That combination of mental patients reduced care-

giving time, for when the schizophrenic hallucinates, the mentally handicapped companion listens attentively, giving the foster parents more free time to work on their farm. The program also changed the common medieval concept from one in which the mentally ill were possessed by the devil to one in which emotional sickness was accepted as part of the human condition.

Using an artistic metaphor, we suggest that a community is like a musical ensemble without a conductor. Each instrument is different and can be played alone as well as with others. In contrapuntal music, each person's part is a melody. No one is only a "harmony" part to another. Many melodies (persons) sounding forth at the same time—and sounding wonderful together because of the intense listening of the musicians involved—was the 16th-century composer Palestrina's image of heaven.

Imagine a Dixieland jazz band in which musicians are playing different instruments, each improvising a melody with no written score. The musicians, however, must agree to play the same song, which provides the harmonic base for their individual improvisations as they shape their own creativity to complement that of their musical companions. The skills of the community facilitator/educator, which we are trying to describe, involve, in this analogy, helping everyone to find a group in which his or her song fits with the others, and then coaching them in the skills of listening and playing so that, as an ensemble, the music sounds beautiful.

Each community, garden, family, or musical group is unique, just as each person, plant, or instrument is unique. Global networks of nonresidential communities can span the planet, linking together persons-in-community with others choosing to play the same song in celebration of life on our planet.

A Few Comments on Education

Often, for educational purposes, we humans try to limit the diversity of members in a particular group. Our habitual mode of teaching focuses attention on the teacher, or the therapist, and reduces the ability of group members to learn from each other or discover by themselves. If what is desired is the learning of factual information on a purely intellectual level, there is some point to that mode of teaching.

A conscious effort to honor the diversity of the learners is an essential component of the learning process we are advocating. It is student-centered learning, in which the uniqueness of each learner helps in the communication of the topic to be learned. As people understand things differently, concepts need to be expressed differently to be accurately understood.

Educate stems from a Latin root, meaning "to lead out from within." Throughout history, there were always a few educators who dared to speak from the holistic minority tradition. For example, Maria Montessori dared to

state: "To aid life, leaving it free, however, to unfold itself, that is the basic task of the educator." That is similar to Moreno's understanding of social leadership, based on spontaneity/creativity, and to the study circle and self-help group models of education or healing, organized by the people for the people.

Technology has drastically changed the content of what should be considered appropriate education for the next generation. Information about the world is more readily available than in previous centuries. Computers are available to children beginning in the elementary schools, so the process of how to find information or apply it has become more important than factual knowledge per se. Consequently, teaching styles based on conveying information, useful in the past, need to change.

Now the need is for educators to help people integrate what they know into functional behavior. Students, both adults and youth, need to be able to communicate not only with their peers but also with those different from themselves. We are truly living on a small planet, in the global village McLuhan predicted, and diversity cannot be avoided.

Social Health Skills for Daily Life

We will limit our discussion here to the role of adult education, the development of persons-in-community. Action methods are now well established in adult education circles, and we can share with you an experience that indicated to us that they also work extremely well with children. Children of 7 years and older are able to learn the basics of sociometry, peer mediation, and other problem-solving skills, such as how to facilitate playground activities. However, our discussion here concerns the expertise of the community facilitator/educator in work with adults.

Learning social skills could be compared to learning a language or a sport. Someone can show you swimming strokes in a few minutes, but it may take all summer (or several summers) and consistent practice before you are able to swim. Reading or theorizing about it could never suffice. The test would be the ability to swim in deep water, where you cannot touch the ground but must depend on your strokes and ability to float to keep from drowning. Doing or experiencing is the key. Social skills for persons-in-community require a similar process. We divided the activities of persons-in-community into three sections and describe the skills needed by community educators.

Group Facilitation

The community facilitator has developed the following skills: the art of listening, chairing a meeting, finding common ground, moving toward consensus, "composting" of anger and rage, and collaborative negotiating skills. A

program exists that we consider a viable training model for developing these abilities: the Alternative to Violence Program (AVP). The program, initiated in the United States by the Society of Friends (Quakers) more than 20 years ago, is now a worldwide nonprofit organization. It consists of a series of three 3-day units of intensive group work, organized as basic, advanced, and training-for-facilitators workshops. Each unit consists of 30 hr of action learning, covering affirmation, community building, communication skills, and creative conflict resolution. At the second level in the advanced workshops, insight becomes a focal point. The training for facilitators is the first course in which participants begin trying out the role of AVP workshop team facilitator. The basic tenets of AVP are as follows:

1. There is a power that is able to transform violent and destructive situations and behavior into liberating and constructive experiences and cooperative behavior.

2. This power is always present—it is in you, in your opponent, and it surrounds you both. It is able to work through people who are open to it.

3. It is not something that humans can use—rather, it is something that uses us. We cannot manipulate it; we can only try to remain open to it so that it can work through us.

4. Being “open” to Transforming Power involves three things: (a) We must first be willing to lay aside habitual assumptions that violent and destructive solutions are the only ones possible and be willing to try something different; (b) we must believe that a “win-win” solution is possible and that there is something in our opponent, however hidden it may be, that is willing to join us in seeking such a solution; (c) we must be willing to commit ourselves to a nonviolent position and take risks, possibly to suffer, if necessary, in order to maintain that position.

Third-Party Conflict Resolution Skills

Although some reconciliation and cooperation skills are included in the group facilitation workshops, all third-party dispute resolution skills and system designs need to be learned in a separate workshop. When there are violations of people and relationships, the group (as a third party) or a specially trained individual can be called upon to help work things out between the disputing parties. The restorative justice process, either formal or informal, involves the victim, the offender, and sometimes, if more assistance is needed than the individual conciliator/mediator can provide, the group itself. Together they search for solutions that promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance so that life, for both the individuals and the group, can continue. The path to a solution may involve these processes: conciliation (shuttle diplomacy); mediation (neutral 3rd party facilitation empowers the disputants to negotiate

their own solution to their mutual satisfaction); mediation/arbitration (the third party has the power to make a final decision if mediation does not work); and the basic design of interpersonal dispute resolution processes within groups (including family units), organizations, or institutions.

This unit of conflict resolution is also a 30-hr program involving experiential learning and, in essence, is a practical course for solving the types of interpersonal conflicts most people experience in their daily lives. An apprenticeship follows the completion of the advanced workshop. These apprenticeships need to be specifically designed to suit the structures in which the individuals being trained are involved, be they family units, neighborhoods, communities, institutions, professional groups, and so forth.

Practical Sociometry

J. L. Moreno's basic methodologies, a consciousness-raising process of how we choose our companionship, is the training model for this unit. These skills involve discovering one's own role repertoire, role dynamics in real time; identifying the social atom formed by oneself and others; understanding the companionship choice of group members, the sociogram; facilitation of family/group reorganization on companionship principles; and the social value of solitude. This part of the training includes a 30-hr unit of action learning and is part of the basic training of most psychodramatists. After an advanced workshop, the participants could serve an apprenticeship, perhaps as a team leader in a family/village week. For an example, we suggest the "Sociometric Family Week" conducted by Ragnhild Poppius of the Svenska Morenoinstitutet (Gamla Rådstugugatan 26, 602 24 Norrköping, Sweden). In that program, some 30 men, women, and children connected with a family-therapy center rented a large house and lived together in smaller "families of choice" for a week with psychodramatists acting as the program facilitators. Practical chores were part of the program because there was no professional support staff. Participants left with an experience, under skilled facilitation, of a bigger world, with more possible choices of behavior and role. Often, they experienced a happier world than they had known within the confines of their own families.

What is important about the "village" experience is that it is a microcosmic experience of consciously living out the holistic universe world view. The 1-week village experience includes the diversity of the human family. If the "village" undertakes a project that connects it to the earth process in some way, the entire spectrum of life forms becomes included. The family/group goal is more than learning a few social skills or achieving some personal growth breakthroughs. It is a temporary experience of living in an earth-friendly sustainable community, with others of their extended kinship group, neighbor-

hood, or social organization. If they choose to do so, participants can return to their homes and geographic communities with both the vision and the skills to live a holistic lifestyle.

The social value of solitude needs to be addressed. Simply put, that means finding a place for voluntary solitude within the organizational life of the community. When we are companions to each other here on earth, each of us has our own unique connection to the cosmos. Cultures express this in different ways: the meditation practices of the East, the vision quests of Native Peoples, hermitages in various religious traditions, a time of group silence for discernment in meetings. A place in nature or a building set aside where a person can be in solitude has an immense value for the community. The social value of solitude is that the community acknowledges the transforming power of solitude, discussed in the group facilitation section of this article, as a gift to the community as a whole.

The Organizing Principles of Community Educator Training

Workshop participation in the group facilitation section and sociometric family week is open to all, and voluntary participation is essential. The first requirement here is to be open to looking at and talking about conflicts and our part in them. We try together for solutions, which come from the whole group. We look at behavior to discover what increases and what decreases conflict and violence. The recruitment process needs to inform potential participants that several prerequisites are necessary: (a) interest—to engage and keep the attention, to arouse the curiosity, to cause to feel interest; (b) attention—careful observation, watching, active civility, command issues, to ensure readiness to act; (c) practice—performance or execution as opposed to theory, custom, or habit, systematic exercise for instruction, training.

The three sections of the community educator training—group facilitation, third-party conflict resolution, and practical sociometry—would each have a basic and advanced training section (60 hr), which is a total of 180 hr of experiential workshop time. Each section would be divided into two parts. After a 25-hr section, usually a 3-day weekend, homework would be assigned. A 5-hr session, scheduled within a month, would provide a review and closure for that section. An apprenticeship would follow each section of the 180 hr of training. The apprenticeship could be somewhat different for each of the three sections, but the model that has been established for AVP programs works very well. We will outline only the first section because the design for the other sections will be similar.

A potential group facilitator begins with a training-for-facilitators workshop. The apprenticeship continues with the person being on a facilitating team three times, in other basic, advanced, and training-for-facilitators work-

shops, a total of nine 3-day sessions. The apprenticeship ends with the new community facilitator organizing his/her own basic workshop. Whenever the person feels ready, an on-site evaluation from those experienced as community facilitators takes place. The motto is always "learning by doing."

Ongoing Training for Community Educator/Facilitator

Qualifications for competency differ from development of one's own personhood, but they are interconnected. The life experiences of the potential educator/facilitator will be more relevant than academic studies. There are no tests for a successful person-in-community, and it is better described in spiritual/psychological language than in the language of conventional professional training.

Personal growth is an experience that we describe as an existential rebirth. The process of life is closely linked to energy flow. The universe is a system of energy manifesting at nexus points as events. Events happen continuously; their effects depend on the flow of energy involved and on the quality and quantity of that flow. In terms of human endeavor, perhaps the most significant aspect of energy flow can be said to be the quality of the intention involved. When an event occurs in human life such as splitting the atom (which was a monumental event) or picking up a knife (a daily event), is the intent behind that action to create or to destroy, to heal or to wound?

Energy affects us from within and without. Energy is the connecting link. It is not male or female; it is both and neither. Energy cannot be said to be good or evil. The most one can say is that energy *is*. It gives us locomotion and makes us do what we do. Everything alive is a manifestation of and a conductor of energy. What is without enters into the within. From within, guided or aided by our being, energy enters into the without. In human terms, this guiding process is called intention. This process seemingly ends at death. During a lifetime, our bodies serve as continuously moving substances for the grand drama of the energy dance unfolding.

Feeling the energy flow is a conscious experience of life. When life and the individual are one, there is such a depth of fulfillment that after even the briefest experience of this, no other pursuit will suffice. To most people, any other aim would be off the mark, once they have had a taste of this primary link.

The flow of life energy is blocked in proportion to the need of the person to assure survival. We (collectively or individually) can take only so much conflict. When this limit is reached, the passage of energy is blocked. These blocks are called defenses, and when they are created, they are vital to the organism's ability to survive. To live within such defenses as if the siege were still present is like an adult carrying around luggage filled with his old baby

clothes. They might have been necessary once, but their usefulness has been lost, and the burden of their presence is a reality.

Existential rebirth can give us a sense of being and of a right to be. Living with that sense expresses our personal authenticity. That moment of maturation into adulthood, the moment of existential rebirth, does not mean that all problems are resolved forever. Rather, it means that our authenticity is in the driver's seat, even though there may be accidents and wounds along the road into the future; hence, the need for continual personal work. It is a form of physical, emotional, and spiritual housecleaning, personal work to maintain the luster and shine of the clear awareness of self that happens when we wake up at the moment of existential rebirth. Thus, maturation continues.

All religious traditions have incorporated personal growth into rituals. Religion (from Latin) means "to bind to—again and again." Commitment to always clean up unfinished business, so one can be truly present to the time at hand is the primary required ongoing training, if one wants to profess, declare, publicly avow interest in this line of work.

Where Would Community Facilitators/Educators Work?

Most new social roles begin as off-shoots of other established kinds of work and often include work that is very important but unpaid. For example, one might begin with

- family-kinship (or friendship) leadership, which can be expressed by organizing a 1-week summer vacation for family and friends where learning these social skills in an earth-community context is part of the program;
- programs of nonprofit organizations, para-church and spiritually based groups, self-help groups, and sports organizations—these various short courses in the social skills for sustainable communities could be introduced to complement existing trainings;
- the therapeutic field, conducting sociometric family weeks as part of the work of those in the mental health field and organizing projects to connect the human community to the larger earth community;
- a course in schools or colleges, with an apprenticeship with nonschool or college populations—for example, leading an AVP group;
- wherever one felt it important to develop persons in an earth-community context; or
- sections of the population most rejected by others.

The Need Is Here and the Time Is Now!

With the breakdown of such traditional integrating structures as the family, the church, and the neighborhood, with the inadequacy of hospitals and crisis-

intervention centers to provide all-embracing, ongoing assistance and cohesion, and with a group consciousness that emotional growth is not restricted to childhood, there emerges a need for a creative witness to safeguard and enhance the worth and dignity of the individual person and our interdependence as members of a larger family.

The goals for a human sustainable community are as follows:

1. To strengthen the contemporary family, by developing new skills to act beyond traditional family roles
2. To build extended family networks by choice, for mutual support and celebration
3. To create a caring, healthy environment for those who are most vulnerable—the aging, the young, persons with disabilities
4. To celebrate and live in harmony with the fact that all in the universe really are interrelated, regardless of our different perceptions—“Whether or not we believe in a geocentric or a heliocentric view of the universe, only a fool would maintain that the earth is the source of its own light or that days may pass by without a relationship of earth and sun,” as Grundtvig remarked in his writings (Knudson 1976, p. 25)

The ability for spontaneous creativity is a given attribute we all have. The process of discovery is as infinite as the universe. A sense of belongingness grows with each creative act. To expand our scope, to release more energy, to act anew in an old situation, or to be able to function creatively in a constantly changing world with a sense of meaning and purpose, we need to cultivate our own uniquely given circumstances with compassionate, nonjudgmental awareness and respect for all of creation.

SUGGESTED READING

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