



# Notes from the Ecotone: Making and Keeping Friends on the Border of the Ordered World

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**T**HESSE NOTES EMERGE BOTH FROM THE PERSONAL AND FROM THE COMMUNAL, BALancing my Southern Baptist upbringing, emphasizing the faith-belief of the individual, and my Lutheran adult education, emphasizing the historical richness of the confessional community. What follows are some of my thoughts and borrowings as I attempt to make sense of the world.

Between 1974 and 1993, I was involved with an organization located at a crossroads between the so-called dominant community (primarily European and middle-to-upper socioeconomic class) and the non-dominant community (primarily of color and middle-to-lower socioeconomic class). The City, Inc., since 1967 had exclusively served inner-city young people and their families who for a variety of reasons were involved with the criminal justice system. These young people and their families were also, more often than not, poor and of color. Since the early 1980s, many of the young people who came to The City were affiliated with associations called gangs by the popular media. The City combined the functions of counseling, education, and advocacy with programs ranging from employment to school and day care, to outreach and advocacy. The City, hiring a large part of

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its staff from the community it serves, has also progressed hundreds of young people towards high-school graduation, improved their basic academic and problem-solving skills, kept them out of the juvenile justice system, and helped their families resolve the challenging problems of living together.

Aristophanes claimed that “whirl is king,” and my twenty-five years of inner-city experiences embrace that confession in the often dizzying nature of living on the edge – the border of the ordered world. Over the years I have been challenged and humbled by the complexity of inner-city Minneapolis.

### I. THE ECOTONE, CROSSROADS, AND COMPLEXITY

I find the metaphors of ecotone, crossroads, and complexity to be useful in appreciating the relationships between communities.

In ecological biology, an ecotone is “a transition between two or more diverse communities...it is a junction zone or tension belt.”<sup>1</sup> Because of the overlap, species from each of the systems create a diversity of species not present in the individual systems. Edge species emerge in the ecotone. These species are specific to the overlap, spending “the greatest amount of time in the junctions between communities,” but they can also move, live, and survive in the participating systems.<sup>2</sup> Consider that our inner cities are, by definition, ecotones.

William Whyte, in *City: Rediscovering the Center*, argues that “what attracts people most is other people” and our cities, as a collection of people and crossroads, are where “one thing is certain: it is at the crossroads that the chances are best.”<sup>3</sup> Whyte also argues that the outward move of corporations from central cities results in a forfeiture of chance, perhaps intentionally. The chance for change, in Whyte’s analysis, is neither good nor bad, but very present where people move and gather in numbers.

In physics, an evolving expression of quantum theory addresses the phenomenon of complexity:

The edge of chaos is where the components of a system never quite lock into place and yet never quite dissolve into turbulence, either. The edge of chaos is where life has enough stability to sustain itself and enough creativity to deserve the name of life...the edge of chaos is the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy, the one place where a complex system can be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive.<sup>4</sup>

The diversity of the ecotone, the chance for change at the crossroads, and the creativity in complexity represent some of the myriad dynamics in relationships between communities that are strangers to each other more than is often acknowledged.

<sup>1</sup>E. Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1971) 157.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>3</sup>William Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988) 11.

<sup>4</sup>M. Mitchell Waldrop, *Complexity: The Emerging Science at the Edge of Order and Chaos* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 12.

## II. THE POWER OF THE MEDIA AND THE POLICE

No two institutions are more representative of the dominant culture, its values and perspectives, than the media and the police. The local community see the police as an army of occupation; this begins to gain a foothold in reality when we consider, for example, that the Minneapolis Police Department is overwhelmingly white (90% plus), its officers overwhelmingly young and inexperienced (averaging 2.5 years experience), and overwhelmingly not residents of the town in which they work (over 70%).

The reader should know that I have witnessed a staff person shot in the head by rival gang members and have been present at a shoot-out with over two hundred people from rival sets; most recently, on my watch as president, The City was associated with the murder of a policeman.

A former deputy chief in Minneapolis referred to some of my colleagues and me in the local newspaper as “part of a group of people who have bilked the community for over twenty years,”<sup>5</sup> even though I had never met the man. Although his formal apology a couple of days later was displayed on the last page of the local news section, the labels were already attached in the minds of some people, simply because a policeman had said so in the newspaper.

Of course, media coverage and content shape perceptions. Right after one of our staff persons was shot in our building during work hours, a community newspaper ran the following:

The shooting, however, has galvanized other nearby residents and business owners who have been unhappy with The City for some time....They especially oppose the drop-in program, but are afraid to speak out openly for fear of reprisal. Fear is so high among these people that they do not want their names used in print; one resident was even hesitant to be seen going to a meeting about The City in a neighbor’s house. They tend to see any crimes committed in their area as crimes perpetrated by young people who frequent The City and suspect that the drop-in program is a center for gang and drug activity. They also suspect that The City is guilty of financial improprieties.<sup>6</sup>

One of the greatest challenges to The City’s efforts was the implicit association with the tragic murder of a policeman, reinforcing the dominant culture’s stereotypes and fears about its enemies in the inner city. Philip Kretsedemas, analyzing the media coverage of the murder, notes:

That all stories are fabricated has little to do with their credibility or lack thereof. Rather, the value of the story to us – the readers – has much more to do with the credibility of the storyteller than the content of the story itself....The mainstream media will have us believe that no one is doing the storytelling – that they are objective. This claimed objectivity is reason enough to make us suspicious of the one telling the tale.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Brian Bonner, “Minneapolis Shootings Revive Street Gang Issue,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press Dispatch*, 25 February 1988, 1A, 10A.

<sup>6</sup>Van Anderson, “The City, Inc. Inspires Fear and Praise,” *The Horn* 6 (1988) 1-10.

<sup>7</sup>Phillip Kretsedemas, “Stories – How the Media Spin a Yarn,” *Colors* 2 (1993) 4.

I can remember sharing with a friend my anger and alarm about the local police releasing dogs on inner-city people gathering frantically at a local hospital following a shooting death of a family member. My friend replied, "If the cops unleashed the dogs, your people must have done something wrong!" If you find yourself disagreeing with the cops, you too must be a gangster of some kind.

Positive engagement with an "enemy" is difficult. As one might expect, after publicly making the association between the assassination of a police officer and The City, Inc., the chief of police publicly "terminated" the relationship between the police and the agency; at that time, we were focusing on putting together a gang council to reduce violence in the community. In spite of the controversy, it is important to note that The City had tremendous support during this time period, with programs working at capacity, many with waiting lists, and revenues at record levels. In spite of the association, apparently some, those closest to The City's day to day work, were not as negatively effected.

### III. "DON'T TALK WITH THEM, THEY'RE..."

I've come to understand that one of the first moves in making an enemy is to objectify and externalize that person as an other, attributing characteristics that aren't likely to change and promoting a kind of certainty about the other that suppresses the possibility of surprise and wonder. For instance, the most common definition of gangs from the dominant community is "an organization or group of persons organized for the purpose of criminal intent." This definition makes any positive engagement with gangs difficult, forcing one to deal with criminal intent first of all. Seldom are these so-called-by-the-media gangs ever asked how they would define themselves. I have most often heard them refer to themselves primarily as friends, brothers and sisters, and families.

A pervasive polarization exists, sustained by labels of righteous and wicked, where whole communities break down into camps, and communities are literally at war. This foundational, relational breakdown gains its foothold at the personal level where we continually insist on a right not to talk with each other, convincing ourselves we have nothing in common.

### IV. "BEHAVE LIKE US"

While it is probably no surprise in a society where money is so important, we do know that one of the strongest single predictors for children to be at-risk is poverty. And poverty is mean.

There is something about poverty that smells like death. Dead dreams dropping off the heart like leaves in a dry season and rotting around the feet; impulses smothered too long in the fetid air of underground caves. The soul lives in a sickly air. People can be slave-ships in shoes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937) 193.

In searching for what's wrong with the inner cities, one of the arguments is that poverty is primarily the result of wrong kinds of behavior. This argument depends on the belief that this country is, indeed, the land of opportunity: if you behave and hold the right kinds of values, you'll get ahead.

Our politicians, liberals and conservatives alike, mesmerize us with their analyses and arguments on eliminating poverty and welfare. Stereotypically, conservatives emphasize behavior and values, arguing that a return to discipline and accepting responsibility are key. Stereotypically, liberals claim that the structural denial of opportunity, resulting from racism and poverty, extinguishes most attempts at reforming behaviors and values.

An emphasis on behaviors without the glue of relationships and culture is doomed to become ineffective preaching. An emphasis on structural causes, without attending to the personal, opens the door for blaming the system, which is obviously something very resilient to change, and perpetuates victimhood—a lifetime of being owed by someone (or something) else.

We talk past each other here. My experience has been that both arguments are correct but only when taken together: a message of behavioral change is best delivered in the context of a relationship; but systematic racism and poverty are alive and well today, not something we defeated in the sixties.

#### V. "LET'S HIRE SOMEONE TO DO THIS"

A few years ago, I was shocked to hear a radio advertisement encouraging parents with troublesome adolescents to give the advertiser, a psychiatric hospital, a call. With these kinds of inducements to send our children away to get fixed by others, perhaps it is little wonder that we have record out-of-home placements for children in treatment programs, group homes, and foster homes—institutions run by professionals, a parents-in-absentia phenomenon.

We're continuously seduced into an overreliance on professionals and programs, fixated on the latest methodological fad, e.g., outcome-based education, boot camps, workfare. Are these attempts born of frustration?

The task of educating our young is just one example of how the professional community's relationship with the local community and its resources has deteriorated. Major educational institutions charged with the training of teachers for our young still have little success in attracting, retaining, and graduating teachers of color in any significant numbers to meet the challenges currently facing many of our inner-city school districts. Adding insult to injury, these institutions still rely predominantly on eurocentric methods of inquiry and instruction, perpetuating racism and culturalism in educational institutions. The point here is both the denial of multicultural perspective and the blind acceptance of the eurocentric method as not only universally superior but overarching and unifying. As John McKnight has argued, inner-city communities are doomed to be consumer communities, with little "outside" expectations of production, dependent on professionals from other communities to provide the basics of social and educational

services.<sup>9</sup> The professional community “feeds at this trough” and regulates the territory, even though demonstrating little success.

What justification do we have for confidence in the professional social and educational community? I believe there are no professional or programmatic answers in which to find hope. Consider the real possibility that this overreliance on professionals and programs forces down the possibility of resources from within the community and culture being brought to bear on these vexing issues.

## VI. WHERE TO BEGIN?

In the midst of all of this, what has happened to the simple human enterprise of making and keeping friends? Are we running the risk of forgetting this basic lore altogether? Where are the values, the skills, the encouragement to affiliate effectively? With our relatives in the Christian communities, where are the dynamics of grace, redemption, and reconciliation? Are we losing the glue that holds communities together?

There is a pervading sense of hopelessness about future prospects here on the border. Can you believe that across this country we have whole communities of people who know of no one who is employed? I’ve heard young people say they don’t buy the American Dream; they want proof first. The civil-rights movement was a gross failure in their neighborhood. Young people are looking for something that’s going to work for their family.

Life here on the border requires building relationships and community. We’re all pretty clear we need to rebuild social networks and community. We (think we) know about community, or remember anyhow; we’ve waxed eloquent about it: the details, the smells and emotions of personal memories, those who cared for us. How to move from a memory to a living presence, now, is the challenge. Urbanologist William Julius Wilson’s simple answer is embedded in his complex analysis: reduce social isolation.<sup>10</sup>

## VII. COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Here on the ecotone I am aware everyday of my relationships, of “all of my relatives”; I am aware of this vast—because it is beyond my ability to describe and catalogue—array of relational stuff: stories, theories, dittys, encouragements, warnings—all mediated to me through interactions with others. I am constituted by and through my relationship with others. In its simplest sense, community begins with a relationship.

I believe culture is the location for, the repository of, the transmittal source for these values and motivations, for the lore and dreams of making and keeping

<sup>9</sup>John McKnight, *The Future of Low-Income Neighborhoods and the People Who Reside There: A Capacity-Oriented Strategy for Neighborhood Development* (Evanston: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, 1987).

<sup>10</sup>William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) 60.

friends and building community. I'm reminded of this every time I "go home" to visit my folks; I still feel the "small townness" and its contributions to my values—though I'm sure I'm romanticizing here. But if there is no community, culture and its values wither.

In writing about the inner city I am also compelled to write about my faith. Spirituality, as a resource for building community, is also mediated to me through these relatives and relationships. In spite of the endless program prattle from the professional communities, spirituality isn't found in programs either.

Spirituality and culture are tied together but seem to be packaged differently, given a particular culture. My specific experiences and relationships with inner-city African Americans and woodland and prairie American Indians demonstrate that you don't go long in conversation, learning about their cultures, without the issue of spirituality being raised. Yet, in conversations with many European Americans, one can talk for quite some time with no mention of spirituality. I have been taught by African American and American Indian relatives that the spiritual resource is embedded in culture, with its values and ritual reminders.

In a search for a definition of culture, there is little consensus. Cross-cultural therapist Charles Waldegrave persuasively suggests:

Cultures carry within them history, beliefs, ways of doing things and processes of communication. Experience of the most intimate events and the most public are interpreted to people, to some considerable extent, by their culture; culture, by its very nature, gives meaning to events and experience...culture is probably the most influential determinant of meaning in people's lives.<sup>11</sup>

Relationships mediate culture; culture has a quality of localness to it; it is not a monolithic, knowable set of facts and values, not a body of knowledge to be acquired like a skill; rather, it is something one participates in. Appiah has instructively argued that the emphasis on "African culture" is misguided, forcing down the rich diversity of cultures that exist and have existed for thousands of years on the African continent.<sup>12</sup> Cornell West claims that there is no such thing as a monolithic culture, since, through time, all cultures have derived with and from each other.<sup>13</sup> Relationship leads to community and community seems to hold culture and spiritual traditions and practices. I believe it's important to avoid recipes here; the challenge is to develop awe.

There was a time when teaching and healing were functions held and empowered by the local community. Healers and teachers chosen by the local community, after meeting community criteria, were empowered to heal, to teach the community; they were not sent by a professional association to heal or teach. We

<sup>11</sup>Charles Waldegrave, "Just Therapy," *Social Justice and Family Therapy*, Dulwich Centre Newsletter 1 (1990) 15.

<sup>12</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 24.

<sup>13</sup>Cornell West, *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, vol. 1, *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1993).

are losing something here. My experiences with inner-city communities indicate that the functions of healing and teaching are empowered by the community and its culture(s) and are embedded today in the very neighborhoods we label as wastelands.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to China with a group of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and family therapists. I was impressed by how we all seemed to bend over backwards to impress our hosts that our “system” and our “method” were working quite well, particularly given what we saw of theirs. Of course, we never did dwell on our record number of out-of-home placements of children, high divorce rates, and the billions we spend on a professional cadre of individual and family helpers.

One of the things that did alarm me about China’s rush to industrialize was the massive pell-mell building of single family apartments. Everywhere we looked, new buildings were being constructed to accommodate the immigration from the farming collectives to the cities and their factories. What was being transformed was the extended family and social networks of the villages into the modern, industrialized nuclear family. What costs were being rung up here? Experts stateside tell us that, even though being a single parent brings special challenges to the family, the presence of an extended family or of social networks mediates against the negative effect of these challenges. (Maybe gangs, as social networks, beat isolation and having no friends or relatives.)

How does one get to community and culture? What I’ve noticed is that it seems to begin with a relationship and the added dimension of time. Attending to my spiritual-cultural experiences—this relational resource bank or human petri dish—three simple dynamics have emerged again and again: (1) curiosity, (2) conversation, and (3) confession.

#### VIII. CURIOSITY

Many of the young people who came to The City School for education were no longer curious about what adults thought about the world; their young curiosity had atrophied over time, a consequence of schools that no longer taught and adults, in their world, who no longer knew how to care. One of our solutions was to work hard at hiring teachers who were excited about their own learning, believing that their curiosity about the world could infect their students, rekindle curiosity.

As a family therapist, Salvador Minuchin was instructive to me. He often asked families coming to him for the first time to “teach me about your family.” In the same spirit, theorist Gianfranco Cecchin, addressing the ideal desire of therapists to assume the impossible stance of neutrality with families, offers the option that “encourages the development of multiple perspectives and voices.... Curiosity facilitates the development of multiplicity and polyphony.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Gianfranco Cecchin, “Hypothesizing, Circularity, and Neutrality Revisited: An Invitation to Curiosity,” *Family Process* 4 (1987) 407.



Over the years, I have been attracted to Luke 7:36-50. My focus has been Jesus' pointed question to the pharisee, "Do you *see* this woman?" I have always been struck by Jesus' simple yet challenging appeal for curiosity. Seeing and knowing with too much certainty is part of our sin. Jesus calls for a different kind of seeing—perhaps, "Do you see this woman with understanding?" Luke's account illustrates a critical dynamic in seeing: challenging our tendency to become blinded by our own process of selectivity, whether by what we pay attention to in the media or don't pay attention to on the streets of our cities.

Suggestions that the media shape our certain opinions about gangs is probably an understatement. Taking and keeping a position over time requires a kind of certainty, a loss of curiosity. Adults afraid of children produce lectures and pontifications and reformatories, all without the glue of relationships.

The role of a community, whether secular or spiritual, in helping us see is predicated on active relationships. Zora Neal Hurston's character Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, claimed, "You gotta go there to know there."<sup>15</sup> And it helps, when you do show up there, to have a bunch of curiosity.

#### IX. CONVERSATION

Curiosity seems naturally to lead to conversation. In conversation, the face-to-face encounter with another, transcendence of one's experience becomes possible. Perhaps, chance is also greatest at the crossroads of human interaction: the conversation. My family went to Sunday School every Sunday at the Second Baptist Church of Liberty, Missouri. We drilled and competed in class on finding Bible verses, sang great hymns, heard riveting evangelists, and ditched services; I witnessed, year after year, the teachings and sharings of the gospel from housewives, teachers, professors, farmers, and small businessmen. I particularly remember the farmers, somewhat stiff in their Sunday suits, with their forehead tans and weathered, hard-working hands, moving animatedly, enthusiastically telling me "the old, old stories of Jesus and his love."

I later came to experience and understand this relational emphasis again in Young Life; they stressed the importance of adults "earning the right to be heard" with young people, before sharing the gospel. What a novel idea from the adult community—what implications it might have for those of us who would seek change in inner-city America!

In family therapy, there is a simple and yet profound technique called "enactment." Basically, enactment is getting family members to talk with each other, not *about* the other but *with* the other. Time and time again, I have witnessed the beginning of change taking hold in these conversations between people who have avoided each other through conflict. It is in conversation with another that the potential for change is greatest.

<sup>15</sup>Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 183.

## X. CONFESSION

Conversation, over time, leads to confession. History-telling and disclosure are the simple beginnings of being known by another. I have been reminded often, in James's letter, "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Dietrich Bonhoeffer amplifies the communal function of confession:

Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown.<sup>16</sup>

Bonhoeffer reminds me that my brothers and sisters become Christ to me in my confession:

Christ became our Brother in order to help us. Through him our brother has become Christ for us in the power and authority of the commission Christ has given to him. Our brother stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.<sup>17</sup>

Forgiveness promotes a kind of freedom to be curious. Because I am known and forgiven, I can love and act boldly with curiosity about others and their world.

## XI. AND SO...

To me, an essential dynamic in building community is the sacred process of confession and forgiveness, initiated by curiosity, linked together through conversation. Over the years, I've come to understand therapy as essentially the hearing of confession in hopes of being known. In street work, my experience has been that young people are hungry to be known by an adult; confession is critical in this process of knowing an other.

In attending to inner-city America, George Will's plea captures the challenge before us:

We know precious little about how government policy can get a purchase on the problem of "behavioral poverty" — poverty rooted in habits and character traits. The challenge, to which government is now at most marginally relevant, is to stimulate what has been called "social capital accumulation" ... the mores, habits and norms that are the lessons learned from billions of human experiences over thousands of years.<sup>18</sup>

In my dim awareness, an answer to Will's wonderings lies buried in our memories and experiences with community. The Second Baptist Church of Lib-

<sup>16</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 112.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>18</sup>George Will, "Chains of Familial Love," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 30 September 1991.

erty, Missouri, and Young Life and The City, Inc., through people and their relationships, continue today to provide me with living examples of the values and behaviors in the sacred actions of curiosity, conversation, and confession. As in Paul's second message to the church in Corinth:

When anyone is joined to Christ he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changes us from enemies into his friends, and gave us the task of making others his friends also...and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends. (2 Cor 5:18-19; TEV)

The killing of a cop, solidified positions, certain attributions of evil, and the loss of dialogue—the lack of conversation puts our local community in a crisis-to-crisis role. Times are fluid; community crime prevention and control, without grace and love blown in from the community's cultural traditions, teeter on lynch mobs and social-control agents with no heart or soul—no ability to hear confessions and, full of grace, to forgive.

A loss of curiosity leads to a loss of conversation and the absence of confession, to healers that can't heal, teachers that can't teach. But here on the ecotone, my hope for us all, for all my relatives, is to be known and not alone.