

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Who do we exclude? In the church, we ask ourselves this question all the time. Who are we leaving out? By virtue of how we present ourselves to the community, who are we *not* welcoming? Are we handicap friendly (i.e., for the disabled, the hearing impaired etc.)? Do we socialize in ways—before and after worship—that send the message: *you’re not welcome here?*

The reality of our lives is that we exclude all the time, some of it intentional; most of it unintentional. To some extent, we exclude by *where* we live, *where* we go to school, *where* we work out, *where* we shop, and *where* we go to church or synagogue.

Much of the time these decisions are based on convenience or safety. Still, there is a natural tendency to live out our lives in situations and communities where people are more like us.

In Miami, we boast all the time of our rich ethnic diversity, which is indeed one of our unique qualities. At the same time, most of the ethnic groups, in our *rainbow* of ethnicity, *tend* to socialize and live out their lives with their own kind.

For most human beings, crossing lines of greater diversity makes us uneasy, anxious, and less confident.

Nonetheless, when we exclude, we shrink the size of our world leaving certain people out. Such *choosing* may not be mean-spirited. It may simply be easier and fit in more with our life-style, our values, and our *chosen* goals at the moment.

Exposure to diversity. If you think about it, exposure to diversity is a critical value in community life. This is true for all ages, even our infant children.

In The Growing Place, the pre-school at our church, the twos, threes and four-year olds who have the greatest difficulty in adjusting are, almost invariably, the toddlers exposed to the least diversity. In other words, usually they have been cared for, exclusively, by either a parent or grandparent.

At my family reunion this past July, there were nine toddlers enjoying the fun-packed week at Green Lake, Wisconsin. The two (siblings) who had the most difficult time (more prone to fussing and irritability) were the infants of one of my dear nieces who just can’t bear to have anyone else (outside of family) care for her children.

Her children’s limited interaction with other children did not prepare them well for the sudden diversity of daily interaction with their toddler cousins. This is a prime example of how exposure to diversity can be a *good* thing. It can facilitate our growth and help enlarge the world we live in.

Living towards a bigger spirit. Certainly, one of the values of any community is to bring about a social world where *all* people can both get along and thrive. We do this best when we work together in ways that are welcoming and including of greater diversity.

Where inequities exist that restrict diversity and shrink our world, we must find ways of eliminating the inequities. One of the most successful ways of doing this is through education. Education, where it is fair and equitable (which means it is *not* based on property tax values), remains *the* common denominator for removing (over time, to be sure) the inequities that linger in our communities.

Education offers tremendous hope everywhere. Education is how we break down the barriers that divide. It is how we bring disparate peoples together. It is how we enlarge our world, gaining an appreciation for those who are different from us.

Education enhances economic prospects, just as it helps level the playing field of the otherwise disadvantaged and marginalized. Put another way, it's a whole lot easier to *live towards a bigger spirit* when we have a meaningful job with just compensation. It's hard to be a *big* person when we're forever beaten down by limited opportunity.

Education can also help us to be inclusive on all levels of community life. The more we learn about one another, about our distinctives, as well as what we hold in common, the larger, more well-adjusted, person we become.