

Chapter 17. Building Attunement in Community through Social Architecture

I wrote this piece in 1989, together with Celest Powell. Again, it was an epistle to the Board of which we were both members, and contained our thoughts on the importance of bringing a greater spiritual focus into our life and work. The idea of attunement put forward in this piece is active and energetic. It gives another perspective on the concept of attunement described in the first section. "A Model of Community Culture."

A Vision of Attunement

David Spangler says,

In a centre such as this one we do not come together to learn techniques of attunement. What we do come together for is that in and through our love, our respect for each other, the help that we give each other, the openness and trust that we offer to each other, we can discover our home; a state and place of consciousness where we are no longer propelled into search, into longing, into loneliness, but where we know that we are one, one with ourselves, one with each other, one with life, one with God. ...Attunement is the simplest thing in the world; because, in the mind of God which is essentially our mind, there is no separation. There is only closeness. So attunement becomes a process of changing our image of travel and distance, and aligning it with the Divine image of Oneness, and non-separation. It is as simple as one heart beat following another; one breath following another. ...There is no space that separates us from that for which we long. But the secret of arriving there is completely a

secret of giving. Attunement is a manifestation of the out-breath, ...the giving forth of the being, to whatever surrounds it in its environment and to itself. But we think of attunement in exactly the opposite fashion. We think of it as a receiving, as a sitting in silence and awaiting a voice or a Presence to communicate itself to us. ...That puts us into a very passive state; puts us into a non-creative state. And it puts us into a state of a form of spiritual selfishness where we await for the Divine Voice to come to us (Spangler, 1977).

Creating Community through Living the Qualities We Desire

As we understand Spangler's essay, it is a commentary on giving and receiving, a call to live our ideals, to walk our talk, and to become that very love for which we long. The search for human community animates us, and we translate Spangler's remarks into the context of that search. He seems to be saying we shall find community when *we live those qualities* which we look to find in community. We do not need a place, or an organization; rather, we must live with others as though we were already in community. To us, that means sharing freely with all others the love, the helpfulness, the compassion and the giving which we imagine we would find if we were living in the caring community we desire to inhabit. We shall experience those qualities as we put them out to others, and our nurturing of others shall nurture and uplift us.

Giving and Receiving

As we think about our search for community, we realize that, like many others, we are looking to receive that which is missing in our lives. We imagine that when we

become part of a group of people who care, we shall become more loving; when we are with others who cooperate, we shall lose our competitiveness; when we receive nurturance, we shall be more giving. Spangler's writing is a potent reminder that in the spiritual as in the mundane world, there is no free lunch: if we are to be fulfilled, we must be both cook and customer, both priest and parishioner, both lover and beloved.

What then, of the search for community and of the effort in which we are jointly involved, to build here a social system which manifests our ideals and our longings for a life of work and love which celebrates the human and Divine Spirit, replenishes the Planet, and raises consciousness in ourselves and those whose lives we touch? Is the attempt to grow a more perfect and nourishing social organism an effort to project our needs onto an outside structure, an effort which is doomed to failure because we are all looking to receive more than we are able to give?

Community as Classroom

Possibly it is. But we believe that every effort we make to realize our highest needs, no matter how misguided, brings us along the path towards the kind of truth David Spangler articulates. Each effort at community is a lesson or a classroom, in which we can learn to give, to take personal responsibility for creating the Kingdom of God, and to see ourselves and others both clearly and compassionately. The question to be addressed in creating real communities is not just whether they will meet our needs, but whether they can be better designed as supportive contexts for our

learning to give, to work, to love, and to find the God within. That is the question we shall address in the remainder of this essay.

Social Architecture and the Design of Our Community

"Social architecture" is the body of knowledge about creating structures, roles, systems and procedures in organizations which will best fulfill the purpose of the organization, and at the same time meet the personal needs of the organization's members. If we take as given David Spangler's idea that to achieve attunement requires learning to give, to manifest that which we long to be given, then the task of social architecture in building an attuned community is to create an organization which fosters, teaches and supports all its members in manifesting love, in finding the Divine Spirit within themselves and others, and in giving service to mankind and to the planet.

Social Architecture Channels Energy through Time and Space

Social architecture, like its analogue in the design of buildings, is the art of creating spaces which support activities desired in the organization, and discourages others which are not desired. A well designed building channels the flow of human activity and energy: for example, open plan offices encourage direct interaction and sharing of information; separate offices discourage it. In neither office building do we need to make rules about how much people communicate with one another. The design constrains and channels the flow of energy and makes it easier or harder to communicate.

Similarly, by the way we design work processes, roles and responsibilities, authority relationships, reward systems, and the like, we encourage certain kinds of behaviors, attitudes and learning processes, and we discourage others. If we are clear about what processes and behaviors we want to encourage in order to facilitate attunement, we can design our organization to facilitate them. If we do not design our organization consciously to facilitate the attitudes and behaviors we want, some of our organizational arrangements will almost certainly channel energy and attention in ways which are contrary to our purposes. This is as true in the spiritual life of the community as it is in its social and economic aspects.

The Joys and Sorrows of Individualism

Because we are a very individualistic people, our approaches to spiritual growth emphasize the values of freedom of choice, self-development, and personal initiative. We have strong egos; we are action-oriented; we value novelty and become bored easily; we assert our needs for autonomy. We tend to mistrust authority, whether in the form of texts or gurus; we want to find our own paths to enlightenment, rather than take a guided tour; in our spiritual practice we chafe against requirements and discipline.

We have the longings which go with our predilections. Feeling alienated, we search for intimacy, and dream of community. Competing, we wish for cooperation and teamwork. Going it alone and doing our own thing, we are lonely; we hope to find companions traveling the same paths. We believe it is this longing for wholeness which leads us to alternative institutions such as this community, where we look for

the gentler ways which we don't easily create for ourselves, at the same time as we are alert to resist authority, discipline and constraint. We believe that the people who are attracted to this community have within themselves the need to give love, to cooperate, to contribute their effort, and to respond to the Divine in one another. The challenge to us is to design settings in which they will be led gently to experience these qualities in themselves, without strongly provoking their fears of control and authority.

Design Principles for Social Architecture

What are principles for designing such settings? One is what we call "maximum feasible choice." By that we mean we give as much freedom and autonomy as people are ready to exercise responsibly. When people make their own choices as to how and what to learn, or how to perform their work, the learning or the work is more highly motivated, and more in tune with their unique needs and capabilities.

The difficult part is to decide what constitutes responsible choice, and what level of responsibility people are ready for. We can approach this by being clear in advance what the "boundary conditions" are—what are the minimum requirements for learning or work which we are willing to accept. For example, in the area of spiritual development, we might decide that the boundary condition was for everyone in our community to commit to regular spiritual practice. A tighter boundary might specify the amount of time each day we wanted people to spend in their practice. A still tighter one would prescribe that the time was to be spent in meditation. Even tighter would be to fix the practices in which we would engage.

When people are at an early stage of development, whether emotionally, or as regards their skills and abilities in the area of concern, boundaries need to be more prescriptive. As they develop, the boundaries widen.

Accountability at the Boundary

Whether the boundaries are tight or loose, a key principle in this approach to design is "accountability at the boundary." It is at the boundary that our commitments are tested, and our contracts are fulfilled. This concept implies monitoring or assessment, to keep the process conscious. In formal learning settings, accountability may be to an instructor or to a group of fellow learners. In a community, accountability is usually to one's peers.

Accountability and Freedom

We often confuse freedom with no accountability. In the model proposed here, accountability begins where freedom ends. The two are complementary and define one another, just as the rim of a cup defines the container. There can be no freedom without a boundary, just as there could be no cup without a rim. Freedom is total within the boundary. Within that time and space, one is responsible only to oneself (or one's peers, if we are in an autonomous group) for what one does and how one does it. The boundary is where one becomes accountable to someone else for having met one's commitment or delivered on one's promises. In this model the question is never whether or not we are accountable. The question is when and to whom we are accountable, and how specifically the requirements for our performance are defined.

Community Design as Boundary Setting

Thus, the design question for building attunement in community becomes how to specify the boundaries at which we are accountable to one another for our learning, our growth, and our performance in manifesting the qualities of attunement about which David Spangler speaks: loving, giving, showing compassion, and appreciating the Divine Spirit in ourselves and others. Within those boundaries we are free to spend time and energy as we will; at the boundary, we are responsible to the community for the results we achieve.

Principles for Living Together

If these theoretical concepts are useful, we should be able to use them to make some design decisions about how we structure and manage our community. In illustrating how we might do this, we shall make some statements about the kinds of behaviors and attitudes we want the members of our community to manifest. Please take these as personal, and as illustrative only. We are aware that we have yet to create consensus on these principles.

- Community members share a sense of vision and high purpose which is sufficiently well articulated that it serves as a guide to the individual for his or her day-to-day actions.
- The primary question posed to prospective members of this community is "What can I contribute?" rather than "What will I receive?" Members are attracted by the opportunity to serve the vision.

- Following Kahlil Gibran, we believe that work is "love made visible." Each task is ennobled thereby, and given heart. Members take satisfaction in doing work well. Members think in terms of "our job," rather than "my job" and "your job," helping out wherever they see a need.
- Members love one another and take care of one another. It is considered equally important to build and maintain loving relationships, as it is to get the work done.

Who Are the Community Members?

In order to create arrangements and agreements which will foster these principles, we need first to decide who are members of the community. Again, we shall suggest a provisional answer to that question. For the purpose of our design work, people become members of our community when they make a commitment to its vision and purpose, or when they participate in programs here in which community living is a significant aspect of the design. According to this definition, people who come as individual guests would, during their stay, be members. People who attend programs offered by workshop leaders who use our retreat center simply as a source of board and lodging would not.

Towards Implementation

It would be presumptuous to do more than sketch the outlines of how we might implement our principles in daily practice. We have given the matter some thought, however, and we offer some examples below of how implementation might be approached.

Developing a Sense of Vision and High Purpose:

Our community needs a well articulated purpose and sense of mission, on which there is true consensus. People need to feel that there is something here which is bigger than their individual wants and needs, something which is worth giving their energy and love to, even making sacrifices for. We need to state our vision of what we are doing in the world in a way which makes people feel good to be associated with it.

A clear vision permits us to set forth the principles by which we mean to operate. When we can agree on those principles, we need fewer rules and regulations. We can operate within wider boundaries and be accountable for the *effects* of our actions, rather than focusing on the actions themselves.

Our vision includes the priorities we set on tasks and people. Our community produces goods and services which attract others' energy in the form of money. That task is vital to the survival of the community, and we place ourselves in service to it. At the same time, the community only exists because we ourselves have need for it. The structures and systems of the community are in service to its members, and should operate in such a way as to empower everyone.

If a statement of vision and purpose is to serve as a guide for individual action, it must be "bought into" by those who are now members, perhaps by means of a "vision workshop" in which members create together their statement of purpose and of the mission of our community in the world. This statement would be as specific as possible regarding the principles and practices we expect members to follow in order to manifest the vision.

For "temporary" members (those who come and participate in the community's life for brief periods of time) the vision and mission statement would be part of their orientation, along with an explanation of the principles and practices we follow in order to manifest the vision.

Experiencing Membership as Opportunity to Contribute.

We offer association with our community as a chance to serve, rather than to be served. We do not make distinctions between those who contribute money and those who contribute time and energy. We encourage people to think of supporting the community with both time and money, rather than being "passive" investors. We don't focus only on the big investments or gifts, but go for a broader base of support, with many small contributions.

Michael Phillips tells a story in *The Seven Laws of Money* which is relevant here:

Not too long ago a group came to me and wanted to buy a gigantic piece of land. It was a group oriented around an Eastern religion and they naturally wanted to raise *money* for the gigantic piece of land. I said "You don't want money, you want supporters. You can go out and look for supporters and in the process ask for money, but don't forget what you're really after. Supporters." They did this. They contacted countless people, always asking for a small amount of money but in the process realizing that the commitment of a small amount of money was a commitment of support. And, of course, it was the support that built the institution and helped it grow. The institution is still growing. If this religious group had gotten a grant in the beginning it probably

would have blown their whole future. Where would their supporters and friends and energy have come from, especially when the grants and funds began to run out in two or three years?

Experiencing Work as "Love Made Visible:"

In our working lives we "manage by the vision." We articulate a set of principles which bring the vision and purpose of the community down to the level of everyday decision guidelines. Each is accountable to everyone else for adhering to these principles in carrying out our work, no matter what our role and leadership status. While we must have well thought out systems and procedures for efficiency and economy, the rules are subordinate to the principles by which we live and work. Our systems are simple, readily modifiable, and understood by all. We work together to improve them.

We bring love into our work by doing it well, even the parts that don't show. We care for our physical environment, picking up, cleaning up, painting and decorating, so that this place, manifests the love we have put into it. We serve guests and one another with simplicity, harmony and elegance. We care for our community in the way we conserve and maintain its resources, looking after tools and equipment, husbanding resources, reducing waste. We manifest our love of the land by following nonpolluting practices, by recycling, and by reducing our use of non-renewable resources.

Distributed Leadership

Organizations which empower the membership tend to be "flat," with few levels of hierarchy. Leadership is distributed, rather than concentrated in a few hands. Leaders see themselves as in service to the community. People have the opportunity to become competent generalists. Jobs are shared or rotated, and people have continuing opportunities to learn one another's skills.

Rotation of leader and member roles, role-sharing and cross-training fosters each person's knowing and caring for the whole. When people become competent at several roles, we have a more flexible organization. Conflict between people doing different jobs is easier to resolve as they come to appreciate one another's difficulties and needs from having done one another's work.

We are accountable to one another for performance of our tasks. We design and use a peer review process to assess our performance of tasks against the agreed standards for the tasks, and also against standards for our functioning as a member of a cooperative team.

Loving and Taking Care of One Another

We spend the time to get to know one another personally, to develop ourselves as a cohesive and mutually supportive group. We regularly conduct "clearings" where conflicts and bad feelings can be processed, and we take time out to deal with individual disturbances as they come up. We agree on a set of norms as to how we want to treat one another, such as the following:

- **Appreciating:** we give credit for ideas and contributions. We build on others' ideas. We acknowledge one another's abilities and qualities.
- **Nurturing:** we teach, mentor, support and encourage one another. We take satisfaction in one another's successes.
- **Valuing:** we see each person as worthwhile in themselves. We value one another as sacred vessels of the soul, rather than only for the contributions we make.
- **Trusting:** we give each other the benefit of the doubt. We each look for, evoke and respond to goodness in the other.
- **Listening:** we empathize with one another's concerns, hopes, fears. We take time to hear and respond from the heart to each other's feelings.
- **Giving:** we give generously of our time, energy and resources in service to one others' needs. We give more than expected, more than a "quid pro quo."
- **Harmonizing:** we initiate problem-solving and peacemaking, and search for win-win solutions to conflicts. We avoid judgments and provocations, by avoiding "you" statements in favor of "I" statements. We look for the positive intent in others' behavior.

Balanced Growth on Four Levels

The work and social life of the community are arranged so as to foster the health, growth and development of each member in all four areas of life: physical,

emotional, mental and spiritual. Members are expected to grow in each of these areas, and to contribute to one another's growth.

We are each accountable to one another for our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development. Together we set mutual expectations and develop broad-based agreements as to our developmental goals, and how we will know that these goals have been achieved. Following the principle of "accountability at the boundary," individuals choose and carry out their own ways of meeting the goals. The community institutionalizes and supports the individual's self-development by setting aside times and places each day during which people can work on their own development. People may choose to work in groups in order to make use of peer support.

Performance Evaluation

We design a peer-review process in which people account for their self-development activities. In early meetings they set personal goals and commit to them. In future meetings, they restate their goals, describe their activities in pursuit of the goals, and the successes and difficulties they are experiencing. They receive feedback and help from other members.

Our Message and Our Hope for the Future

The ideas set forth in this essay are not offered as a proposal for reorganizing our community. Rather, they are what we came up with when we began to play with David Spangler's insights, combined them with our observations of this and other communities, and began to develop our own ideas on the design of intentional

communities. We have applied the ideas of social architecture to the problem of building an attuned community, an organization which fosters, teaches and supports all its members in manifesting love, in finding the Divine Spirit within themselves and others, and in giving service to mankind and to the Planet.

We believe that if we are clear about what processes and behaviors we want to encourage in order to facilitate attunement, we can design our organization to facilitate them. Whether or not the specific suggestions we have given are appropriate to our own community, the concept of social architecture holds promise for designing intentional communities so that their structures, roles, systems and procedures best fulfill the purpose of the organization, and at the same time meet the personal needs of the organization's members.

In approaching this task, we have been guided by two principles: "maximum feasible choice," and "accountability at the boundary." Following these principles enables us to maximize individual freedom in choosing the *means* by which we work toward the goals of community, at the same time as we ensure that each is accountable to the others for pursuing community goals and for the results they achieve.

We offer our ideas, then, in the hope that we may dialogue, experiment, and learn together about such issues, for the benefit of our community, and of our own growth and development. We invite you to join with us in this adventure!

"On Community" is a Work in Progress

These three papers are at best fragments of what there is to be said about the design and management of intentional communities. More of my own thoughts on the subject are found in the story of my own life in community since 1990, and in my reflections on the importance of *surrender* in community and indeed, in organizational life generally. These musings are to be found in my professional autobiography, *Consultant's Journey* (Harrison, 1995). I continue to explore the subject, in dialogue and through experience, because I believe that as we learn to build community in our organizations we shall also learn to heal ourselves and our Planet.