

Toward the Loving and Forgiving Community

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What Makes for a Good Community?

Is it.....

.....how well people communicate?

.....how often they get together?

.....how they are informed and how they consume important information?

.....how those without homes are protected?

What else? Fair wages? Public safety?

What Makes for a Good Community?

Did you notice that all points in the previous slide focused on BEHAVIOR?

**It seems to me that too often, when people consider a “good community” they focus on the externals—
sufficient wages, sufficient housing,
sufficient public safety.**

What Makes for a Good Community?

What about the INNER WORLD OF THE CITIZENS?

What about **THE HEART**?

The late Millard Fuller, who started Habitat for Humanity (houses for poor people), said this to me: **“We build the houses. You build the hearts. Unless we build the hearts, the people do not stay in the homes.”**

What Makes for a Good Community?

Building the hearts is at the heart of the matter of a good community.

And yet, the inner world of the citizens is too often **ignored in modern societies** as we focus on the externals of housing, wages, public safety. All of this is good, **BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH.**

***We must once again* focus on “the heart.”**

What Makes for a Good Community?

I say “once again” focus on the heart because thousands of years ago, this is exactly the focus for the ancient Greeks.

Plato, in his classic book, *The Republic*, clearly states that it is the **growth in the moral virtues that makes a community good.**

The Common Good of the Community

Aristotelian realist philosophy states that communities have a **common good**. A common good is defined by **Plato in *The Republic*** as persons growing in the **Cardinal Virtues of justice, courage, wisdom, and temperance** with these emphasized within the group.

These four virtues, in Plato's view, are **not generated by opinion or feelings**, but because they **naturally apply to all persons and all communities**.

These are **understood by reason** and **chosen** by the **free will** of each person. In other words, the Cardinal Virtues are not forced upon us.

As Wild (1948, p. 185) clarifies, the **goal of the common good is human perfection** for all in the community.

Wild, J. (1948). *Introduction to realistic philosophy*. New York: Harper & Row.

What Is the Definition of Each Cardinal Virtue?

- **Justice** is offering one's best to others and the community. Kreeft (1992, p. 60) describes Platonic justice through the poetic image of music: **one strives to be in harmony with others** as all cooperate and play a beautiful societal tune. This is the **central virtue** according to Plato in *The Republic*.
- **Courage** is going ahead despite fear so that one can do one's best even when it is difficult to do so.
- **Wisdom** is knowing the right response at the right time without having a rule-book nearby.
- **Temperance** is balance, avoiding too much or too little in all we do, including practicing the virtues, in pleasure seeking, and work.
- In Book IV of his *Republic*, **Plato** (2015/330 B.C.) defends the view that **all four of these Cardinal Virtues, together**, help to mature individuals and to have **a well-functioning community in which the greater good then benefits all.**

Kreeft, P. (1992). *Back to virtue*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Forgiveness Can Keep the Other Moral Virtues in Balance, Avoiding Extremes

- In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, **Aristotle** (1999) talks about what has come to be labeled as “**the doctrine of the mean.**”
- Each moral virtue is **bounded by two vices**, one of which is an **under-representation** of the virtue and the other is an **excess of the virtue.**
- **For example, *justice*** is the mean between acquiescence and excessive demand; ***courage*** is the mean, weakness or fear is the under-representation of courage and reckless bravado is the excessive demonstration of the virtue.

Aristotle. (1999/340 B.C.). *Nicomachean ethics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

How Forgiveness Balances the Central or Cardinal Virtues

- When people are treated **unjustly** by others, **anger** can ensue, which can develop into **irritability** (Stringaris, Vidal-Ribas, Brotman, & Leibenluft, 2017) and even to **hatred**.
- Forgiving those who are unjust, then, can first **reduce the anger**,
- which in turn can **reduce the desire for excessive recompense** (in the case of justice),
and
- the **desire for reckless bravado** (in the case of courage).
- Without hatred, **temperance can be restored**, and
- the clear, rational thinking of **wisdom** can once again be present.

Stringaris, A., Vidal-Ribas, P., Brotman, M.A., & Leibenluft, E. (2017). Practitioner review: Definition, recognition, and treatment challenges of irritability in young people. *Journal of Child Psychology, 59*, 721-739.

How *Agape* Complements Forgiving in Communities

The practice of *agape* love:

- 1) focuses more on **assisting others** than just the self and therefore,
- 2) enhances **respect for persons** and thus possibly creates more **harmony** within a given society than has ever been the case before;
- 3) thus in the future, *agape* may **prevent resentments**, that could possibly turn into revenge, from even emerging.
- 4) If *agape* then becomes **willingly chosen between and among persons**, such self-giving mutuality, I hypothesize, will enhance individuals' **psychological health** and **increase cooperation** among members of the society. It seems that such a social experiment, the development of the *Agape and Forgiving Community*, **has yet to be tried in any contemporary society.**

Can *Agape* and Forgiveness Be Embedded into Communities?

We come now, near the end of our conference, with perhaps one of the most difficult questions of all: **How can we embed *agape* and forgiveness into communities so that those communities are sustained, at least in part, by these moral virtues?**

How Do We Embed *Agape* and Forgiveness into Communities?

To embed *agape* and forgiveness into communities, we need **the 3 S's**:

- 1) We must have strategies to ***start***
- 2) We must have strategies to ***support***
- 3) We must have strategies to ***sustain*** this effort over many years.

The Challenge

To my knowledge, there never has been, in the history of the world, an attempt to embed *agape* and forgiveness widely and deeply in any community across:

- 1) members of families
- 2) schools
- 3) workplaces
- 4) houses of worship
- 5) prisons and homeless shelters

The world has missed this opportunity. So, how do we **start**.....how do we **support**...how do we **sustain** such a vision?

How Do We *Start*?

We already have started.....with this conference.

We start at the **grassroots level**.....

One person at a time.....

One family at a time.....

One school or one school district at a time.....

Where will **YOU** start?.....

In your own family?

In a school near you?

In your house of worship?

Where Do You Start?

- To enhance community practice of *agape* and forgiving, we must start.....today....with **each person individually** practicing the moral virtues of *agape* and forgiving,
- and then providing opportunities in **families, schools, workplaces, and houses of worship** for *agape* and forgiveness to grow.
- In other words, community expressions of *agape* and forgiveness **start within the human heart**, as insight, as delight, and as motivation to give these away to others.
- We can **spread the word about these moral virtues**. For example, our presenter at this conference, Mr. Jonathan Little, has produced short radio announcements about the International Forgiveness Institute's services. These can aid people in seeing the importance of forgiveness in their everyday lives.

An Example of *Starting* within Your Own Family: The Preliminaries

Preliminaries:

The parents are encouraged to create a time and place for family discussions.

We recommend that the parents gather the family together **at least once a week** to have a quiet discussion about love and forgiveness.

They are to keep in mind that to forgive is not the same as excusing or forgetting or even reconciling and that forgiveness works hand-in-hand with justice.

An Example of ***Starting*** within Your Own Family: The Family Gathering

The Family Gathering:

Questions on **love** can be asked such as these:

What does it mean to love unconditionally?

Who was particularly kind and loving to you this week?

What did this **feel** like?

When the person was really loving toward you, what were your **thoughts** about that person?

When the person was really loving, how did you **behave** toward that person?

An Example of ***Starting*** within Your Own Family: The Family Gathering

The Family Gathering:

Questions on **forgiving** can be asked such as these:

Was anyone particularly unfair or mean to you this week?

What were your thoughts?

Did you try to forgive the person for being unfair to you? What does it mean to forgive?

What does forgiveness feel like?

What are your thoughts when you forgive?

What are your thoughts specifically toward the one who acted unfairly to you when you forgave this person?

How did you behave toward this person once you forgave?

If you have not forgiven, then what might you do to accomplish this? (Make a decision to be kind and, when you are ready, even loving toward this person, seeing even in a small way that this person has inherent worth)

An Example of ***Starting*** within Schools

If the place to start is on the grassroots level, then we already have started.

Our International Forgiveness Institute has built forgiveness curricula for children as young as age 4 and adolescents up to age 18.

These curriculum guides have been ordered by educators from over 30 countries across the world.

You educators at this conference are shining examples of a grassroots effort on behalf of your students.

We can continue this grassroots effort by knocking on doors and asking educational leaders if they are interested giving the tools of *agape* and forgiveness to their students, as a way of protecting their hearts in the future when life does not necessarily go as they had planned or hoped.

The Second “S”: Support

Do you know the greatest challenge I have seen in the 20 years in which we have been asked to plant forgiveness in such places as schools or workplaces?

Fading after initial enthusiasm

Let me repeat:

Fading after initial enthusiasm

It is extremely typical for people to get highly motivated to plant forgiveness in families, schools, workplaces, and/or houses of worship only to have this **fade away in about three years or less.**

The Second “S”: Support

How do we prevent the fading after initial enthusiasm?

Support

Support from others who also are trying to plant love and forgiveness in the family or school or workplace or house of worship.

We now have a website, particularly for school personnel that can be a support for those of you trying to plant *agape* and forgiveness in the hearts of others:

agapeloveandforgiveness.com

How can those of you at this conference support one another as you go forward so that YOU DO NOT LET THE PLANTING OF *AGAPE* AND FORGIVENESS FADE IN YOU?

The above question is vital for you, for your community, and for humanity in general.

Three things are necessary: Support, Support, and Support

Do not let the contacts you have made here now fade in you.

The Third “S”: Sustain

How do we keep the themes of *agape* and forgiveness going for many years to come?

We need to embed these moral virtues into systems so that it is not just the grassroots efforts themselves that sustain these ideas in communities.

Instead, the communities themselves need to embrace the radical idea that *agape* and forgiveness need to be part of the social fabric of life, part of everyday thinking and feeling and acting and relating to one another in community.

****How do we do this?***

Because this idea is so untried and so radically new, I have to confess that I do not know the answer.

Here are three ideas upon which you might build:

The Third “S”: Sustain

First, **NORMS**

How do we create a *stable norm* in communities that *agape* and forgiveness are very important for individuals, families, and communities?

Norms have been created in societies such as these:

Cigarette smoking is not good for your health.

Restorative justice in correctional institutions can be an important idea rather than a punishment-only approach.

We need to be kind to those who are not of our same nationality or race.

All of the above have started as IDEAS and have become part of many societies.

How do we create a NORM that *agape* and forgiveness are as important as healthy behaviors, as the idea of restorative justice, as kindness?

The Third “S”: Sustain

Second in the “Sustain” category, we need to interest *leaders* in this idea that *agape* and forgiveness need to be NORMS in communities.

At our Jerusalem Conference on Forgiveness in 2017, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was asked this question about bringing forgiveness into communities.

He paused and then answered: We need to find a way of convincing community leaders of the great importance of forgiveness.

With Rabbi Sacks as our teacher on this, we now ask:

How can we interest leaders in thinking about, trying personally, and then encouraging the planting of *agape* and forgiveness into the community?

We already have a model of this within our own conference here. Dr. Judith Aldaba has shown us a brilliant way of folding out forgiveness education in a large community within the Philippines.

How do we now have more Dr. Aldabas in this troubled world? Even asking this question, with a sincere attempt at the answer, is a step in the right direction.

The Third “S”: Sustain

Third in the “Sustain” category, we need to come full-circle back to “Start.”

A key to sustaining *agape* and forgiveness within communities is to rely on dedicated people on the grassroots level to keep persevering for these, even when others fade.

Will you be one of those who persevere, even when it is difficult and even painful?

We need those who so appreciate *agape* and forgiveness that they are willing to go through pain to get these going and keep them going in communities.

Are you one of those who will Start, Support, and Sustain these moral virtues in your community, an idea that never has been tried in any secular community to my knowledge?

How to Increase *Agape* and Forgiveness in Workplaces and Houses of Worship

I already have given examples of starting the theme of *agape* and forgiveness in families and schools.

How do we do this in workplaces and houses of worship?

Here are some examples:

- 1) In the Human Resources Department of an organization, discuss the harmful effects of anger on employees and on productivity in the workplace.
- 2) Arrange for a speaker, once or twice a year, to discuss anger and how to reduce it through forgiveness.
- 3) Occasionally put a note in the workplace bulletin discussing the importance of community harmony and the diminishing of anger.
- 4) Within houses of worship, bring in speakers at least twice a year to discuss the ancient origins of *agape* and forgiveness and their importance for individual members, families, and for the worship community itself.
- 5) Place weekly or bi-weekly quotations on *agape* and forgiveness into the bulletin. This will keep these virtues in front of people.

How to Increase *Agape* and Forgiveness in Workplaces and Houses of Worship

None of the ideas in the previous slide will work unless we focus on:

Start

Support

Sustain

We now end with one new idea for the peace movement: Cross-community focus on *agape* and forgiveness, particularly the inherent worth of all people, even those with whom we disagree.

On Breaking the Persistence of Conflict *Across* Communities

- When the common good breaks down *within* a community, does it not make it difficult to apply the **themes of justice, forgiveness, and *agape*** to others *outside* that community?
- If so, then **the conflict could continue for millennia.**
- Yet, if forgiveness and *agape* can **restore the common good *within*** a society, this may make possible **applying at least forgiveness to the other community.**
- This, then, might lead, in some cases, and with persistence and time, to **the idea of group-to-group forgiveness.**

What Are the Challenges Facing Us?

- How many people in a given contemporary society anywhere in the world can **pass a test** in answering the question: **What is meant by the common good of society?**
- We have **lost** a sense of growth in the **virtues**, and thus
- we have **lost** a sense that we literally can **grow in our humanity**.
- **Forgiveness** and *agape* are so far **off the radar** for most people that the definitions are vague.
- We need a resurgence of thinking **as philosophers** and as virtue-advocates in **passing this on to our children, who then may grow up to create a better world**.
- *We cannot afford to wait.*

A Cause for Hope

- For the philosophical materialists, forgiveness and now *agape* have made their way into their realm: **science**.
- Thus, the **realist philosopher, the theologian, and the materialist/atheist** all can sit down now and discuss the moral virtues of **forgiveness and *agape***.
- and how to **apply** these in communities
- and to **grow** in them
- and to **appropriate both of these virtues** for the **common good**.
- We have **self-help books** for the general public, a therapeutic training **manual for mental health professionals**, and Forgiveness Education **curriculum guides** from age 4 to age 18. We now need more focus on *agape*. I think the world is ready.....

.....and we cannot afford to wait.