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Strangers Becoming Friends; On the Way Together

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They walked together, these two friends, from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus (Luke 24:13-52). They were despondent, for their leader and friend had been killed. It was hard to understand how and why it happened this way, and now, to complicate matters, some of the women were spreading rumours about an empty tomb, an angel's visit, and the news that Jesus was alive. As they slowly trudged back home from Jerusalem they were prepared to relinquish their belief that this Jesus of Nazareth was something more than a good prophet. Discussing the recent events in their lives, they could not make sense of what had happened.

Quietly and unobtrusively, the stranger joined them as they journeyed. He listened to their conversation, noting their sadness. Then he invited them to share their thoughts with him and to reflect with him upon this strange event in their lives. The two companions told what they could; what they knew about Jesus, his life and his death, what they wanted to believe about him, and what the women were now telling them about his being alive. What does all this mean?

The stranger gently reprimanded them for their lack of belief. Then he explained to them his understanding of the situation in light of the Scriptures and the Jewish tradition. He helped them understand how Jesus the Messiah fit into the total picture. In fact, he answered their questions so well that the two marvelled at his insight and knowledge of the Scriptures.

Desiring to learn more, the two friends welcomed this stranger into their home. By offering food and rest, they were inviting the stranger to become friend. As they gathered around the table for food and fellowship, the friend, the

invited guest, took the bread, gave a prayer of thanks, and shared it. The guest, the stranger, had become host, sharing more than food. When strangers became friends, there was no longer a clear role distinction between them. They ate, drank, and talked as companions.

It was in the ordinary, everyday experience of eating and drinking with friends, the shared fellowship around the table, that the two recognize that the stranger has never been a stranger, but was their friend and leader, Jesus of Nazareth, resurrected from the dead.

As the two disciples reflected on this new happening in their lives, they finally began to understand what Jesus had been telling them all along. In this moment of realization, the two were transformed. No longer despondent, and not content to revel alone in their renewed faith in the resurrected Jesus, they got up from the table, left the comforts of home and rushed back to Jerusalem to share the good news with the other disciples. They had a story to tell, and it had to be shared with their friends.

The Emmaus narrative is the story of adult learning in the context of hospitality, community, and journey. From this account, educators can realize the framework and the focus for life-long learning. Adult Christian education is a process by which hospitality is extended to all Christians to be part of a learning community as they journey through life. For we are all on a journey. As we reflect upon life's experiences along the way, we mature and grow in our Christian faith. Within the context of the Christian community, the congregation, we are invited to share our faith walk, to listen and learn from each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Hospitality is a key underlying factor, not only in reaching out to one another, but also in welcoming newcomers into the midst of the community, in inviting the stranger to become friend by offering love and acceptance. Hospitality is being guest and host within the faith community.

Content and methodology, though important elements of learning, especially from a developmental perspective,¹ are secondary in adult learning. But without hospitality, the stranger will always be stranger, will never feel free to open the self to new possibilities and new vision. Without community, there is no impetus to grow, no challenge to active faith response.

Without recognition that “faithing”² is a life-long journey, there is no forward movement, no understanding that faith development is an ongoing process beyond the teen years.

In order for adult learning to take place within the context of the Christian community, the congregation, there must be hospitality offered, community shared, and the journey recognized. Let us examine these in more detail separately in order to understand the importance of each for adult learning.

Hospitality

Recently I attended a one-day seminar on adult learning in the congregation. Upon arrival I was warmly welcomed by a secretary who handed me a prepared name tag and took me to the seminar room. There, a large welcome sign greeted me, inviting me to take coffee, tea or juice. The agenda was posted at a strategic place, outlining specific plans for the day. An enthusiastic woman introduced herself as the facilitator for the seminar and sat down to chat with me for a few moments. Charts on the wall, papers on the floor and other teaching tools suggested to me that she was ready and well-prepared for the day’s discussion. Her warmth and personal interest in me made me feel more at home than I would have normally felt in a roomful of strangers.

Ample time was allotted for introductions, sharing recent experiences about learning, input, etc. By lunch time I felt I had made friends with many of the thirty strangers in the room. The inviting atmosphere, set largely by our leader, offered a space for me to open myself to learning by sharing part of me with others. I learned much that day about how adults learn by experiencing firsthand the acceptance and hospitality offered by the group’s facilitator. As a result of this rewarding experience, my style of leadership has changed as I take more seriously the learner and the process by which adults learn.

As a learner, I had to be open to the invitation to learn. Like the two disciples returning from Jerusalem, I had to make room for the stranger who desired to share my pathway for a while. There is a risk involved for the learner, but if there is a desire to learn, a willingness to change one’s behaviour, a wish for transformation, it is well worth the risk. “Only the person who risks is truly free.”³

For learning to take place there must also be trust, in order to see the stranger as potential friend rather than enemy. As the journey continued for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the trust level for the stranger increased, for, by the time they reached their destination, the stranger had become friend—he was invited to eat with them. Table fellowship, in Luke's gospel, designates a special relationship that serves to "exemplify group identity and solidarity".⁴ Jesus spent time eating and drinking with many different types of persons, demonstrating a willingness to become an integral part of their lives. He identified and acted on behalf of the persons who were not welcomed by society.

One Mennonite congregation in an urban U.S. setting arranges for several families to share a potluck noon meal at the church each Sunday. If there are any visitors at the worship service, they are invited immediately to stay for lunch to become acquainted with a part of the church family. For this congregation, hospitality is a key first step in attracting adults to be part of their fellowship.

In the first century, Plutarch referred to this kind of activity as "the friend-making character of the table....A guest comes to share not only meat, wine and dessert, but conversation, fun and the amiability that leads to friendship."⁵ When friendships develop, there is opportunity for intimate sharing and Christian growth that results when we reflect upon our faith stories.

It was during the meal fellowship time that the two disciples finally recognized Jesus. The stranger-turned-companion had never really been stranger but friend, leader, and servant. When the hosts allowed themselves to become guests, were willing to be nurtured and served by the other, their lives were changed, there was "re-cognition" and, consequently, transformation. Henri Nouwen writes:

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choices and commitment....[It is] the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way.⁶

As persons involved as educators in adult Christian learning settings, our task is to offer a free and friendly space for adults

to reveal their gifts, their strengths and their vulnerabilities, to each other. Leaders offer a place where self-respect, self-esteem, self-directedness are encouraged and affirmed, a place with safe boundaries for revelation of inner thoughts and feelings, and a place for confrontation in love. Nouwen suggests that if teaching were seen as a form of hospitality, some of the heaviness of responsibility would be replaced by a freedom to rejoice in the personal growth of the learners as they are freed to explore their personal faith pathways. Teachers offer themselves to the searching learners:

By a supportive presence we can offer the space with safe boundaries within which our students can give up their defensive stances and bend over their own life experience, with all its strong and weak sides, to find the beginning of a plan worth following. As teachers, we have to encourage our students to reflection which leads to vision—theirs, not ours.⁷

Teachers are to be supportive, loving, affirming and non-judgmental. They invite and facilitate dialogue, response, and reflection based on the present experience of the learner. In the Emmaus narrative the stranger joined in the discussion of the two disciples, asking them to reflect on their recent experience that resulted in sadness and disillusionment. Then he explained to them his interpretation and meaning of the Scriptures as it related to their present situation. I suspect that the explanation was not given as a monological lecture or sermon, but in dialogue and discussion as he listened to their responses and built on those experiences and that information. I am sure that Jesus' acceptance of them and their understanding of the Scriptures contributed to their willingness to dialogue, listen and ultimately to believe.

Hospitality, then, is an attitude of acceptance, an offer of "friendship without binding the guest and freedom without leaving [the guest] alone."⁸

Learners and teachers together offer and receive hospitality as they journey through the experiences of life. When hospitality is extended, the strangers are invited to become guests, "revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporated in the recognition of new found unity."⁹ Leaders and participants together learn by teaching and teach by learning. Learning is a shared responsibility in the midst of community.

Community

Hospitality invites community and the building of relationships among adults. Adults do not learn in a vacuum, in isolation. The Scriptures are clearly the story of a people of God, an account of how God acted on behalf of God's chosen people. Jesus, as God incarnate, called a band of disciples to form a new community. "That new community of disciples was where he invested his greatest energy and vision. They shared celebrations and disappointments, times of struggle and times of prayer, miraculous acts of God and common meals."¹⁰

The church today must continue its communal nature in a way that is meaningful for adults. For "Christian faith is a shared communal reality....To call people to faith means primarily to bring them to a deep personal love of Jesus and, at the same time, to invite them into community. One cannot be in *koinonia* with Jesus and not be in *koinonia* with all other disciples."¹¹

Christian nurture and growth take place within the framework of the faithful community. Here is where the common memory and vision are shared, where common rituals are understood, where the faith is shaped in the dialogue and interaction with friends travelling together on the journey of faith. Here is a community "that in its common life is more like a family than a social institution or voluntary association."¹²

Sharing a common memory and vision does not assume that participants in community life act and think the same about everything. They are not clones. Rather, they celebrate individual differences! Christian community is inclusive in that it has "learned to transcend its individual differences."¹³ Unique gifts that people bring to the group are appreciated and accepted. Within community, "hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a change for the guest to find his [sic] own."¹⁴

Community calls for a deep commitment both to God and to fellow participants. There is a willingness to communicate honestly, to move beyond superficial friendships, to uncover our masks, to laugh and cry together, to love and to confront. There is a willingness to let go of self, of selfish attitudes, of favourite beliefs that stand in the way of growth and friendships. Nouwen writes:

When we are willing to detach ourselves from making our own limited experience the criterion for our approach to others, we may be able to see that life is greater than our life, history is greater than our history, experience greater than our experience, and God greater than our God.¹⁵

Confrontation of beliefs and attitudes, handled in a loving way within the community of faith, enables growth and transformation. It allows learning to take place, and consequently behavioural, and often attitudinal change for the better of the person and the community.

Community offers hospitality, fellowship, intimacy, and safety. It is a place for healing, for conversion, for active listening, for caring. There is a spirit of peace rather than competition. Authority is within community, in partnership rather than hierarchical. Leaders need to relinquish their need to control:

Community-building requires that those accustomed to leadership be genuinely willing to enter a state of helplessness. It demands that I empty myself of my need to talk, my need to help all the time, my need to be a guru, my desire to look like a hero, my quick and easy answers, my cherished notions.¹⁶

Learners within community provide resources for each other for learning. In a climate of trust, acceptance, commitment and respect, the interaction of the co-learners (teacher-learner and learner-teacher) builds relationships, mutuality, and interdependence, all of which contribute to spiritual growth for adults.

Through participation in community we as adults become involved in an authentic adult learning process. When a group of people works together toward a common goal, sharing with and supporting one another, and sometimes struggling, they go through a process of learning and growing. Real community, like the praxis of adult education, respects individuals, values their contribution, and works best when it tackles questions which are perceived by individuals as meaningful in their lives....Community is formed not merely by reading and listening, but by doing and by working at it together.¹⁷

In the Emmaus story, the two disciples walked together as close friends, sharing the common experience of the death of their leader, bearing each other's burden of dejection and failure, supporting one another as they struggled to understand. By inviting Jesus to walk with them, they opened their hearts and welcomed him into their lives, their community of two. In

the dialogue and table fellowship learning took place as the friends reflected and then acted. Together they returned to Jerusalem, transformed and empowered believers, to spread the good news to the others within the broader faith community. Jesus has promised that where two or three are gathered, he is present with them, he is there to commune with them.

Adults learn and grow in community, recognizing the unseen presence of the resurrected Christ within their midst. Adult learning is participation in relationship-building within the community of faith. Adult learning is "koinonia in formation".

On The Way

"We are all pilgrims and companions on this journey towards adult faith."¹⁸ As adults we travel on a journey of discovery and faith, nurturing, discipling and empowering each other along the way. It is the travelling that is most important, not the destination. The journey is a life-long process, beginning with one's baptism (in my tradition, a believers' baptism) or an intentional decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and ending with one's death. All of life is journey; as Christians, we are seekers on the journey of faith, moving at different paces en route, believing that Jesus Christ walks alongside us, even though sometimes unrecognized.¹⁹

If we believe that Jesus is the "teacher" who walks with us along this life-long pathway, we probably need to re-view our concept of "teacher" in adult Christian education. As teacher, the Spirit of Jesus illumines our way as we seek guidance in life's decisions and crises. But we need adult guides to help us to make decisions and life-choices. There are, in our congregations, mature Christians who have the gift of nurturing and shepherding others along the way. They have the gift of hospitality and know how to engage persons in reflections on their experiences in light of God's story and grace. They have the ability to draw persons together, to build relationships within the Christian community. They are more guide than teacher in the traditional sense. A guide is one who has been on a similar pathway before; one who knows of other interesting paths as well as dead ends and pitfalls along the way; one who walks alongside the traveller, pointing out interesting landmarks, explaining historical significances, reaching out a hand to steady

the walker on a rocky incline, walking along in silence. A guide helps to see, to interpret, to reflect. A guide cannot force the traveller to see or make observations, but without a guide, a lot of interesting details, sights, sounds will be missed. A guide is receptive to our questions, available to meet the needs of the travellers and just there if needed.

Jesus walked beside the disciples as they trudged slowly to Emmaus. The perfect guide, he typified "presence":

he listens to the questions, the fears, the problems, pain and confusion, the needs and the searching; he lets the disciples continue with their questions and helps them to articulate what they are experiencing and feeling; he witnesses to his own faith and demonstrates a considerable knowledge of the Scriptures and the life of the Messiah; he is seen as authentic and caring. Jesus respects the dignity of each of the persons with him and accepts where they are. In the midst of an ordinary walk, he shows basic attitudes of openness to God, trust in God's faithful love and presence throughout history. Jesus opens their minds to new horizons in the conversation, gives hope, educates. He empowers them out of their experience, to go forth and spread the good news to friends and neighbours.²⁰

People need guides to accompany them on the way, to walk and talk, to be present as they continue the process of becoming. Dialogue is an important part of this process as persons reflect together on the meaning of discipleship and faith. Ralph F. Smith suggests that dialogue implies movement, that "to be with and for someone is to 'walk and talk' with them....Movement clearly implies willingness to risk, to change, to explore, to discover, even to be a bit crazy according to the world's norms."²¹ Walking and talking or action and reflection lead to transformation, being set on a different pathway that leads to a vital, growing faith. For the two disciples

the road to Emmaus, it turns out, does not lead to Emmaus, but back to Jerusalem—from the scene of the action, through the reflection, to a new kind of action, action in the midst of the fear and anxiety and danger they had left just a few hours earlier, but action now undergirded by new understanding that can deal with the fear and the anxiety, if not the danger. So at the end of the story, they are right back to where they started, but now everything is different.²²

And so the journey continues for Christians today. Our perspectives, in fact, our whole beings, are changed along the way as we reflect upon our actions and are willing to be transformed by God's presence within us and within community.

Such transformation and resulting growth take place in the context of the community of faith.

Educators need to be aware that in adult faith development progress is neither linear nor at the same speed. Adults are on different pathways, at different spaces along the way. John Westerhoff speaks of three pathways to God, three trails that we travel along on our spiritual pilgrimage. The first, the "Experiential Way", focuses on transmitting and acquiring the story within the caring, nurturing fellowship. The second pathway, the "Reflective Way", invites persons to be vulnerable in their search for meaning in their lives, to accept responsibility for their own faith response. The third way, the "Integrative Way", encourages persons to address how they can live out their faith in the world. They accept truth for their own lives and advocate this truth, yet they are able to remain open to others. Within a community of faith that is radically and totally dependent upon God, persons seek to live in interdependent relationships with each other as a model for the world.²³

Guides need to recognize and accept the fact that adults are not all mature nor all-matured Christians, but are at different places along the journey. Yet they are called to encourage each pilgrim to continue in forward motion with their companions in the faith. Christians are a people on the move, walking and talking as friends, learners and guides together.

In adult education, where we offer a place and a space to grow spiritually, that is, wholistically, learning can take place in an experiential way. In the safety of a hospitable community, adults can test their ideas and beliefs with others, can receive the support and encouragement to change their thinking and behaviour. And adults are given impetus to move forward with renewed energy to serve Christ in a needy world. There is assurance that one is not alone on the journey, that we are in this together.

Thomas Groome,²⁴ a Christian educator, in his shared praxis approach to learning, suggests five movements in the learning process. Sharing our story, reflecting on our story, hearing the life-giving Story and Vision, conversing and reflecting, and making a faith response are the movements towards a transforming lifestyle. Change occurs and the cycle of action and reflection continues in a new form. The journey is flexible

and spiral, encircling larger and in different patterns as persons share their life stories, reflect upon their meaning, hear The Story for the faith community, reflect upon the implications for them, then move out in action.

The journey motif is not a new concept, but has always been part of our Christian heritage. The story of the people of God begins with the journey of Abraham and Sarah to a new land. The Exodus is the story of another journey i.e., out of the land of slavery into new unknown territory, a totally different pathway. The journey continues for us as the people of God. It is fearful, yet exhilarating, for as we chart new courses along the way, we have the assurance that the unseen guest is with us, guiding us in a real way along our journey through life as a people of God becoming who we are.

Hospitality and community are important frameworks for adult learning that is life-long. Both aspects can be worked at intentionally in the congregation in a way that encourages growth and Christian maturity. A few years ago five women from my congregation met on Monday mornings for a Bible study. We gathered in each other's homes, enjoyed coffee and breakfast graciously supplied by our hostess of the day. During breakfast we caught up with family news, shared tidbits of information and advice, laughed and joked together. Then we began to share what we had gleaned from our reading and studying before we came together. Questions would be raised without fear of rejection, hostility or ridicule. There was no "teacher" to tell us what to think or believe or to give us all the answers to our questions. We were learners together, sharing from our personal experiences, our own insights. The hostess served as facilitator during the time together. She guided the discussion, keeping us on track, helping us to be relevant, to be honest, and to be reflective. We challenged each other to put "walk" to our "talk" during the week, to live out our faith responsibly. Over the year, we grew to love each other as sisters and friends. Our personal pain became everyone's pain, our joys were celebrated, our sharing was deep. We were willing to become vulnerable because we trusted each other and honoured confidentiality. We set aside a block of time for intercessory prayer on behalf of each other, our families, and our neighbours. The prayer time was a special time for us all as we began to see answers to our prayers in the lives of loved ones.

This group provided a strong faith community for me. I was strengthened by the support and love of my friends. As I reflect on our time together, I marvel at the movement forward on my faith journey. It was a time of personal growth and enrichment. The content was not the important part of our meeting. What mattered for me was the personal interaction, the intimacy, the interdependence that developed as we moved from stranger to friend, as we became a close-knit Christian community of women who walked with each other, hand in hand as companions on the way.

Christian educators extend the invitation to adults to learn in community, to continue the journey with fellow travellers. We create space for adults to come together to share their stories and to reflect on them in light of the Christian story. We offer guides for the journey, persons to walk and talk, persons who will “use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own.”²⁵ We teach to learn to teach. Is our aim not that all become learner-guides, helping others continue on their way with confidence and joy? The learner-guide need not be trained clergy but a maturing Christian who has accepted God’s invitation to be a “ministering” person. Lay ministry is walking hand in hand, sharing the journey, learning together.

In the midst of the congregation, God’s renewed community, adults learn what it means to be followers of The Way, and are empowered to serve God in the world. Learning, by definition, calls for behavioural change within persons and community. Both have the “potential to be transformed and to transform the world according to the gospel, turning away from one way of seeing and of living toward the Christian way of living life and experiencing community.”²⁶ Change is for a purpose—to continue the mission begun by the ministry of Jesus Christ, i.e., to be a transforming agent in the world, offering redemption, reconciliation and shalom on the earth.

The two disciples’ encounter with the risen Jesus transformed them from despairing, weary travellers to joyous energized walkers ready to move out and tell God’s good news to others. The Spirit of the risen Jesus encounters his followers in the same way today. God’s Spirit is the gift which unites

disciples into a community of faith and love, and empowers them to proclaim the gospel in word and action.²⁷

In the congregation, an ideal learning setting for adults, the stranger is invited to become friend, to travel with fellow seekers en route the journey of faith. Adult Christian education seeks to foster a strong personal faith within strong communities of faith as the church struggles to be faithful on its journey into God's future. Adult learning in the congregation can best be described as strangers becoming friends as they journey together in community.

Notes

- ¹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). Also Thomas A. Droege, *Faith Passages and Patterns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
- ² Kenneth Stokes, *Faith is a Verb* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989) chapter I. The concept of "faithing" is developed here.
- ³ Leo Buscaglia, *Living, Loving & Learning* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982) 202.
- ⁴ Dennis E. Smith, "Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106/4 (December 1987) 633.
- ⁵ Plutarch in his Table Talk 612D and 660B as quoted by Dennis E. Smith, *Ibid.* 634.
- ⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975) 71-72.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* 89-90.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 71.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* 67.
- ¹⁰ Tom Sine, *Taking Discipleship Seriously* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1985) 38.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Bellefontaine, "Living Christian Community: A Biblical Perspective," *Insight: A Resource for Adult Religious Education* (Ottawa: Concacan, Inc., 1988) 33.
- ¹² John H. Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community: The Church That Makes the Difference* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985) 85.
- ¹³ Scott M. Peck, *The Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 62.
- ¹⁴ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 72.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* 107.
- ¹⁶ Peck, *The Different Drum*, 117.
- ¹⁷ Joanne M. Chafe (ed.), *Adult Faith, Adult Church* (Ottawa: Concacan, Inc., 1986) 24-25.
- ¹⁸ Paul-Andre Giguère (ed.), "Christian Orientation in Adult Education. A Synthesis of our Vision. National Advisory Committee on Adult

Religious Education, CCCB," in Joanne M. Chafe (ed.), *Insight: A Resource for Adult Religious Education* (Ottawa: Concacan, Inc., 1988) 7.

19 Ibid. 8.

20 Ann Shore, "Experience in Contemporary Campus Ministry" in Chafe (ed.), *Insight*, 76.

21 Ralph F. Smith, "Did Not Our Hearts Burn Within Us?," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15/2 (April 1988) 188.

22 Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News. Reading the Bible With Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) 28-29.

23 Westerhoff, *Living the Faith Community*, 95.

24 Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

25 Buscaglia, *Living, Loving & Learning*, ix.

26 Giguère cited in *Insight*, 14.

27 Bellefontaine, cited in *Insight*, 35.