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Market, technology, friendship and community

The word *community* is understood most of the time to be describing the group of people who use the same local services, belong to the local clubs and take part in local activities. More than it describes relationships between people, it seems rather to define what is external to them and what they have in common as long as they live in the same area. In my own understanding - which has been influenced by my origin in another (Mediterranean) culture – community is much more than that. By reducing it to a functional mechanism we tend to deprive it from its deeper meaning.

Kinship

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins says that in our western society “*money has replaced kinship*”. By that he means that our market economy regulates our human relationships and ways of belonging to a social group that is determined by money based exchanges. If we look back, we can observe how reciprocity has been for centuries and millennia the traditional way of relating to each other in a social group. It does not involve money; it develops organically when each one helps their neighbour because it is the necessary way for subsistence. Anything you give me or any help you bring me will oblige me morally to give back something, not even especially to you but to any member of the community. I help you repair your roof; you will give me some products of your garden and teach my children Spanish or you will help your other neighbour to dig up a trench. This kind of reciprocal exchanges that are not regulated by money, not even measured according to a well-defined yardstick (this is only one of the many functions of money!), generates ever new relationships that may get deeper and deeper and become true friendships. It creates a never-ending link that develops further and further, wider and wider, because the obligation (or gratitude) is never exhausted and the more relationships develop and become intense, the more they call for further developments and deepening as true friendship. On the opposite the market with its use of money does exactly the contrary. It says very coldly: here is the money that pays for the price (false representation of value) of what you have given me. I do not owe you anything anymore; please disappear from my life; I do not want to see you again; I do not need you, now that I got (extracted) what I wanted from you.

Meaning

In a similar way, the sociologist Ivan Illich says that “*technology has replaced meaning*”. It means that technology has taken the role of defining what is needed and what is not, i.e. the purpose of what we do is simply defined by mainly technological constraints and does not need to be reflected upon. We do not need any more to ask what is the essential reason of what we intend to do because technical problems are just very practical. They impose their purpose and their means as ready-made solutions. This shortened way of escaping the true question of meaning allows us to manage our environment and our society as a purely functional machine. Of course we never stop having desires and unexpressed needs as well as being puzzled by metaphysical interrogations, but our materialistic understanding of the world allows us to solve problems on the merely practical level, without us to have to go further and risk ourselves in more metaphysical introspections. Technology calls for more technology; and the true question of the authentic meaning of who we are and what we do is further evacuated out of our way of thinking. We repair the road or build more power stations or exploit new mines but we do not consider how far a new mine / road / power station will help us as well as the coming generations to thrive and to live life to the full.

Expulsion

We believe that we live in a society that provides everything we need: food at the shopping centre, health at the hospital, culture on the radio or at the school, leisure at the cinema, sport at the club, friendship at the pub. Because our market system has invaded every field of our life, we are provided for many things by many performing services which seem to answer all our needs and which are all paid for. These goods can all be consumed, either because we pay for the price (shopping, trades) or because the State has paid for it through further investments that are financed by taxes (roads, health, education). We live in a well regulated society and our needs are answered by a system that believes it has foreseen each of them, or at least defined what was essential and what it would provide, and what it wouldn't. By conquering all forms of relationships and creativity, market and technology have forced us out of the network of natural exchanges that could develop without using channels regulated by money (i.e. reciprocity as described above). Not only kinship and friendship become irrelevant because they do not answer any more needs connected with subsistence, not only the question of meaning becomes irrelevant because all solutions are already provided on a more functional level, but on top of this we have been more drastically ejected out of our own society that seems to function well without our contribution (except as cogs) in terms of human creativity, empathy, or search for the essence of life. We are no more needed as soon as we have paid or been paid for what we bought or sold.

On the opposite, I believe that a lively society needs to be based on real subsistence (basic material and immaterial needs), on true search for the meaning of life, on real needs defined and related to this deeper meaning and mystery of what life truly is, on care for each other where all members are offered special possibilities to thrive, on harmonious integration into a wider universe and social group in a form of interdependence where each one is unique and needed for what they are in their originality. Individuals can then become persons who interact with one another. Relationships take shape in a natural and free way, related with subsistence and true needs (immaterial and material). They are not pre-defined by market forces or technological worship. They are the core of what happens between people. They are the creative forces that generate true communication. People are no more ejected from society. They are the true vectors that shape it. For these conditions to be real, we need to be connected with the needs of subsistence and we need to escape the laws of market and technology (i.e. control them by social awareness).

Friendship

As distinct persons we are yet not autonomous particles that fly through space; but we are all deeply connected with the land that nourishes us, with the social group that has given us the basic tools how to cope with our environment: this group taught us how to walk, how to talk, how to behave in a group, how to love and be loved, how to understand what happens around us and in us, how to interpret these basic facts and to choose what is relevant and what is not, how to establish a hierarchy of values. Of course one can say that this basic teaching is not always perfect and is full of flaws. It is certainly the case, but it nevertheless provides us with the basic instructions how to do things in the eye of our tradition or dominant ideology. Thanks to this teaching we should even acquire the tools how to reject its flawed instructions and how to make the choice of other better priorities. This freedom of choice is evidently a very precious opportunity that we should care for. Yet it does not mean that we are free to do anything we wish to. Our sense of responsibility consists precisely in this faculty we acquire to reduce our own range of possible choices to what honestly corresponds to our understanding of truth. Our western context has so strongly emphasised our ability to be free as individuals that it has consequently broken our links with the society we belong to, as if this society were here only to serve individualistic purposes.

Most spiritual traditions emphasise the role of the wider body: the people of God for the Jews, the Sangha for Buddhism, the Church for Christianity, the Umma for Islam. Truly our individual identification with our own distinct body-memory-mind is an illusion. We are indeed all One. Yet our deeper sense of belonging to a wider body has been replaced by western individualism that breaks all restraining links.

Money (replacing kinship), technology (replacing meaning), individualism (replacing sense of belonging) are the tools of our own ejection from life and social interdependency that form indeed, I believe, the core of our experience in life. When we reverse this movement of expulsion and try to reintegrate our real place into a network of interdependent relationships, we have the opportunity to rediscover the true meaning of friendship. As long as we do not reverse this tendency, friendship will remain a leisure activity. We will enjoy good time together having a glass of wine, a delicious meal, a BBQ, a swim, a ride, a dance or watch a show, listen to a concert. But none of these activities will provide the opportunity to be truly concerned with or involved in each other's life.

During these good times of leisure time that we share together we will of course be able to exchange about what we have experienced or what we have done, how we have felt and what we intend to do. But this sharing goes only through talk and nothing is there to test or confront the truth of it. I do not mean that the one who talks is lying. I mean that there is indeed no direct confrontation with any form of reality that would test the truth of it. When I write these present lines, they are only words. They ensue of course out of my experience and my observations of what happens in me and around me. They are generated by my frustration in front of what I have called expulsion, and how we seem to be prevented from developing true relationships of friendship by the market system and technological way of thinking that impregnate and even define our culture and ways of living. Yet nothing confronts me with the test of veracity of my talk or writing. In this way of life there is no direct confrontation with the true nature of reality, and these lines are only words that I type on my computer and that are not confronted with the hard struggle of life in its materiality. Committed friendship is precisely what would allow to confront the truth (or untruth) of these words with the visible and invisible matter of life.

Friendship in this way means interaction and involvement of each one in the life of the other. Involvement should be here understood in a positive way as meaning a deep concern for what the other experiences and how s/he does that. Involvement does not mean intrusion or invasion. Privacy remains what people wish it to be, at the degree they wish it to be. Just more concern means more

understanding, better listening, more empathy and also, inevitably, a wish to participate where there is room for participation. Friendship means in this way deeper sharing and involvement because there is something to share through life experience. If I'm involved with you in a building job, I will know you better than if I spend only time around a table, drinking and eating and talking. If you visit me when I'm sick, you will discover aspects of my person, of my fragility, you would never know without me being sick. Accompanying people in terminal illness is certainly a very powerful way to connect deeply on a level that touches the essence of life itself. Yet, without looking for such extreme situations, we notice how a practical involvement in one another's life creates the spark that produces the real light.

Community

We are all highly diversified people and we are complementary in our experiences, skills, knowledge, choices of ways of living, priorities that ensue out of past insights, steps of transformation of ourselves that result from these diverse conditions offered by our own life. As we develop very different skills, we become more competent in fields that our friends ignore. This is, I believe, the core of community. We are all as the cells of a body that need each other because the hand needs the foot, and the heart needs the lungs and the brain (the image is not from me!). Each of these parts is poor and ineffective in itself, but reveals itself to be powerful and rich when linked with others.

We all need each other to progress in life. We need, you and me – I believe - to talk and to share about our main concerns and questions, about our own doubts and insecurities, about our suffering, about our intuitions, our wisdom. Each of us, we need the support of the others to develop into someone more mature, more aware of what is, more conscious of the wider picture. Alone we struggle; we feel free and not disturbed by others, but we feel also very poor because we are cut off from other's intuitions, insights, knowledge and abilities to live in a compassionate way.

Community is based on the search for truth and for the best ways to make people happy. Before we are takers (probably an attitude inherited from our market system), we are mainly givers (our true nature). Generosity is the deep energy of life that needs to make available what flows naturally. Each of us we need to be seen and recognised for what we are, and the best way to be recognised is to become givers. The more generous we are, the richer we become. This is for me one of the mysteries of life.

Friends have skills we do not have. Why don't we trust them to lead us where we cannot go alone. This is not a resignation of being absorbed in the anonymity of the flock. This is not the melting down of diverse personalities into a homogenous mass. No, it is precisely the contrary, becoming more ourselves in order to be unique and provide what we can to the others, and receive from them when we need to. To lead and to be lead is probably the cement that keeps community together and links us into lively relationships of true friendship that foster life and wonder.

Why do we have so much difficulty to be committed to a common purpose? Why are we so deeply split one from another? Why are we so much obsessed by our own personal needs? Why is individualism, and not community, our main identification?

Why conform to the laws of market and technology that deprive us from our being? and why not try to become helpers to each other, and guides and inspirations in order to create new relationships that bring each of us in deeper connexion with the mystery we are, you and me? The whole is much more than the sum of the parts.

Expression and truth

I believe that the lack of community in our everyday life generates a kind of incapacity to express ourselves. When we support each other in our quest and when we are involved in the life of the others, we have the opportunity to share our questions and to try to find answers together. This search stimulates true communication. This form of communication is evidently very far from the one that is used on frequent sms. It concerns indeed our deeper being and the mystery of life. When we reconstitute true social links in form of a living community in which every member is involved in the lives of the others, expression becomes a solid tool to investigate the nature of things. In my own life I always experienced writing as a powerful tool to investigate Reality. I believe we do not write to express what is clear in our mind but on the contrary we learn to write about what we do not know clearly or about what we want to know better or in a more complete way. It is precisely what I am doing now. The act of writing becomes a means and a tool to test what we write, whether it is true or not, or more exactly whether the expression fits reality or not. The expression becomes then a way to better discern patterns and concepts. Language has evidently contributed to the development of philosophy and to the deepening of our human consciousness. When we use words we learn to use also concepts.

It ensues out of these statements that the reconstitution of true community links will help us to better investigate Reality. Community is at the same time the expression of the reinforced links that are fostered by more awareness and awareness gets also reinforced by the fact we develop community links. Poor societies (especially in materialistic cultures) know often a very weak level of use of language and a pretty weak communication between people. By contrast small children who learn to express themselves have often a clearer understanding of life and of all nuances. They become soon able to describe them and to establish subtle distinctions. In doing that they become more and more aware and more and more able to express what matters for them. They develop their skills of discernment and understanding as well as their faculty for verbal or artistic expression.

As community reinforces our commitment to the search for truth, it will also reinforce our focus on what matters most. By becoming more conscious of what is essential, one becomes detached from what is illusory. Here too, the quest is based on the reciprocity of two forces: attention to the essential and detachment from illusion, inasmuch as community reinforces expression and expression reinforces community or as expression reinforces clear-sightedness and clear-sightedness reinforces expression. This is why community constitutes the further stage of human development as Teilhard de Chardin so well describes. It brings us further on the road of consciousness. Long program! Long way to go!

This topic of “Friendship, Community and Love” will be the theme of a further workshop (Nov. 2018)

DCH, Numbugga, February 2018