

Common Unity in Community Health Clubs.

Today our modern society is plagued with social problems such as depression, mental illness, drunkenness, teenage delinquency, drug abuse, sexual abuse of women and children, all of which are merely symptoms of the larger problem of poverty and insecurity. This in turn is often due to politically or religiously induced discrimination, xenophobic hatred, and even genocide. Despite incredible material and technological advances we are reverting to cave man behaviour, our brains using primitive wiring in our brain to deal with the insecurities of the modern jungle.

In the past ten years research into how the brain works has revealed intriguing facts showing which part of our brains are used when stimulated by different types of input. Through MMR scanning great progress has been made in understanding what happens inside our heads. We have begun to understand abstract emotions in terms of a mechanism within the information sharing system that is our brain. Happiness is now something we can track electronically so that we are able to explain what makes us happy and consequently how to achieve happiness. Scientific experiments on human behaviour have now confirmed that 'Happiness' is the great healer for society, but that we may have lost the knack of inducing this happiness due to the stresses of the way we live life in the 21st century.

The Dalai Lama¹ provides some insight as to how we can use positive thinking to increase our resilience and to recreate community. When the word Community was first used it was meant to denote a group of people with a 'common unity', but does this still hold true?

What, in fact, is 'Community'? The Dalai Lama defines it like this:

*'There are different levels of 'community' that can be formed on the basis of living in the same neighbourhoods, or a common religion, culture, shared interest and so on. But in a sense I think this level can be seen as focusing on external characteristics that we share. But there is also a deeper level, in which we can relate on a more fundamental level, relating to others based on our inner qualities. These are our common characteristics that we all share as human being, our **basic human qualities**.... No matter what other factors serve as the basis for our sense of community, no matter what other ways we may relate to others, if we can maintain **a feeling of connection to others based on our common humanity**, it will prevent all these problems from arising.'*

Whether we are rich or poor, Christian or Muslim, rural peasant or urban businessman, tribal chief or President of the United States, we are all concerned to keep our body going, and to be as comfortable as we can, with enough to eat, a place to sleep and a place to raise our young. In this we are the same as animals, reptiles and fish. These common survival needs unite all sentient beings. A kernel of our brain (the amygdala) is also shared with reptiles. We share our most basic wiring, the limbic system, with all living creatures, and like them we identify our friends and foes, our lovers and our brothers through a

¹ 'The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World' is assisted by eminent psychologist, Howard Cutler. (p.266)

primordial brain that triggers us to fight or run for our lives when faced with an unknown entity. In recent years the fact that we share 98.9% of our brains with chimpanzees has also sent shock waves through traditional religious dogma that has given us the illusion of being above the animal world, a perspective that the whole of creation was actually made for the use of man, the controller of the planet. Now that our planet is running out of resources and that our own greed has over reached the ability of the planet to provide enough resources, we are having a serious rethink as to exactly what our role on earth should be. As subsistence farmers leave the land and crowd into cities, the world shrinks and our dreams evaporate.

So many of us find the best we can do is to live in a shack in a dirty wastland on the edge of the big city, eeking out an existence as we continue to breed our children into a life of deprivation and squalor. We are surrounded by people we don't know, people we don't *want* to know because as we observe them across the road, we see how different they are from us. They eat different food, the smells from their kitchen offend our noses, they speak a different language, dress differently, and we don't understand their body language, or their religion... we simply don't understand how they tick and so unable to read them or even like them, we mistrust them. With this lack of trust becomes fear. Fear is a primitive response to the unknown.

So begins the cycle of suspicion that leads to hatred, which again leads to division within communities. Lack of common unity, lack of trust, lack of social capital are often cited as the symptoms of a dysfunctional community. But how do we change this, how do we bring back the laughter?

Lack of common unity means that people are not able to rely on their neighbour because they don't trust them and they are scared of their ways. Ask yourself this question:

'If I had to go out at night in an emergency, would you be able to ask your neighbour to look after your young children?'

If the answer is 'No', ask yourself 'Why?'

Perhaps you don't know your neighbour, perhaps you know them but you have had a petty disagreement, or perhaps you don't like them because they are different. Whatever the reason, you are living in a state of insecurity because you cannot trust your neighbour. Perhaps it is not your neighbours that are source of your insecurity, but a rogue element in your neighbourhood, that has taken control so that the majority of ordinary people have been held to ransom by the few.

Why should this happen? It is logical to believe that if the mass of people outnumber the deviants, then the majority should be able to prevail. If they can't control the deviant fringe that is ever present, then it is either because they are disorganised as a group or the powers that be (the council, the state) have an inept or corrupt police force. With no state control, the community may have to organise itself and set up vigilante groups to deal with local misdemeanours, and these groups can become rogue elements so that the area is now divided by gangs who wrestle for control. This gang warfare is a symptom of a

breakdown of law and order. Now residents, to protect themselves, have to either move out, or wall themselves in (flight or flight).

Those that have the means to leave this dangerous place will do so, usually to protect their young; those who stay behind are less able to control their lives and become ever more unable to cope. They probably have less education, less creativity, less contacts and no other options, so they are forced to tolerate a situation that others refuse to accept. Boredom, lack of opportunity, anger, frustration, and resentment of the 'haves', lead to desperate behaviour and inner city violence that is the hallmark of all dehumanised settlements. It is the cycle of poverty: fathers drink themselves into oblivion, sons take to the streets and deal drugs for a living, steal and rape for fun, and young girls get laid, get pregnant, raise children on their own, who grow up like a pack of wild dogs, to begin the sad cycle again.

How do we stop this desperate cycle of inhuman existence? How on earth do we even begin to break into their lives and call a halt to this mindless behaviour? The Dalai Lama speaks the obvious:

'the creation of a more peaceful and happier society has to begin from the level of the individual, and from there it can expand to one's family, to one's neighbour, to one's community and so on.'

It is not easy but it can be done, and it has been done through Community Health Clubs. It starts by getting people together. How do you get people together in the shacklands and informal settlements around the world: in favelas in South America, in council estates in developed countries, and remote abandoned villages in Africa and Asia. You have to find a common issue that is so basic it catches everyone. This is a hypothetical interview with a woman living in one of the 200 informal settlements of the Cape Flats:

What is the most basic thing we all do?

Well, we all eat, sleep and shit, and most of us just like animals try to mate and breed.

Right. What problems are associated with these basic functions when we live very close together?

OK, we share one little room with the whole family. We sleep together, usually on a floor, on mats, and there is no space, it is cold and damp on the floor, hard on the body and people snore, masturbate and wet themselves and we have to put up with this close by every night. Making love is a problem because there is no privacy, and our kids grow up seeing everything and copy it before they are fully grown.

What about shitting?

Yup. Not great either. People have to share toilets if they are lucky enough to have access to one, others shit in the lanes or behind the shacks, some in plastic bags which they throw onto the garbage heaps. The public toilets are revolting, they smell and are often blocked and fouled by drunks or vandals. They are dangerous at night and far from the house. We are forced to confront our neighbours excrement every day. It is inhuman. Even cats bury their faeces. We behave like dogs, crapping everywhere.

What about food?

We used to grow our food, when I was a child on my fathers land far from here. But in town there is no space and we don't know how to grow things. We have to buy food and it is expensive. We live off the cheapest food that gives us energy, white bread, coke, doughnuts, hamburgers if we are lucky. Most of us dont have wives with us, so we buy food ready cooked on the streets. We don't know if this food is properly cooked. Flies sit on the meat and they probably come straight from the garbage and shit in the sheets to spoil the food, but we have no choice. Sometimes the people who serve us the food have dirty hands and we don't know if they wash their hands before preparing food, we don't care. We eat enough to stay alive, not much. The kids survive somehow, but we don't eat together because I get home late after work, the transport is so crowded it takes me til after dark, and I leave home before it is light. I leave money for the kids to get food on the way to school. Dirty food, sore stomach, diarrhoea, vomitting, it's a way of life. We are used to it.

Why do you put us with this kind of existence?

I have no choice. Their father does not care about us. I am trying to support my children so I came to town to find work. I do this so that my children can grow up and do better. I hope they will stay at school so they can get a good job and maybe they will get us out of this poverty, and look after me when I am old.

So your children are the reason for your existence?

Of course, as a women, my main concern is that my children survive and are healthy.

So if I told you there was a way that you could ensure that your children grow up healthy would you follow that way?

Of course, that is my main concern. But I think I cant do much really as I am alone here. I am far from my parents and my sisters, and I know so few people here and in fact they speak a different language that I don't really understand. Also I don't have money to improve my life, and really no time to do anything.

Could you spare one hour a week to come to a meeting for the next six months?

If it is at the weekend I could do that. It would be a nice way to meet people here.

And so our Lady of the Shacks joined a Community Health Club. For the next six months she met the group every week and they talked about things that affected their health. How to improve their surroundings, how to clean up the garbage, make the pathways cleaner and safer, improve the toilets, regularise the activities of their teenagers, care for their babies. They learnt about basic hygiene, how handwashing with soap is so important, how clean food, and safe water is critical to the survival of babies, how to treat diarrhoea and when it is vital to take children to the clinic. They learnt for themselves the way to prevent infections and parasites undermining their health. Within a few months

they had stopped many common ailments like diarrhoea, skin diseases such as scabies and ringworm, eliminated the worms that debilitate most poor children and cause stunting of their growth. Other serious disease such as malaria and bilharzia are also understood so they know how to prevent these illnesses.

The health club was made up of about 50 people from around the area. The women enjoyed getting together, they sang songs about health which raised their spirits as they joined their voices together and danced together, washing away their worries for a few hours a week. They had fun, they made a drama about their issues, and they loved to act in front to their children, showing them what should be learnt. They developed many more friends and shared stories about their lives. Week after week, the group got bigger as others saw that this was a positive activity to do at the weekends. After six months they had done 24 health sessions and were experts on home hygiene and preventable diseases. They felt good about themselves, experts in their own lives, able to explain to their children the right way to live a healthy life.

During this six months, no one brought up the issue of politics or religion. They didn't speak about anything that would *divide* the group along cultural or ethnic lines. Instead they spoke about what they shared, *what they had in common*: the need to survive and provide their children with a healthy life. The knowledge they gained could be shared without fear of personal loss - knowledge is infinitely divisible. No matter how many people share their knowledge, there will always be enough to go round. In the first six months of the Community Health Club, no material assistance of any kind was distributed: no building materials, tools, or tokens like T shirts, books, and buckets had been given, and therefore there was no reason for the group to squabble amongst each other like sea gulls fighting for scraps from the table. Instead the Community Health Club members were united by knowledge, not divided by the greed of personal gain. In six months they had grown together as a group, sharing ideas, sharing the challenge, united in a common cause: to improve living conditions so their children could have a better life, through their skills as good parents.

Community Health Clubs help members look at the challenges within their community, and focus on what can be done individually and as a group to make small changes with no cost that will have a positive impact on health. Each session examines a problem and then recommends a small practice that will enable a more orderly lifestyle. Peer pressure within the group encourages all members to try and take up the practice, like for example, washing hands with soap before preparing food. Like many societies (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous) that use peer pressure to reinforce good practice, health clubs establish norms of behaviour that can identify a good health club member. These standards are constantly reinforced by good praise and recognition. Those members that attend all sessions gain a certificate which is public recognition they are good health club members and subscribe to the standards of the group, in much the same way certain behaviour is expected of Boy Scouts or good Christians or Muslims. These positive attitudes and exemplary behaviour make health club members feel happy with themselves for achieving a higher standard of living by their own efforts. Their husbands and children notice the difference in the home and start to complement them and this again encourages more effort to maintain the standard achieved. So positive emotions of admiration encourage self

respect and self efficacy (i.e. confidence that the person is able to achieve these goals). Our identity is now not only as a mother, but as a health club member, and our boundaries have expanded to encompass many more people which again gives more security. We feel united with others, sharing difficulties and this makes us stronger, despite our poverty. This makes us happier and we have more generosity of spirit towards others. The Community Health Club has given people an opportunity to gather to discuss simple issues, but in the process of these participatory activities that encourage everyone to join in the discussion, we have heard our neighbours speak and we realise they are just like us, trying to have a peaceful productive life. Many of the superficial differences of religion, race, ethnicity and political allegiance dissolve as we are able to see the humanity that binds us all. Once we recognise this common humanity and get to know our neighbours, we start to trust people more. Slowly we learn to be interested in the differences that divide us, instead of being threatened by the strangeness. We try their food, and even if we don't like it, we have shared the taste. We help each other with our children, baby sitting or takes turns to walk children to school. Perhaps we start a team and play volley ball or football and have some fun together, letting off steam from the daily drudgery.

So the Community Health Clubs provide a forum for interaction, which fosters a network of friends and acquaintances so we feel less alone, and can trust our neighbours more fully. Even if there are still bad elements that distrust this trust, we can recognise where the problem is and as a group takes steps to rectify the issue. This organisation means we are becoming a true community, with 'common unity' one which can function to maintain its members and ensure a safe environment for children.

***'The changes in thinking caused by positive emotions are also the type of thinking that would encourage seeing members of other groups as all part of the category of 'human beings' rather than as separate, rigidly defined racial, national or social categories. This could serve to reduce ... discrimination, racism, hatred, conflict and violence. In fact there is experimental evidence showing that those in a happier frame of mind perceive members of other groups with less prejudice and hatred.'* (p.269)**

The link between increase of trust and reduction of crime was underlined in Zimbabwe when a policeman once told me that he had noticed there are far fewer offenses recorded in areas where there are Community Health Clubs. We have to start somewhere: health promotion is an entry point which provides an excuse for meeting, sharing and solving common challenges.

'Continued research in the fields of positive psychology and neuroscience has revealed that positive emotions serve to promote a way of relating to others based on what unites us more than what differentiates us. These emotions cause changes in our thinking that results in a tendency to perceive ourselves and others as being more similar. The positive emotions tend to expand the boundaries of our identity, making these boundaries more like a permeable membrane rather than an impenetrable wall...

Community Health Clubs are providing exactly the vehicle that is needed to transport people out of isolation and frustration as they attempt to provide a better life for their children.