

Where Do We Stand?

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We stand in company with those called to create the beloved community for all people, in right relationship to the planet that sustains us. Our particular journey defines the struggle for inclusion by moving against injustices that socially exclude people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and rob them of citizenship. Ours is a generations-long endeavor, testing our courage, our creativity, and our constancy.

To stay faithful to this journey we must know where we stand, otherwise the tasks of creating inclusion will overwhelm us. Without nourishing the people, ideals, and practices that sustain us, we will become discouraged, our imaginations will grow dim, and our will to social invention will fade as we experience...

- ... heart-breaking differences between what pathfinders demonstrate is possible and desirable and what most people and their families experience;
- ... excruciatingly slow and too often superficial efforts to reform organizations and systems so they have the capacity to support inclusion;
- ... undoing of victories, reversal of significant progress, and resurgence of exclusionary structures and practices;
- ... loss of meaning as powerful ideas -like working in person-centered ways- suffer appropriation to decorate practices that leave social exclusion undisturbed.
- ... suffocating enclosure of the space necessary for creative relationships by enforced demands for attention sucking, fear inducing compliance with rules shaped by distrust and transactional mindsets.

These images guide a renewal of intentions and relationships that keep us on our journey to the beloved community. Each engages us both individually and collectively, as "I-myself" and as a member of "we". They encourage attachment to our sources of power, hope and joy in the work of building communities where all are welcome, each belongs, and every person and family has what is necessary to thrive as contributing citizens.



The forces of social exclusion, powered by the devaluation of people with intellectual disabilities as less than human and less than citizens, can seem too strong and dark to overcome. We can feel alone, naive, too small to make the difference in our communities that we are called to make. Despair can grip us.

We need a firm stand. A way of being present that orients us to our highest purpose, opens us to sense and be present to what wants to be born with our help, and energizes us to dance with possibility as we learn by trying new ways to do new things.

We can count on the energy that flows up and down between our awareness of the earth that supports us and the sky that opens our consciousness to possibility. We can count on the energy that flows from relationships between us and around us. Regular mindfulness practices and intentional co-sensing through deep listening opens our hearts to compassion for the whole of our world and our own work within it.

In the face of difficulty and defeat we stand together, committed to step into the possibilities of inclusion, using whatever we have to co-create new paths toward the beloved community.



Each of us has life **Work** to do, a distinctive contribution to our community that feels right when we discover opportunities to do it. This differs from performing daily tasks –small “w” work– though it can infuse the everyday with meaning. There can be a felt sense that this **Work** engages us with a higher power, an elemental energy that wants the best for us, for our community, and for our planet.

Generative questions indicate where our **Work** gets done. These are not questions that have known answers. Good responses emerge through co-creation and move us a step forward on our shared journey to a just and inclusive community. Poor responses deny or oversimplify generative possibilities and trap us in reproducing more of the same social exclusion.

Our **Work** makes demands. To create the new, we must discern what needs to die and let it go. We let go of certainties about what is impossible. We let go of the mindsets and structures that no longer serve the inclusion journey. We let go of the illusion that exerting power over others can produce good things. We recognize that good things can only be co-created out of our freedom.

Generative questions arise when the intelligence of an open heart, an open mind, and an open will reveals tensions between current reality and the ideals of the beloved community. Tensions become creative when our hearts are strong enough to hold them despite pain, when our minds are clear enough to inform our next steps into a desirable future despite uncertainty, and when our will aims true and with shared power enough to open up a way forward despite fear.



Strengthening and diversifying our relationships

The real work of inclusion is relational. We look to each other as whole and equal people with gifts to exchange for the common good. Transactional roles – buyer and seller, consumer and provider, client and professional– do not touch us deeply enough to liberate the energy we need to build up the beloved community.

We are different and different interests and beliefs hold us, so conflicts are central to the beloved community. It is not absence of conflict that builds inclusion but the disciplined practice of nonviolence in naming and resolving conflicts.

To sustain the courage for nonviolent action we draw those who share our ways of knowing and understanding close. We bond in circles and hold each other, challenge each other, and care for each other in the adventures and strains of reshaping our society. This is where we feel a sense of belonging that keeps us going on and a sense that keeping on has meaning. To expand our awareness of our community's possibilities and recruit allies, we build bridges to those with diverse identities, histories, cultures, perspectives, and concerns. Our intention is not to convert or colonize but to invite co-sensing and co-creation of possibilities that offer greater wellbeing for all.

To support weaving diverse relationships in ever wider and deeper ways we practice and develop the art of intentionally hosting safe spaces. Safe spaces make it possible to go deeper than shallow claims of sameness. Hearing one another's stories of difference, even when these differences confront us, opens a way to a deeper, more complex awareness of common purpose among us.



The work of inclusion thrives on openness: people with open minds, open hearts, and open wills with a deep desire to overcome social exclusion. Openness wants space to develop relationships that translate deep listening into social innovation. Space expands with the power to direct resources to discovery of new ways to support belonging and contribution. Exchange of learning in communities of practice enriches the search.

Driven by distrust and fear of scarcity and risk, the systems responsible for people with disabilities colonize more and more space. Complicated rules and oversight mechanisms convert freedom to act into rendering compliance. Cost control schemes seek efficiencies by substituting standardized transactions for responsive relationships. Compliance with administrative controls encloses opportunities for innovation in a shrinking corner of organizational life.

Without continual renewal of conviction on where we stand we are vulnerable to resignation, as if social exclusion were an irresistible fate and our only option were making congregation and segregation more tolerable. By struggling together, we can resist a sense of futility and claim, create, and defend our place to stand and take action. Otherwise the relentless busyness of fear driven activity will cut us off from the source of our resilience: co-creative relationships with diverse people doing the real work of inclusive community on local ground.



The devaluing realities of social exclusion hide from our awareness so they can work oppression unseen. **Direct violence** subjects socially excluded people to significantly increased risk of neglect and abuse. **Structural devaluation** deprives people of the means to live a good life and diminishes their life chances. Lives are shorter. Enforced poverty is a condition of necessary public funding. The system –haunted by unacknowledged collective fears of those perceived as “Other” – tilts toward program structures that constrict life. Citizenship is compromised. **Attentional devaluation** refuses to see people in terms of their highest purpose and future possibilities and instead sees them only in terms of their history of deficiencies. Gifts are obscured, limiting contributions to the common good.

When we consciously hold these too common current realities in tension with a deep vision of the beloved community, the tension generates energy and direction for the work of inclusion.

It takes intentional listening, observation, and dialogue to bring the shadows of current reality to consciousness. Our senses are disoriented and our intelligence is distracted. The intelligence of an open mind is disrupted by the voice of judgment (VOJ). Grounded knowledge can't form because new observations and feelings are deflected by assignment to binary categories: good/bad, right/wrong, realistic/impossible, acceptable/disgusting. The intelligence of an open heart is hardened by the voice of cynicism (VOC). Empathy is paralyzed by the belief that it is impossible to take meaningful action on what the heart knows. The intelligence of an open will is overwhelmed by the voice of fear (VOF). What losses and trials will we suffer if we follow the stirrings of our will for inclusion?

Remembering where we stand can put these distracting voices in their proper place and open us to a creative awareness of current reality. Awareness of current reality can make hidden wounds visible and open to healing.



Devaluation takes many forms that hinder the journey to inclusive community. Multiple devaluations –prejudices against race, class, gender, age, immigration status– interact to make the path slipperier and steeper. Narratives of pity, eternal childhood, dangerousness, specialness, and vulnerability can grip community members, some families, and some people with disabilities themselves. Agreements about what is possible and how to move into the possible can be fragile and demand regular renegotiation. Policies trip up and delay positive actions. Valuable human and material resources are frozen in program structures designed to serve people in groups. Shortages of direct support workers puts progress at risk. Almost everything takes longer than it should.

It is painful and a source of righteous anger, to witness the ways injustice works on people we care about. Mercifully, our relationships give us the choice to organize ourselves for resilience and resistance.

As well, each journey into inclusion has distinctive features. There will be breakdowns and disappointments, breakthroughs and celebrations. Keeping on with creative fidelity to the possibilities of inclusion draws on our inner sources of inspiration and strength.

As agents of social change we stand in a lineage of moral exemplars, mentors and teachers –some of them people with disabilities and their families; some of them from our own lives, others figures from history. When we hold them in our hearts, honor them, and remember their good influence, we touch sources of courage and guidance.

Regular practices of spiritual and physical renewal cultivate the mindfulness, intelligence, and energy necessary to see and seek new possibilities and for healing when discouragement grips us. Immersing ourselves in the stories of all those who struggle to live into the beloved community raises us above the powers of devaluation.



Such are the riches of community life that inclusion offers each person good chances to discover and develop a life of their own, distinguished by relationships that bring joy and consolation and roles that offer meaning and satisfaction. Well focused, intelligent support is an important asset in composing a good community life.

Because each life is distinctive, organizations have abundant opportunities to join with people and their allies to co-create the particular constellation of support that will assist each person to pursue their distinctive path in community life. To make the most of these opportunities, organizations move deliberately to meet the challenges of aligning their mindset, structures, and policies with the work of offering individualized supports to self-directed circles of people seeking community lives.

An assemblage of practices, sequenced in an order that describes a U shape, activates the curiosity, compassion, and courage necessary for deep individual, organizational, and community change. To put these practices to work, imagine moving down the U from the left, sensing possibilities; then pausing at the bottom to reflect; and finally moving up the right side to learn in action. We begin when we notice that we are mindlessly reproducing an undesirable current reality. Choosing to search for better ways, we invite diverse others to join in a co-creative effort. We hold back the impulse to jump to action. We make time for sensing, discovery, and reflection. We move outside our usual boundaries to visit places of potential and develop a shared sense of what more is possible. At the bottom of the U, we reflect to reveal what wants to be born with our help, now, in this situation. We take responsibility for what we must let go of and open ourselves to let the new come in. We move quickly up the U in rapid cycles of trying and learning in action.

An effective U process is grounded. We sense openings, looking down with care at the ground each person moves on, the neighborhood and community they could inhabit more fully. On the ground, we find or make generative spaces in which meaningful relationships and roles emerge.



The work of inclusion can be fruitful. People find more friends, real jobs, real homes, marriages. They find and develop their gifts. They find belonging and make positive differences in community life. Organizations focus their assets on individualized support for community life. Systems make journeys into inclusion a bit less difficult.

The work of inclusion can seem fruitless. Necessary supports turn out to be fragile, vulnerable to administrative changes or shifts in management. Engaging people without the advantages of strong family relationships challenges competency and commitment. Too many efforts to transform organizations and systems are weak and shallow, sometimes amounting to new words pasted over more of the same. Always, some form of institutionalization waits to catch the insufficiencies of our efforts.

As with every effort to move toward the beloved community, the question of trust is fundamental. If we have no more than technical procedures, managerial command and control, or economic incentives, we do not have enough to keep going for the long haul. If we demand a steadily rising count of lasting victories, we cannot sustain our journey through territory where devaluation continues to visit oppression on people.

Only if we trust that our fallible and imperfect efforts emerge from a deeper source –a source we touch when we seek to discover the highest future potential in our situation– can we sustain our capacity to make a difference. Only if we trust that the power at the source of our work tends toward social justice will we have the confidence to search for a way when our way seems like no way. Only if we trust that our co-creations are seeds of possibility that seek openings to grow can we join hopefully in the work of inclusion.

We Stand Where We Stand

We stand where we will stand, on little plots of ground, where we are maybe “called” to stand (though who knows what that means?) –in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in fields of lettuces and apricots, in hospitals, in prisons (on both sides, at various times, of the gates), in streets, in community groups. And it is sacred ground if we would honor it, if we would bring to it a blessing of sacrifice and risk.

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope –not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.

–Victoria Safford
Gates of Hope

Beth Mount imagined, designed, produced and described the
Where Do We Stand? quilt.

John O'Brien wrote the words.

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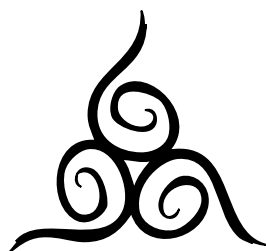
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Thanks to the people who gathered In November 2018 at the Tulpehaking Nature Center in Hamilton, NJ to explore ways to respond to current trends that threaten the work of inclusion. They met under the question, *Where do I stand?* They brought the experience of accompanying people and families on many inclusion journeys, changing existing organizations and designing new ones to offer individualized supports. The spoke from hearts informed by translating values and theories of change into practices that serve social justice. Our conversations there inspired the quilt and informed the writing.

Start here to learn more about the values that inspire and sustain us and the ideas that guide us:

- John O'Brien & Beth Mount (2015). *Pathfinders: People with developmental disabilities & their allies building communities that work for everybody*. Toronto: Inclusion Press. inclusion.com
- Hanns Meissner (2013). *Creating blue space: Fostering innovative support practices for people with developmental disabilities*. Toronto: Inclusion Press. inclusion.com
- Otto Scharmer (2018). *The essentials of Theory U: Core principles and applications*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



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