

5th International SRV Conference  
Canberra, Australia  
September 22, 2011

## **RELATIONSHIP AND TRANSFORMATION**

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This morning, I am talking about relationships – I have no special expertise concerning relationships. I am a person living and struggling with relationships – just like you. I am going to tell you about some particular relationships that have profoundly changed me, transformed me; relationships that have challenged me to deepen in my humanity and my understanding of what it means to belong to the human family – and as it happens, the relationships that I will speak about are with people who are very vulnerable in our world, people for whom our world is mostly a hostile and unfriendly place.

All human beings yearn for relationship. Typically, we are in many relationships; from the most intimate to the most casual. Our relationships are a source of immense joy and happiness for us. And our relationships are a source of pain and suffering.

For some people, the greatest suffering is not having a relationship – a relationship in which they are respected, valued for who they are; a relationship in which they give as well as receive. These are the relationships which give us life.

For many years, I never realized the power of a relationship to change me. That kind of experience was not what I was looking for in relationships – to be changed. Mostly, in my relationships my project was to change, or at least improve, the other person.

To make matters more difficult, most of us go into the world ill-prepared and even handicapped in our ability to relate to certain people. That was true for me.

I was born and raised in the Southern United States. I was taught probably the same things that you were taught as you grew up; and it was something like this: the people we know, our family members, our neighbors (at least some of them) are good people – to be trusted. People we don't know are not to be trusted – they are strangers, and if they are not dangerous, they are, at least, suspect. People who belong to our religion are good people, and righteous – people who follow other religions are in the dark. They are wrong – when I was young they were not necessarily considered dangerous, but that has changed today.

Because I grew up in the Southern United States, and more than sixty years ago, I was taught that people with dark skin, Black people, were not the same as people with white skin; that they were not as intelligent; not honest, etc.; and I could give you a very long negative list. But in short the message was – they were less than equal. And you needed to be careful around them. They were not to be trusted.

Because I grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, not far from a large Cherokee Indian reservation, I was also taught that Indians were not equal; that they were

lazy and not as smart as white people – and I remember one day at school, when I was perhaps 8 or 9 years old, a little girl told the rest of us that Indians smelled bad – that they never washed. So, that was my knowledge of Indians for years to come.

People who look like us are good. Those who do not look like us, do not believe like us, do not speak like us, are suspect... and they might be dangerous.

In every culture we create our groups – and we give labels to those who do not belong to our group. Our group, our organisation, is a place of security and identity. We create a world of us and them. We have a strong desire to be better than the others, to be stronger than the others, to have truth on our side – to know that we are absolutely right – and they are wrong.

When I was a boy, there was a man who lived in the valley near my family, whose name was Stanford Oates – and Stanford was different – he was not exactly one of us. He had sandy, red hair and a round open face covered with freckles, like many of us, but his body was all twisted and he walked with great difficulty. When he spoke it was with an enormous effort, and you could hardly understand what he said. Years later, I learned that he had something called cerebral palsy. He was in his twenties when I was about 10 or 11 years old. He lived with his mother and he mowed lawns to earn some money. It was amazing to watch how he could push a lawnmower in perfectly straight lines while his arms and legs were flying in all directions as he sort of stumbled-walked behind the mower. Naturally, that is to say it was “natural” because of our education, Stanford was automatically considered suspect by us children – and perhaps dangerous – we weren’t sure, but our mothers told us to “leave him alone.” When we would see him coming down the street with his mower, we would all begin screaming and yelling, “Run, run for your lives, the monster is coming.” And we would run away screaming and laughing – for us, it was great fun.

When Stanford would be in the neighborhood and see us playing football, he would always come and ask if he could play too. And we would say, “No.” And he would say, “Just for a little bit.” And we would say, “No, you can’t play because you can’t run.” And he would say, “Yes I can.” And then he would start off running, and after three or four steps his legs would become twisted together and he would fall in heap. And we would all point at him and laugh and say, “We told you so! You can’t run.”

About twenty years later, I went back to visit my parents who still lived in the same home, in the same valley. I was married and had children. I was living in a L’Arche community in Canada. I also had a full beard at the time.

As I was taking the suitcases out of the trunk of the car, Stanford came walking down the street. He stopped in front of my parent’s driveway and looked at me – he looked hard and long trying to figure out who I was. Twenty years is a long time. The beard did not help in his search to recognise me. And then, suddenly, an enormous smile spread across his face and he came stumbling down the driveway with his hand and arm outstretched to greet me. It was one of the most powerful and moving moments of my entire life. I felt as though I had been struck by lightning.

Here was this man that we had always made fun of; this man that we, that I, had always rejected; whose friendship I had never even considered; here, now was this man coming toward me to welcome me home. But it was even more than that. It was as though Stanford, holding out his hand to me, was giving me one more chance to recognise him as a human being, one more chance to recognise him as a man, and to experience our brotherhood. After all the rejection, the exclusion that he suffered, here he was, giving me one more chance to become a human being.

I took his hand and returned his smile. It was a powerful moment for me – a moment of freedom; a moment of joy; a surprising gift – I felt as though there was something new, or renewed, within me.

We spent the rest of the afternoon drinking tea and coffee with my family on the terrace. I soon left to return to Canada. I never really had a relationship with Stanford but I never forgot what he gave me that afternoon – a simple but profound lesson, and a growing realisation of how much we human beings need one another.

We live in a world that is filled with insecurity and fear – and one of the reasons is that we do not know one another – we have little experience of our common humanity – our brotherhood/sisterhood. Even though our world has become a “global village,” where we can see and hear what is happening instantaneously around the planet, we are still afraid of one another – we can still imagine monsters where there are only men and women like you and me.

We create barriers around ourselves to keep out those whom we have been taught to fear – barriers to protect ourselves – and these barriers become our own prison. Ruth Patterson is a Presbyterian minister in North Ireland and the director of Restoration Ministries, an interdenominational organisation dedicated to promoting peace and reconciliation. Last year she told me about the “peace walls” that have been built in the city of Belfast – you know how many? – 88! They were put up to prevent problems. They also prevent people from meeting one another. And we know of similar walls in the occupied territories, in Baghdad, in Kabul, the wall that the United States is building along the Mexican border.

Ruth says that in the work of peace-building in our world, there is no substitute for 1 – 1 relationships. If I do not know you, I can give you any label I want to – I can make you less than human.

The individual inner journey to freedom – and then to relationships – is the most important journey we can make for ourselves and for our world – it is fundamentally a peacemaking journey...

We have places to go inside ourselves where we have never been before.

Stanford Oates came down the driveway and broke down the wall between us. He gave me a sense of what it might be to be free – It was a beginning, a small step on my inner journey.

When I was a much younger man, I believed that the people that I would learn important things from would be people who had lots of diplomas, or who were well known for their wisdom; or at least, people who had written lots of books. When I went to live in the L'Arche community of Daybreak in Canada, right away, I had a very different experience. I could tell you many stories from that time, but I will only tell one. I call it, Gordon Henry and the new shoes.

At that time in L'Arche, 35 years ago, we did not really have salaries. We received room and board and a little pocket money at the end of each month. During my first winter in Canada, I saved my money each month in order to buy some new shoes when spring arrived and the snow was gone. I had seen the shoes I wanted in a store window in Toronto. They were called Australian walking boots. They were made of soft, brown leather and the tops came up to the ankle.

So, one Saturday in May, I went into the city of Toronto and bought my new shoes. When I returned to my L'Arche home, I put the shoes in my cubby hole by the front door. In Canada, because of the snow, we all had a cubby hole by the front door for our boots and slippers.

The next morning was Sunday and I was driving the van for those who wanted to go to church. Everyone was dressed and it was time to go. I went to the front door to wear my new shoes for the very first time – but they were not there! There was a little panic as everyone searched around for my shoes, but we couldn't find them, and it was time to go.

After church, I called the other L'Arche homes that were part of Daybreak. The Daybreak community was a Farm. We had cows and sheep and chickens and large vegetable gardens. After a while, someone from one of the homes called and said they had found my shoes. A young man named Gordon Henry had taken them. We called him Gordy. He and I worked together on the Farm. He was a young man with a very happy personality. He was not very tall, and he had what we call Down's syndrome. That particular weekend, he was responsible for picking up the eggs in the chicken pens – we had around 750 chickens. The eggs needed to be gathered each morning and evening. To do this, he had worn my brand new shoes. They were covered with chicken shit. Even after washing them, a kind of dull, white stain remained on the less than shiny, brown leather. They were ruined! I was furious. I wanted to strangle Gordy.

The next morning, Monday morning, Gordy and I were supposed to work together in the egg room of the barn, cleaning and grading the eggs that he had gathered during the weekend.

When Gordy came into the egg room, he immediately began apologizing and saying, "I'm sorry, George, please don't be mad, George. We're still friends right? Tell me its ok, George. Tell me we're still friends."

I didn't say anything. Not one word. Forgiving him was out of the question. To me, it was too easy for him to just ask to be forgiven, and then, it would all be over and we would go on as though nothing had ever happened. My new, shiny, brown shoes were ruined and I had never even worn them. I figured Gordy needed to pay. I began making him pay by giving him the silent treatment.

All morning, Gordy begged me to forgive him. He pleaded with me, he pulled on my arms, he cried. I never said a word. By noon, he was sick. He returned to his home for lunch, but he could not eat.

During the afternoon, Gordy continued to cry and to beg me to forgive him – but I went on working in silence. That evening, I received several phone calls from people in his home. Gordy had come home and gone to bed and would not get up for supper. They wanted to know what I had done to him and they told me that I needed to do something to help Gordy.

I was in an unusual situation, personally. First of all, this was really the first time in my adult life that another adult was asking me to forgive them. I had never had this experience before. My experience in adult life was that if someone hurt you or did something mean to you, then you got even. I had spent 4 years in the American military. I had seen plenty of men living right beside one another in an open dormitory and never speaking to one another for years. In my experience, acts of forgiveness were associated with weakness.

The truth was that I wanted revenge, I wanted Gordy to pay for what he had done – he didn't have any money so he could pay by suffering – even if he had money, I probably would have wanted to see him suffer. It was my sense of justice. And the truth was also that I believed my new, shiny, brown shoes were more important to me than Gordy, more important than my relationship with Gordy.

Gordy did not come to work the next day. He was still in bed. His spirit was broken – He was heartbroken – He was becoming physically ill.

I cannot tell you why, but I slowly began to realise the enormous power that I had over the relationship between Gordy and me – a relationship that was obviously very important to him. It was as if I had our relationship in my closed fist and I would not let it free, let it free to live – and there was nothing Gordy could do about that. I had all the control over the relationship.

Working by myself in the egg room I began thinking about Gordy and what was happening – about what was happening to him and to me.

I began to realise that Gordy was important to me – and maybe more important than my new, not-so-shiny, brown shoes. But with this realisation came a terrible vulnerability. To say, “I forgive you” to Gordy meant letting go of all the control that I had – all of the power I had over the relationship. It also meant that I would need to have the courage to live one of the most important lessons in my life.

So I went to Gordy's room and told him that it was ok; that we were still friends; that all was forgiven; that I wasn't angry any more. As I was talking to Gordy, I knew that I was taking a risk. I was giving up my power, my control. I felt sort of weak in my stomach. At the same time, I experienced a certain lightness of being – there was a sense of a new freedom for me and for Gordy; the kind of freedom that allows a relationship to grow and to deepen, that allows love to grow – and in spite of my fear of the vulnerability, I was grateful.

Vulnerability “is letting go of who we think we should be in order to become who we are.” Those are the words of Brené Brown an American sociologist. She says that “vulnerability is the birthplace of joy and gratitude; it is risking saying ‘I love you’ first.”

We have to embrace vulnerability in order to enter fully into any meaningful relationship, because we never know where the relationship will lead us. Real, meaningful relationships take us out of our comfort zone; they take us out of that warm, comfortable place where we know that we are right; they move us out of our certitudes and convictions. That is the great richness of difference – of human diversity. It calls us to deepen, to broaden and to enter into a vision and understanding of a world whose existence we probably never suspected. But it is not an automatic journey. Relationships have the possibility of transforming us when we do not have a project for the other person. When we are not out to change the other person or use the other person, but rather, we are just completely and totally present to one another.

There is a woman named Dr. Irene Tuffrey-Wijne who lives in London, England. She is a university researcher. She is also a member of the L’Arche community in London, and that is how I know her. One of her research projects concerned people with disabilities who were dying of cancer. She wrote a book about her experience entitled, *Living with Learning disabilities, Dying of Cancer*. The book tells the story of ten people who participated in her project. She followed all of them until they died. One person who participated in her project was a man named John. He was dying of cancer in hospital when Irene began to meet with him. He was very excited about being included in her project and delighted at the idea of being in the book she wanted to write. He said that he had lots of things he wanted to say to people about life; about taking care of themselves (he had symptoms of cancer that he had neglected for a long time). “I don’t want other people to make the same mistake I did,” he said.

John was about 40 years old and Irene described him as having a mild intellectual disability. When she arrived in his hospital room, he was always upbeat and a great talker. When people would ask him, “How are you today, John.” He would say, “Well, I’m dying of cancer, but apart from that, I’m fine.” He was also an exceptionally good singer. He even had a DVD of himself singing in a talent show.

There was something captivating about John’s personality. And even though he was dying, his only regret, he said, was that his mother would be alone after he was gone. Irene said that as she continued visiting John, it became impossible for her to sit and take notes as she did with the other persons who were part of her research. She eventually set her notebook aside and would just talk and listen to John. When she arrived home, she would write down all that she could remember.

One morning the hospital called and said that John had died very suddenly. There had been no signs that his death was imminent. The hospital had not had a chance to call and forewarn anyone – not even his family. Irene said that when she received that call it was an immediate shock; she was devastated! She was surprised by how strong her feelings were

after hearing the news of John's death. She was so affected that she had to stop working for a while.

As you can imagine, in such a project, Irene had quite good supervision and psychological accompaniment. During the weeks following John's death, those who were accompanying her helped her to discover more about why she was reacting so strongly to John's death. First of all, an important relationship had developed between the two of them. When she was with John in his hospital room, she said that she had become "totally present" to him. "I have never been so totally present to anyone else in my life – not even to my husband." So, she understood that she was grieving the loss of this relationship that was unique in her life and filled with meaning for her. And then, she discovered something else. She said, "I began to understand how much I liked the person that I was when I was with John – it was as though I was a different person, not my ordinary self; I was, in a way, transformed – I was someone who could be totally present to another human being." "And when John died, I lost that person too." Her grief was so strong because she was grieving the loss of two persons.

One more story, very short. It is about a woman who lived in my L'Arche community in France. Her name was Françoise Leblond and she died this year, one week before her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. During the last 14 years of her life, her health was very fragile. As a result, she seldom left her bedroom. She lost her sight because of glaucoma. She had never been able to speak, but she had always been able to communicate, especially when she squeezed your hand – she also had a large toothless smile that let you know when she was happy – and she screamed extremely well to let you know when she was not happy. Everyone called her "Mammy," a way of saying "Granny" in French.

In the last years of her life, if you had entered her bedroom, you would have seen a tiny, toothless, little old lady with straight, grey hair lying in bed – unable to see, to walk, to talk, unable to feed herself or care for herself in any way. She needed 24-hour-a-day assistance with all the aspects of her life. If you are anything like me, the first thought that might come to your mind would not be, "Now here is an interesting person that I really need to get to know."

At her funeral, the church was packed, standing room only – there were people from 7 different countries, many young men and women who had lived perhaps a year or two with Françoise in her L'Arche home, and many old-timers who had known Mammy more than 35 years. For almost two hours, I sat and listened to one person after another speak of the impact this tiny, fragile woman had on their lives; they spoke of how they had been changed, transformed through their relationship with Françoise.

How did she attract, solicit so much gratitude, so much love? People spoke of how she revealed to them something deeply human – of how she had the capacity to make them feel loved in their own fragility and vulnerability. People spoke of how their relationship with Françoise had healed them of their desire for power and control. "She taught me how to welcome age, and weakness, and dependence..."

We have all heard such testimonies – the last time that I had the occasion to listen to Wolf Wolfensberger he was sharing some of the experiences of men and women who have been advocates in Citizen Advocacy programs; these were their words:

**“In a world which values beauty and strength, an advocate discovers something deeper.”**  
**“I have learned so much from someone that I never thought I would learn anything from.”**  
**“Through this experience, I have grown in knowledge, wisdom and competence.”**

What does it mean that so many people who have this incredible capacity to transform us in relationship are often people who are also painfully vulnerable in our world, who appear to many to be totally insignificant in a society that says, “What really matters is strength and power and prestige”?

What it means to me is that we need one another in order to become fully human. That is our human condition. And that is my simple message this morning. We need every single person in the world. No one is extra. No one is unnecessary. We need all the Stanfords in the world who will break through the barriers that we have created and set us free; who will invite us to experience our humanity. We need all the Gordys in the world who can teach us that people are more important than things or projects; who can introduce us to our vulnerability and teach us that it is the birthplace of joy and gratitude. We need all the Johns in the world who invite us to be “totally present” and to experience who we are rather than who we think we should be; and we need all the Françoises in the world who surprise us with the beauty and strength of their presence, and show us how to welcome age, weakness, and dependency with courage and grace.

These men and women, vulnerable and fragile in our world, sow seeds of renewal; they are signs of hope.

Many people believe that there is nothing to be learned from someone with an intellectual disability – or that a relationship is impossible with someone with an intellectual disability. This attitude leads to de-personalization; a sense of alienation and a life of rejection and humiliation.

These are deeply embedded patterns of response to individuals with disabilities...hundreds of years old. Our work, my friends, your work and mine, is to create new patterns of responses, to create relationships that hold the potential for a life shared together. “In the work of peace-building in our world, there is no substitute for 1 – 1 relationships.

The individual inner journey to freedom – and then to relationships – is the most important journey we can make for ourselves and for our world – it is fundamentally a peacemaking journey...

We have places to go inside ourselves where we have never been before.”

And for that, we need one another.