**Can You Really Do It All By Yourselves?**

Guam Social Workers Conference, March 2015

Introduction

* Story of the flailing people being carried downstream in the river. Individuals on the shore jumping into the water and pulling out as many as they can. But they are fatigued and overwhelmed. One of them in desperation runs upstream where he discovers the problem–a bridge has broken and people driving across are falling into the river.
* Meaning for us: You are the people by the shore asked to pull out half-dead persons one by one, while there is a bigger, structural problem somewhere else. As long as the bridge is broken, unsuspecting travelers will be flipped into the water. Obvious answer: fix the bridge.
* Your job is to rescue individuals from drowning (whatever form that takes in their personal history–delinquency, drugs, alcohol, violence, etc), and you are taxed by the job, I imagine. But shouldn’t we give some thought to the structural problem behind much of this: breakdown of community.

How Community Worked

* Meaning of community: not collection of virtual friends on Twitter or Facebook (which I call “faceless”), not a group of people scattered around the island and the globe whom I happen to know.
* Community is a cluster of people I interact with face to face on a regular basis. Some I might like, while others may be unfriendly at times. But I have to deal with all of them on a regular basis, and I know they have their eyes on me.

Example: Housing project in Buffalo–the hawk-eyed woman across the street who wanted to know everything about everyone, and would spread gossip. My brother at age 12 was rumored to have invited 13-year old girl next door into a tent he put up on the lawn–word was all around that something bad was going on between them. Policeman who walked his beat (and didn’t drive) who would talk to parents if one of their kids got into trouble.

* Community meant eyes on the street (and on all of us). It meant stories circulating that warned us to be on good behavior (and shame to the family if we weren’t). It meant the big threat was not prison, but disgrace in the eyes of the community and a visit (of the cop or the neighborhood gossip) to our parents.

Community Island-Style

* You know much better than I do how community worked on Guam, but I’ve heard stories. Breakdown of the island into villages, each with its own mayor. The villages were quite homogeneous–mostly Chamorros–and people knew one another well. Perhaps a little like my own neighborhood when I was growing up. The community was all the tighter because most of the village attended its parish church. The pastor was another figure, like the mayor, who had access to all the families.
* Conflicts happened. When they did, if the two families couldn’t resolve it themselves, the mayor was ready to mediate to bring an end to the conflict. If he couldn’t, the pastor might be able to help.
* Misbehavior. Youth drinking and running wild, juvenile delinquency, theft and destruction of property. It happened, of course, but it was always checked because anything like this would be noticed by others. There were a hundred pairs of eyes on every kid in the neighborhood. Shame is a big weapon in the control of behavior!
* The family had its own ways of strengthening its bonds more tightly. Stories of families on Saipan going out to the family ranch–not just father and mother and kids, but many other relatives as well. They might go out on Saturday and stay the day. They worked together, ate together, and prayed together–all of this tightening the bonds among them.
* Other gatherings that strengthened the family bonds (and still do)–rosaries and funerals, holidays at grandma and grandpa’s house, other family get-togethers that affirmed the identity of the group.
* Summary: This is not to say there were no problems back in the good old days–you know better than that. But the jail population was small back in the 1950s and early 1960s. Guam had advantages then that kept the problems down:
* strong family bonding, with gatherings on a regular basis;
* rather homogeneous village communities, with many sets of eyes on everyone’s behavior and people ready to gossip–in other words, shame as an instrument of social control;
* central figures (mayor and pastor) prepared to step in to mediate in case of conflicts.

How the Bridge Broke

* Why the changes? Guam, like so many other places, was transformed after World War II, because of demographic, social and economic forces operating upon the island.
* Immigration into the island–from Philippines, Korea, Palau, and lately other parts of Micronesia.
* Split-up of families as Guamanians moved off to US to find jobs there (three times as many Guamanians in US as on Guam).
* Growing tourist industry and economy from the late 1960s.
* Expansion of the population to new areas, especially in the northern part of the island. Increased mobility on the island–more cars, jobs in different places.
* Result of the changes is what we see today.
* Village is more heterogenous, people less linked with one another than formerly, sometimes more a collection of homes than a community.
* Mayor may not have same personal connection with his people as formerly. Likewise with the pastor, especially now that churches have multiplied. Their role as mediators may have shrunk.
* Even families are scattered because of job opportunities elsewhere.
* With cohesion weakened, shame doesn’t work the same miracles as form of social control. Moreover, community leaders not in a position to mediate in conflicts as they once did.
* So, we need more swimmers, more life guards to rescue those struggling in the water. Community might have provided for them in the past, but now we are tasked with doing so.
* Policemen who drive around, not linked with the village the same way. Their job is not to talk to parents but to arrest.
* Proliferation of guidance counselors and social workers to assist on a one-by-one basis. Sometimes they do what might have been done without the family or community.
* Aid come from the outside, but only to those who are recommended for it. It is often curative rather than preventive by necessity.

The Same is Happening Elsewhere

* Chuuk and perhaps other islands in Micronesia. In 1971, after a severe typhoon plywood typhoon houses were delivered to Chuuk. Two alterations that signified some of the change that was going on.
* Plywood panels added to create rooms–and provide for some privacy. Formerly, family would have preferred a single unit.
* Kerosene stoves purchase for each house in a lineage unit; they replaced the cookhouses, destroyed in the typhoon, that provided food for everyone in the extended family.
* Both were signs of growing individualism in the community, even within the family. This resulted from introduction of a real cash economy during the 1960s. More jobs led to split up of extended family, redistribution of authority in the family, and additional child-rearing burdens for the father and mother. Consequences of all this–higher suicide rate, delinquency, domestic abuse–were discussed many times before.
* Mobility in US after World War II
* Life in 30s and 40s: large cities, but divided into neighborhoods, often ethnic. People worked at same job all their life and lived in same place. Stability and rootedness, even in cities.
* After the war, productive capacity for military channeled into consumer goods; with prosperity, more people could afford automobiles. Mobility changed US life greatly.
* Interstate highway systems, ability to move around more easily: shopping malls, motels, move to suburbs
* Similar trends: job relocation, pack-up-and-move society, breakdown of traditional neighborhoods, loss of participation in community groups *(Bowling Alone*), construction of personal support community, individualism.
* Meanwhile, TV was developed in 50s, reinforcing many of the changes–eg, less family recreation, culture of individualism.

So What Can We Do?

* Don’t try to rebuild the bridge–you’re social workers, not civil engineers. We can’t restore the past, just as we cannot restore the traditional culture. Changes happen, often as a result of other changes (eg, economic) that seemed to promise so much. We can’t pretend that we live in the past.
* Yet, be open to learning from the past and apply what you can to the present. You may not be able to restore the old village community, but you can take away some lessons on different methods of social control, the importance of shame, and the need to create some kind of real community.
* If you can’t rebuild the bridge as it was, at least you can try to lay planks so that people can get across the water safely. We can adopt strategies from the past and try to use these to save people. Examples:
* Work with and through whatever communities you have on hand–schools, churches, clubs–and get them to keep their eyes out for their members. Encourage them to intervene directly if they can, without feeling the need to go to outside authorities.
* If the mayor can’t mediate, then perhaps we can find someone who can. People who have done wrong should face their victims for the benefit of both. This is becoming a trend on the island and abroad–eg, work of Inafa Maolek.
* Direct outside agencies with messages to deliver to the functional community rather than individuals. Example: Hawaii Government wants to reach Micronesian migrant communities, but doesn’t know how. Advice to them is to develop contact through the churches–since this is most effective strategy.
* What you do is important, and so are you. Don’t exhaust yourself pulling out victims one by one.

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