

"Partnership" - What does it Really Mean?

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Partnership as a concept is a much discussed term these days. Parents & educators talk of "partners" in learning. Consumers of services and professionals talk about "partnering" in service delivery. States and provinces talk of "partnership" in political federations.

However, many parents, consumers, citizens feel that these "partnership" hats mask the old 'control' games. They feel that the "professionals" (those holding the power) really mean, "come to our meeting, our service, our organization - and agree with our rules, our plan, our solution - whether you like it or not." Sign on the dotted line! So, partnership is a term that evokes suspicion. It seems like a great idea - but in people's experience, it is seldom what it seems...

In New Zealand, we had an opportunity to explore the depth of the concept of partnership. We were there at an historic time when the situation between the Maori (aboriginal community) and Pakeha (white Europeans) was heating up visibly.

We were in meetings where the groups were "inclusive" (i.e. had Maori and Pakeha representation). But while the two groups were "in" the same rooms, they were not WITH one another at all. They had never actually "listened" to one another; "talked" to each other. Two worlds apart, parallel unconnected realities - two worlds in collision. And now there are new immigrants to New Zealand and a very substantial population of Pacific Islanders. In microcosm, we had a chance to observe the dance of the tensions that parallel our struggles in Canada and USA. We learned as we watched.

The mood in New Zealand had changed dramatically by our 1995 visit. The daily news included "occupations" of land and locations around the country. The media coverage was acutely reminiscent of the OKA - Kahnawake crisis (Mohawk - Canadian army standoff near Montreal) three years ago. In short, the wraps were off. The Maoris are aboriginal people with stresses similar to aboriginal people everywhere. Their struggle for full recognition as a people has now begun "publicly".

Our workshops were immersed in an uncomfortable tension. Everyone was "aware" of the Maori-Pakeha anxiety - but few knew how to begin the conversation. It was tense - but not hostile in the groups we met. It was more of the tension of "unfamiliarity" - "where do we begin"? Needless to say, not all pakeha's are so willing to participate in a dialogue. The open racism on the phone-in shows on the radio was painful to hear as we drove around the country.

The dominant issue was "Partnership". What does it mean? What would it look like? Is it even possible? From our Maori friends, their perspective is simple. They know the future if things remain unchanged. They are living it. There is massive unemployment, youth suicide, poverty, violence, crime - prisons - all the standard depressing stuff. AND simultaneously, in tiny carefully created pockets, there is enormous hope. There are models of possibility in communities, where people have chosen to challenge the terminal violence (mostly internalized) head-on. They want sovereignty and self determination.

The Maori leadership CHOOSE to focus ALL their energy on creating positive possible futures - and CHOOSE not to invest a mili-second of energy whining or complaining about past "injustice". They are acutely aware of it. They understand it. It is part of their history. But they know that to create the future, they must refuse to be trapped in the talons of depression. Many are angry - a deep anger at injustice - one that seldom slips into the trap of personality or whim. As one wise elder stated, "We have experienced 150 years of failure in the "adversarial mode". We need to switch paradigms - to create a NEW dialogue - a

WIN-WIN dialogue - where people actually talk to each other. The old paradigm has failed us and will kill us unless we can change it."

The leaders are truly "big-picture" thinkers. They are disciplined in the art of choosing how to invest their energy and talent. They understand that the stakes are literally their survival. They know that to be diverted by petty incidents and issues is their death-knell. They are focused on creating the climate for a new dialogue - beginning with RESPECT - respect for each partner's humanity.

This new dialogue cannot be between victor and vanquished: it must be between humans - based on a fundamental respect for each others human rights. It is a dialogue that must be deeper than words. It is difficult to write about, because the search for respect is deeply spiritual. It is genuinely part of the "universal" search for humanity - played out in the paddocks of the Urewera forest - and the tenements of Wellington and Auckland. It is the same issue in North America.

Once people can LISTEN to each other with respect, then the other two prerequisites to sovereignty and self-determination enter the arena - land and language (culture). The Maoris are, needless to say, training young lawyers in land-claims law. Those court struggles are now beginning in New Zealand - paralleling the struggles around the globe. But our sense is that the land issue is deeper than "ownership" in any western sense - and thus the paradigm shift in thinking will be essential to creating the framework for a "win-win" resolution on land and language. If both groups "listen" from their present position, win-win is not possible..

We learned enormously. We learned not just about the struggles in New Zealand, but the struggles of people everywhere to begin a NEW dialogue. The OLD conversations lack heart and are too brittle to allow new thoughts. We discovered there is room for a new dialogue. We saw it happen - fledgling beginnings. We watched as university trained senior business managers began to "dialogue" with rural Maori elders - as equal "citizens" -searching to create new solutions to complex problems. We watched people take tentative leaps across cultural chasms. It worked! It was difficult. It is not complete. It is a beginning, a first step! Partnership is possible!