



## GRACIOUS SPACE

### HOLDING THE DYNAMICS OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY CHANGE

*“Gracious Space is as old as mankind.  
But without the framework to do it, we just don’t.”*

~ Liji Hanny, Benton Harbor Boys and Girls Club

### HUNGRY FOR ACCEPTANCE

*A college student comes to her first national gathering of the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) program with her mother. She arrives guarded. She knows that the gathering will include people from 11 different states. In her experience, whenever strangers hear that she is from the hills of West Virginia, she detects a subtle shift of judgment and stereotyping that diminishes her before she has a chance to get to know them. With these KLCC people however, she is greeted as a member of the family. People are excited to find out more about her. She cries with the unexpected joy of being accepted for who she is.*

People everywhere are hungry for acceptance and acknowledgment for who they are. Many carry old wounds and old stories that cause them to avoid sharing anything that makes them feel too vulnerable, or too uncertain.

Many communities are hungry for the creativity, excitement, and joy necessary to find new and better solutions for old messes. The challenges our institutions and systems face cannot fully be met by people who are holding back their best out of the fear that their offerings will go unappreciated or be torn apart by those unable to make room for ideas that are not their own.

During the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) initiative, funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, we intentionally invoked the KLCC spirit. The KLCC spirit invites every participant to bring her/his most creative/receptive self to work with others in open and non-judgmental ways in service of a visionary social purpose. The KLCC spirit creates a strong platform for change. Gracious Space proved core to creating an inspired and joyful environment that opened up new ideas and possibilities.

Gracious Space serves the common social good and nourishes community change efforts by effectively feeding the human desire for acceptance. Gracious Space develops the capacity for each person to fully show up and to make room for others to do the same. It supports groups learning by addressing both similarities and differences, weaving a new inclusive social fabric.

This paper describes what Gracious Space is and how it provides a container for transformative change. It illustrates how Gracious Space supports the development of collective leadership among community change agents. Finally, it introduces a simple way of getting started.

### **GRACIOUS SPACE PROVIDES A CONTAINER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE**

Gracious Space has the potential to transform the human heart and entire groups or organizations. When we embrace graciousness, we choose an approach that fosters understanding. We choose to be open-minded and welcoming of diverse opinions and viewpoints. This attitude grows within us and is nurtured through practice. When individuals and groups learn together from the inside out, we create the conditions for transformative change.

Gracious Space holds transformative change by inviting people to build relationships that can welcome the tough conversations that work through old stories, old wounds and failed efforts. This change strategy works by asking people to develop themselves and to shift how they are in relationship with others who share a common purpose.

In community change, there are many communities – not just one. Each of these communities within a community has a different story about what has happened to them and why. When people with very different stories come together, they often bump into each other and experience conflict, even when they agree on the shared goal of changing an institution or system that does not serve any of them. Gracious Space increases the capacity of people to stand in the tensions that emerge out of every effort to make change so as to find vibrant new solutions rather than falling back on old compromises.

*In Buffalo, the fellowship quickly moved from coming together to confronting each other. Making a video to describe the community demonstrated how differently people looked at what mattered. This difference in view had a direct connection to race and ethnic background and created divisive tension. The fellowship used Gracious Space to focus on their shared purpose and how they could work together with a deeper appreciation of each other. Later, the project lead wanted to raise an issue with the statewide organization about who was deciding what*

*actions to pursue. She used Gracious Space to invite the leadership to look at their own behavior contrasted with their stated goals. As a result, the organization recognized that its process for selecting issues was unintentionally biased towards the White decision makers. And, they shifted their decision making process to reflect their belief in inclusiveness and service to those most vulnerable.*

## THE BASICS OF GRACIOUS SPACE

Everyone has had an experience of Gracious Space, though they may have called it by other names. The Center for Ethical Leadership defines Gracious Space as a spirit and setting in which we invite the stranger and learn in public.

Each of these four elements — spirit, setting, invite the stranger, learn in public — is simple to understand, although not necessarily easy to put into practice. Living into Gracious Space requires a level of attention and intention that comes from either great heart or great mindfulness. The following is a simple introduction to the four elements:

***Gracious Space: a spirit and setting in which we invite the stranger and learn in public.***

### **SPIRIT:**

Gracious Space has many aspects, such as welcoming, compassion, curiosity, humor - aspects that we each embody. When we bring these aspects with us into relationships, we are “being” Gracious Space. This spirit of Gracious Space is what sets it apart from other communication or conflict resolution tools. This is about preparing ourselves to bring our best self into every interaction.

### **SETTING:**

Gracious Space has a physical dimension that supports our ability to feel productive, healthy and connected with our work and with others. Paying attention to simple hospitality (food, drink, temperature) and items that reflect the energy and personality of the group (art, music, natural beauty) contribute to a gracious environment. This element also has an aspect of time to it. An example is matching the agenda/design to the time available so that people can engage with each other in a productive way.

### **INVITE THE STRANGER:**

Gracious Space uses a systems perspective to consider what it means to invite the stranger. Borrowed from Parker Palmer, the term “stranger” refers to any individual who is not typically

involved in the conversation; someone with a different background, perspective, skin color, gender, geographic orientation, or any other quality that may make him or her seem different. We need the stranger when we are considering complex and new ideas; we need multiple perspectives to broaden our viewpoints before decision making lest we take actions that are too narrow-minded or have only short-term benefit. Inviting the stranger is a strategic decision that opens up more possibilities. And it's good to remember that we are each the stranger to someone else.

**LEARN IN PUBLIC:**

The second systems approach of Gracious Space is to apply deep listening and learning to the diversity you have gathered into Gracious Space. Learning in public requires humility, a willingness to explore assumptions, letting go of the "right way" of doing things, and being willing to change one's mind and open one's heart.

These four elements of Gracious Space create conditions for people to be fully alive, fully engaged and fully present. In his book Theory U, innovation theorist Otto Scharmer notes, "Successful leadership depends on the quality of attention and intention that the leader brings to any situation. Two leaders in the same circumstances doing the same thing can bring about completely different outcomes, depending on the inner place from which each operates." The creativity that emerges when people come together from a place of joy and connectedness is more likely to lead to good solutions.

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Roca, Inc., is an organization in Chelsea, Massachusetts that works with youth living on the street. The organization endeavors to return these young people to find their place in the wholeness of community. Circle process is at the crux of their approach and embodies Gracious Space.

*Saroeum Phoung, the Roca coach, described how, in the early days, their organization moved from being issue-focused to crisis-focused to becoming adversarial with those who carried a different view. At some point, the organization lost track of what caused them to come together in the first place. When the group started using peacemaking circles, they focused first on what mattered to them, what spoke to their hearts. By connecting human being to human being, they were able to identify what was important to do and what needed to be let go. Living into their core*

*value of belonging, Roca changed its relationships with those organizations who had been its adversaries, inviting them to work with Roca from this place of connection. Working cooperatively, they were able to deal with even more issues. Saroem shared his most basic philosophy: "You can't get to a good place in a bad way."*

## **SPEAKING TRUTH IN LOVE TO POWER**

At its core, collective leadership is relational. Developing collective leadership requires the capacity to build effective relationships and partnerships that operate from a deep place of caring, connection, and purpose. Gracious Space nurtures authentic relationships.

Collective leadership demands that people pay attention to their own learning edges. This includes being willing to confront those assumptions and beliefs that may undermine achieving their purpose. Gracious Space encourages people to lean into learning. It knows that a great question has more power than an answer.

Among the definitions of collective leadership used during KLCC was one that continues to have great resonance for participants: "Speaking truth in love to power." Speaking truth to power is a very old saying with roots in the Quaker tradition. However, when 'in love' is added to the equation, it adds a new dimension.

Speaking truth requires that people find their voices and be willing to use them. This means being willing to address the injustice and disparities that arise from the ways in which our institutions have grown to serve, in a disproportionate way, the interests of those in power. It requires that individuals articulate strategies for getting outside the stories told by the dominant culture about why some people are oppressed and/or experience discrimination. It means finding our inner truth about our own value and the value of those that we love and care about in the places we share. It means claiming heritage as a strong foundation for growth.

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For many, the truth that emerges from this exploration results in feelings of sadness, anger and/or frustration. This is a truth that can separate people. When love is added to the mix, it asks people to recognize the interdependence that is inherently part of being human. It asks us to recognize the humanity of those who run institutions and systems that so often engineer such dramatically disparate outcomes for different members and groups within the community.

This type of change stands in the tension of looking at the reality of injustice and choosing action from the deepest place of love and compassion. It does not flinch from naming what needs to be changed, and it does this with a belief that together we can create communities that work for and serve all. It is truly, as invoked by Gandhi, the willingness to be the change that we want to see in the world. Developing the capacity to stand in this tension comes from keeping our focus vigilantly on change, as we welcome the stranger and learn in public, exemplifying the Gracious Space within ourselves.

The last part of this phrase addresses the reality that power dynamics are part of any change process. If we are to create changes that reflect the whole community, then we must have processes that allow people who previously have been left out to participate in an effective way. There are many examples of democratic action that end up in divisive and unproductive stand-offs rather than thoughtful engagement of different interests. Gracious Space supports a different relationship to power, one that begins with finding one's own power and the courage to speak the truth as needed.

*"The ... shared power that is part of collective leadership is not the 'norm.' Power can be monopolizing, autocratic and hierarchical. It is necessary to understand how power is perversely used outside of collective leadership models (and sometimes within) so that we can deal with power ... Control of money, resources and information is a form of power. Communication is a form of power. We need to tell our own story, make meaning of our own work and not be validated by external evaluators ... We cannot just stay within our communities where we share values and behave collectively. If we want to change the world, we have to be willing to model collective leadership. This will mean dealing with abusive power, and it will take courage!"*

~ Learning Lab Synthesis from the KLCC community prepared by Deborah Meehan

During KLCC, many participants experienced Gracious Space, in its action context, as a practice that allowed them to speak the truth in love to power.

*At the beginning of KLCC, Julie was the only Native American employed in a professional position in the local school system. Even though the schools in this town were physically located in the heart of the Reservation, the principals, the administration, the teachers, and most of the school board came from the White part of the community. In the beginning, she was angry. It was hard to BE Gracious Space, especially when she was offering it to those who were not returning it. And yet, staying in Gracious Space, no matter how others acted, led to different relationships and different types of conversations. The fellowship worked with the school district to make the changes that would open this school system to serve all its students. They created a*

*family room that welcomed Native American parents and students, started a mentoring program and performed myriad actions intended to create a welcoming school climate. It was not easy and not done all at once. She described her experience of Gracious Space as a journey from anger to hope.*

Those wanting to do community change work must be able to build a relationship field that is so strong, it supports people to say what must be said in a way that advances the work. This is what the Montana fellowship was able to accomplish.

Being in Gracious Space also encourages change agents to look for openings in the realm of new partnerships — to work with people in positions of power who are willing to confront their part in systems that don't deliver on their intended purpose; leaders who are willing to try something else.

*“When we are together, challenging the stories that are told about us, and pushing back to be true to our own stories and our own values, then we can start to change the systems to be more open to working for us. It takes many of us together, continually pushing and continually raising questions to make a difference in our community.”*

~ Miguel Guajardo, Co-founder, Llano Grande Center

## **GETTING STARTED**

Gracious Space is simple, but not necessarily easy to practice consistently.

Filled with a sense of urgency, many groups jump into action, without taking the time to know each other's stories, to understand the hurts of the past, or to identify what kinds of processes bring out the best in each other. They do not take time to consider the different meanings of words that everyone uses. We have learned that rushing past this foundation-building work is a costly mistake.

Here are some simple ways of engaging Gracious Space in meetings:

### **START IN A GOOD WAY**

Take time for everyone to become present in their spirit, and the spirit of Gracious Space, and to open to learning in public.

Examples of quick methods include:

- Take 3 deep breathes together before starting. Neurologically, this causes the brain to let go of stress and become calmer.
- Check in with a question such as, “What energy are you bringing into this meeting?” or, “What is your intention for what you want to bring to this conversation?”

If you are preparing for a difficult conversation, it is worth spending time to create a good environment to make sure that the conversation will advance the work:

- Invite people to name what is most important to them about the issue as the first step.
- Begin with a written reflection to allow people to prepare to share their key hopes and concerns.

#### **ASK QUESTIONS THAT OPEN UP POSSIBILITIES BEFORE GETTING TO SOLUTIONS**

Compelling questions can shift a conversation from one that drains spirit to one that opens people up and generates new ideas. While there is much to be said about constructing compelling questions within a specific context, these are a few general examples that work with inviting the stranger and learning in public:

- What boundaries need to be crossed for this to move to the next level?
- What are we doing that is undermining what we want to accomplish?
- What do we need to let go of to make room for something new?
- What is so important that it must exist in some way for this effort to succeed?

#### **MAKE ROOM FOR STORYTELLING**

When dealing only with ideas and opinions, it can become very easy to move into judgment. However, in telling stories that share experience, there is generally less judgment because the truth is in the story itself. Making time for participants to share how they have become the people they are, why they care about a particular issue, or what their experience has been with that issue will open up understanding and spark deeper connectivity. This is an easy way to invite the stranger.

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#### **TAKE TIME FOR SHARING REFLECTION**

Moving through agenda items and tasks can reflect a sense of urgency and a belief in the insufficiency of time. Focusing on setting can substantially alter the sense of time and positively



influence how it is used. Creating time for reflection—even a few minutes—invites people to move from the dance floor to the balcony. It is from the balcony that people begin to reflect more on themselves in the context of the group and on the work itself, as they more clearly see what the group is doing and what is and is not working. This increases the ability to learn in public.

### **CLOSE IN A GOOD WAY**

In closing a meeting, have a check-out round so that no one has to imagine what others are feeling. This will bring a good spirit as people exit or a good set of questions for the next meeting. Examples of check out questions are:

- What one word, phrase, or sentence describes your experience of this meeting?
- What are you taking away as a result of this conversation?

### **CONCLUSION**

The core work of collective leadership involves developing relationships that allow people to be their best as individuals and as members of the group, and to engage the partners that will advance the change work. Many change processes focus on how others need to change in order for the community to be better served. One great benefit of Gracious Space is that it invites people to look at themselves, others, and the collective in dynamic new ways. Gracious Space encourages people to shift relationships with others by first living into how they want the community to be together. In this effort, people become more alive, present and joyful with each other. From these types of connections and relationships, transformative change can and does emerge.

*—This paper was written by Karma Ruder of the Center for Ethical Leadership.*

### **RESOURCES:**

Hughes, Patricia M., (2004) *Gracious Space: A Practical Guide for Working Together Better*, Center for Ethical Leadership

**For more information on Gracious Space, KLCC and collective leadership, contact the Center for Ethical Leadership at: [center@ethicalleadership.org](mailto:center@ethicalleadership.org) or 206-328-3020. Also visit our Web site at [www.ethicalleadership.org](http://www.ethicalleadership.org)**