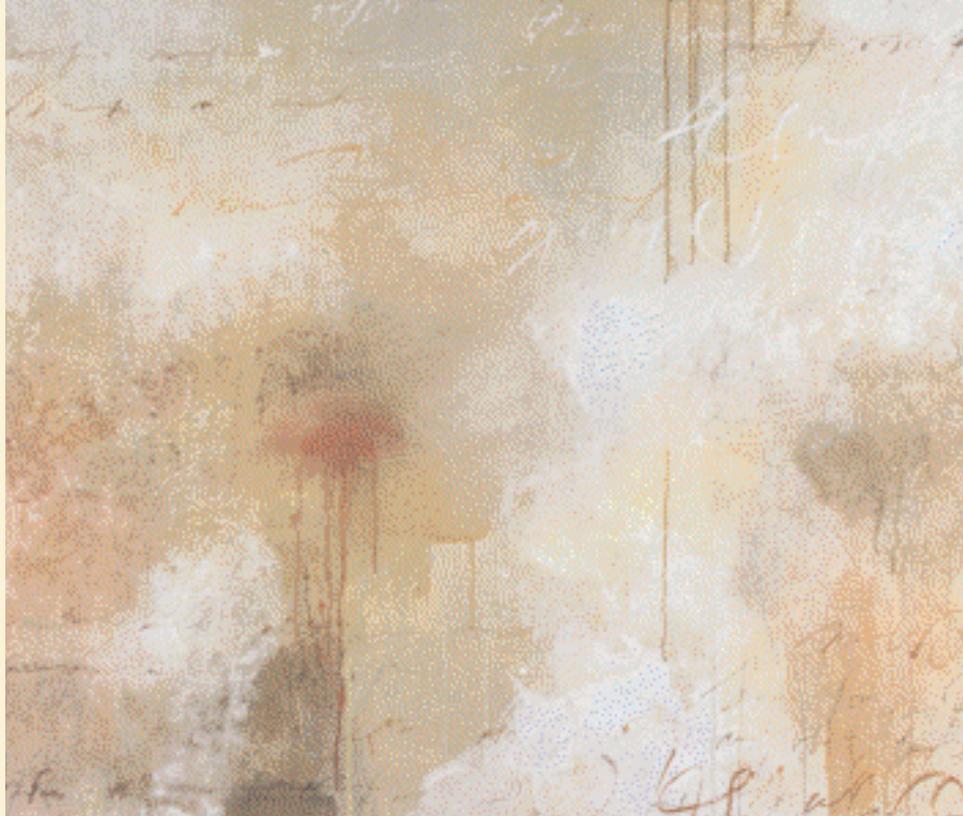


might we not hear . . . a call, like ours,
needing to be answered . . .
and call back across the darkness
of the valley of not-knowing
the only word tongues shape
without intercession,
yes . . . yes . . .

— GALWAY KINNELL



SUSAN McDOUGALL CARMACK

THE FREEDOM OF YES

I n s t i t u t i o n a l C h o i c e

R O B L E H M A N

Choice is not only an individual option. Organizational choices can have far reaching consequences. Rob Lehman, Board Chair of the Fetzer Institute, tells how this particular organization chose to build its own “community of freedom.” (The Fetzer Institute and IONS have been strategic partners joined in common work for many years.)

When speaking of human choice we assume an underlying freedom that gives an individual the power to say yes or no. Moreover, we hope that those decisions arise from a deeper conscious self. Choices that are not made out of our true identity will inevitably lead us astray. We all experience this in our personal lives, and I believe it is true in our organizational life as well.

The Fetzer Institute’s recent decision to revise its mis-

sion to focus on the transformative power of love and forgiveness arose from just such an effort to understand our organization’s true identity. The search began with the organizational philosophy given to us by our founder, John E. Fetzer.

At his last board of trustees meeting, held just a few days before his death, John Fetzer presented his hopes for how the institute would choose its mission and purpose over what he expected would be its long and productive life. During his ninth decade, John Fetzer had sold his substantial business holdings, including the Detroit Tigers, and transferred these assets to the foundation that became the Fetzer Institute. He understood the creation of the foundation to be part of a spiritual evolution that would help lead humanity toward a greater realization of wholeness, freedom, and love. He believed this ancient movement was approaching a critical juncture during the twenty-first century. He saw the Fetzer Institute as part of this much

larger movement of spirit. With others around the world, we participated in what Wink Franklin, a Fetzer Institute trustee, once called the common work. While this was his long-term vision for the institute, John realized that the more specific manifestation of purpose would change from time to time as the circumstances of society changed. Looking back over my nearly fifteen years with Fetzer, one paragraph from John's farewell talk has been the unseen but ever-present gravitational center pulling us back whenever organizational choices seem to be moving off course:

"I'm sure that as you listen, you will hear the ring of truth, first and foremost trying to create a community of freedom. . . . It is here you will find the answer to the final definition of the Institute's purpose. . . . Remember whatever the final verdict will be, its summary will be unconditional love."

Focusing on the creation of a "community of freedom" was by itself an awesome task, and building community before defining purpose struck me at the time as standing conventional organizational wisdom on its head: The traditional form-follows-function approach is to first choose a mission and then design organizational forms that best carry out the mission. John Fetzer was suggesting something different—a priority of community: Create "a community of freedom," and then "listen for the ring of truth." He was suggesting that a community, as an entity, could open itself to guidance. In such a community, the center of creative consciousness shifts from individuals to the community itself. Choice-making becomes a relationship-centered listening

that transcends our separateness as human beings to what may be experienced as a communal being. Authentic human relationships are vessels through which the creative energy of spirit nourishes and guides the community.

This was the background several years ago, when the Fetzer Institute began to revisit its purpose and mission. During the first period of the institute's life, the mission had focused on helping to broaden and deepen the healthcare system by integrating the psychosocial and spiritual dimensions of life into medical research and practice. Working with IONS and others, much had been accomplished that shifted the definition of mainstream healthcare. As a relatively young organization, we had experienced a deeper cultural trend expressed in the wide public interest in integral health: a grassroots movement founded on the realization that mind and spirit are not separate from the body. A person's inner life did indeed affect their outer life. From this same awareness, we began to ask, what are the implications of this experience of wholeness beyond the individual, in the social realm?

We believed community dialogue to be the medium that would allow us to know our deepest center. At its best, dialogue frees us from the illusions and fears that separate us so that we discover the truth that reveals we are one. Thus, the Fetzer Institute undertook a series of retreats for our trustees, staff, and advisors. The central question we asked was: Who are we as an institution, and where does the truth of who we are meet the truth of our culture? Where does our story intersect with the story of our culture? At this intersection, we could possibly discover "the common work."

In this exploration, we first became acutely aware that we are part of a culture operating out of a story of fear. The modern lineage of fear and violence is well known. The last century was the most violent of all human history. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan recently said that the current state of the world—characterized by war, disease, poverty, and ecological destruction—is the worst in his many years of service at the UN. We do not have to look far to see that history has been an ongoing struggle between fear and love. While fear and violence can be seen as the dominant story in our culture, when we look more closely, we recognize another story, the experience of love and forgiveness deeply rooted in most people's lives.

It would seem then that the Fetzer Institute, along with our culture, finds itself at a critical juncture. To which story—the story of love or the story of fear—do we belong?

The Fetzer Institute's mission, to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness, rests on its conviction that efforts to address the critical issues facing the world must go beyond political, social, and economic strategies to the psychological and spiritual roots of these issues. Current work includes research and education programs on altruistic love, compassionate love, and forgiveness; recovering the "heart" of various professions, including teaching, philanthropy, law, and medicine; and exploring the nature of forgiveness, compassion, and love.

To which lineage do we as an institution turn to in our future? The reality, of course, is that we, all of us, are part of both stories! It is abundantly clear to me from lessons learned in the painful growth of our own community that the larger story of wholeness calls on us to recognize that everything we see in others—good and bad, beauty and ugliness, love and fear—is alive within our own communities. In seeing the whole in each of us, we begin to find our true identity and so, discover our real work. The illusion of separateness is the dominant gene of the false self. The question is, “Will we contribute to a culture of separateness that gives rise to the fear and anxiety that are primary sources of destructive human behavior, or will we work to foster the power of love, bridging the chasms that separate one human from another?” To contribute to a culture of wholeness, our efforts to address critical issues facing society must go beyond the political, social, and economic strategies, to the psychological and spiritual roots of these issues.

We find ourselves aligning with those forces in our culture that support what Václav Havel called, “a revolution in the sphere of human consciousness.” For the Fetzer community this revolution is grounded in a deepening consciousness of wholeness that leads to an expansion of love. We proceed from the fundamental assumption that, in reality, we are not separate from each other, from nature, or spirit. Our inner and outer lives are inextricably related. Humanity’s unfathomed capacity to love waits, deep in our hearts, to be liberated as we become aware of this wholeness.

Listening together for “the ring of truth,” we hear one imperative question calling the world community and our small institution, at this time and place in history: How can our culture draw upon its scientific, educational, and religious resources to free the powers of love and forgiveness residing in every human being?

Erich Fromm once defined love, in its many forms, as “the active power that breaks through the walls that separate one human from another and unites us with one another.” Yet, love in our culture is too often equated with weakness, compromise, and lack of conviction. Most institutions deny or ignore the viability, importance, and pragmatic value of love and forgiveness in organizational life. Fetzer Institute is exploring ways to go beyond these prevalent viewpoints. We hope to foster the awareness of the power of love and forgiveness as transformative forces in the lives of individuals, institutions, and communities.

There exist in the world today, as there have always been, networks of fear and networks of love. The freedom of yes is to choose to see all of humanity in each other, and in this way, to reveal the common work of loving.

Looking back at the process that led to an articulation of Fetzer’s new mission, I would say the most important thing we affirmed as a community was that the world will not be transformed through human agency alone. Any organization that aspires to a spiritually noble purpose must take itself out of the center and in its place put spirit¹. This is difficult for even a religious organization, but for a secular institution, without an affiliation with a particular religious tradition, it is especially challenging. We realized that we can neither fully understand nor adequately describe spirit. Yet, we believed spirit to be the profound and fresh center from which our true identity and mission would emerge. True transformation of self or society arises from an awakening and service to spirit.

With spirit at the core, therefore, the question of choice moves beyond the power to say yes or no. It is not so much about the analysis of positives and negatives, but more like the turning of the sunflower to the sun. In the mysterious words of the great eleventh century monk, St Anselm, “true freedom is not the capacity to say yes or no, but rather the capacity to say only yes.”

ENDNOTE

1 For a long time, we tried to avoid even the attempt to make a statement about “spirit,” but in the end, through a community process, we came up with the following:

We are acutely aware that our inquiry to know spirit is incomplete and everlasting, and that we can neither fully understand nor adequately describe spirit. We offer the following description not to be definitive, but to encourage further exploration and discourse.

By spirit we mean the universal spirit that is the deepest and most inclusive ground of being. Spirit is the source of all that exists. Spirit is the infinite, creative energy that gives birth to the universe. Spirit is the common source of the world’s faith traditions. Spirit is the love that creates and sustains life.



ROB LEHMAN chairs the board of the Fetzer Institute, where he served as president from 1989 to 2000. He also chairs the Fetzer Memorial Trust and is a trustee of the Thomas Merton Foundation, and the International Institute of Sustained Dialogue. He holds degrees in law

and theology.

