

Us PLUS Them

by Steve Eulberg

Whenever we gather the membership of our local, Local 1000, I am awakened, encouraged and come away filled with renewed hope. This time I also came away with an important question that came to the surface in our Visioning Process: “How do we influence the larger conversation in our wider communities to include and reflect our vision?”

Jay Ungar and Molly Mason pointed us in an important direction when they told us the remarkable story of the Ashokan Center. The Ashokan Center had been the site of music and dance camps for several years and it was at the end of one of these that Jay composed the now-famous tune Ashokan Farewell.

Situated as it is, below the Ashokan Reservoir, this camp stood below the dam, along the periodic water release path that helps the system work for its New York City customers. (Hundreds of millions of gallons of water a day flow at different times throughout the year.) Their location created a conflict situation that Jay said was only resolved by patient and constant attention and relationship building.

At first they were offered a modest settlement to leave the camp and rebuild it elsewhere. However this amount was inadequate for keeping the programs alive. “For two years we had weekly, face-to-face meetings where what we did was keep focus on what we had in common,” Jay remembers. “We didn’t have power, we didn’t have money, but we had our commitment to find a way to make this work for everyone. ... We started with a small

amount in common and worked to grow the part upon which we could all agree.”

The end result was the creation of something that is simply amazing:

In 2008, an historic and forward-looking partnership was established between the Open Space Institute, New York City Department of Environmental Protection and the Ashokan Foundation that transferred the 374-acre Ashokan Field Campus, its programs and its facilities from SUNY New Paltz to the Ashokan Foundation, a New York State 501(c)3 not-for-profit. This partnership resulted in the construction of a brand-new campus that is located above the watershed, is composed of sustainably-designed buildings and is host to year-round environmental education for the children of New York, as well as hosting the music and dance camps for which it has come to be known.

Vi Wickam, my fiddling buddy in Fiddle Whamiddle, joined Local 1000 this past year and this gathering was the first event that he attended with other members. With fresh eyes and the perspective of another generation (read “younger”), he commented in our small visioning group: “I don’t think that the Us vs. Them traditional adversarial posture of unions is useful at this time.”

When we asked him what he meant, he mentioned the sociological theory of the pendulum swing between extreme-Me to extreme-We postures that is a cogent explanation of the context in which we find ourselves. (*Pendulum* by Roy H Williams and Michael Drew)

At the current time, according to this theory, our culture is moving toward an extreme We posture. In this context

people tend to define themselves as much by what they are against as by what they are for.

Ironically in the extreme end of a We cycle, there is an even stronger tendency for people to become polarized and divided.

If a union is about creating unity, then division is what a union really needs to be against.

Instead of defining ourselves primarily by “who” we are against, we can be more effective in building our local by defining ourselves based on the principles we are for; defining ourselves “in the midst” or “in the context” of the web of relationships to which we all belong.

That raises this question: “How do we be true to our values but still speak accurately and effectively to the broader culture when what we say will be heard with very different ears because of the context?”

We concluded that, when faced with conflict and potential division, instead of talking only about “Us vs. Them” we need to be talking about “Us + Them”.

How do we exhibit our commitment to fight everything that tries to divide Us from Them? How do we strengthen those relationships, venues, and institutions that are working to bridge every divide? How can we remind ourselves that our opponents are not the people, but the forces and ideas that try to separate people from each other? Pete Seeger had a deft way of not letting himself be pinned to the categories of the questions which sought to bait him, always reaching deeper to the common humanity and unseen common sense that is the fuel of that hope.

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