

Self-healing, the Search for Community and Why I Left Subud

by Anna Tomas

Introduction

The following piece is something I wrote to present to a forum at the 2008 Australian National Gathering when David Week was Australia's National Chair. At the time, I was about to step down from being our local Group Chair. Within Subud I have also been a helper and Susila Dharma representative for Australia. When I wrote this, I had been a Subud member for about twenty-six years.

I have since left Subud and no longer attend group latihan. For a while I continued to do latihan with a couple of close Subud friends, but this has now ceased. I simply do not feel the need or drive anymore to experience the latihan with others. I do, however, believe that I experience something similar both in my daily life and also in some of my therapeutic sessions. I like to refer to this as 'contact with grace or the sacred'. Some of the background to my decision to leave Subud is provided in this 2008 talk. It's now 2010; I am still involved in group sessions with my counsellor and I also now practice as a psychologist myself. I am happily married to my husband, who attends a men's group with the same counsellor.

On Leaving Subud

I'd like to share with you my thoughts on why think I might indeed be leaving Subud. Paradoxically, I could attribute my journey down this path to the latihan. Let me relate how. I know that it was through my experiences of the latihan that both my husband Gregory and I felt compelled to move two and a half years ago to this area. Little did we know what an amazing journey we were embarking upon. It started with a marital separation. After twenty-two years of really trying, we both had had enough. This led us both to counselling. As you can imagine it was a very difficult thing to do and we were both desperately unhappy. Initially Gregory attended and I remember returning from a two week work trip and being quite astounded at how much Gregory appeared to have changed in such a short time. Change is not quite the right word — he was more content and less agitated. Seeing Gregory literally transform before my eyes, I knew I had to get some of what he was having. And so I discovered psychotherapy and, as I only recently learnt, I discovered what M. Scott Peck refers to as the 'road less travelled'. It is such an apt description.

Psychotherapy is not easy: it requires honesty, commitment and a willingness to really see ourselves — all that makes us, warts and all. Through this process Gregory and I both experienced healing in ourselves that we never would have thought possible. How can this happen? It is because humans have a natural tendency to be whole and to seek healthiness. But this natural tendency can only be nurtured in an environment that is safe. That is, where we are really listened to, really seen and received, where we are not judged. This is what psychotherapists do. I think I have got a pretty good one and I feel truly blessed. I see this process of healing as sacred and lifelong. Once you have a taste of being healed, it is addictive — despite also being difficult and challenging at times. Through my healing, my experience of the latihan is now deeper and broader than ever. It seems that healing the emotional and psychological aspects of my being has also had a positive impact on my spiritual growth.

I also attend a group session with five other people every three weeks which is facilitated by the psychotherapist. The presence of others is incredibly evocative and

seems to facilitate the process of healing. In that process we are certainly touched by something sacred, and I believe we are experiencing communion — the true essence of community. This happens because we feel safe — we can be vulnerable and therefore open. Our normal defences that protect our vulnerability are down. People respond to vulnerability; it is something common to humanity and it is essential for real personal growth. I have many dear friends in Subud, but there are very few that I feel connected to in the way that happens when I meet with my fellow travellers at every group session. This is what I miss in Subud. I miss the safety where I am free to be me — where people are not trying to heal, change or fix me, but simply allowing me to be myself. We try to be a community but we do not have the right ingredients that could enable us to experience true community.

Community is multifaceted and all these facets are interconnected. Community is more than the sum of these facets, making it difficult to define or describe. But we can identify three salient characteristics of a true community according to M. Scott Peck. Inclusivity, Commitment and Consensus.

Inclusivity is vital to community. Without it we do not have a real community. In such a community, human differences are not ignored, hidden, denied or changed, but celebrated as gifts. For this to happen, the willingness or commitment to coexist, despite our differences, is crucial. By transcending (not ignoring) differences, a real community is able to achieve consensus. Instead of the majority ruling, leaving a disaffected minority, a true community can make a decision by incorporating all differences — but this takes the commitment to coexist. For the large part, I do not see this operating very often in Subud — it does happen, but not very often.

Peck also talks about how self-examination is critical for community — both on an individual level and at a group level. Peck suggests that we need to continually ask: 'How are we going?' 'Are we on target?' 'Are we healthy?' 'Have we lost the spirit?' This is because once the spirit of community is achieved, it is not then something forever obtained — no community can expect to be in perpetual good health — but what a true community does is recognize ill health and quickly take appropriate action to heal itself.

What I see more of in our Subud community is dogma and people operating on a set of rigid beliefs — doing things because 'Bapak or Ibu said', or hiding from their fears and, instead of taking responsibility for their actions, people doing things because 'God told me to'. I see people using the latihan, mostly unconsciously, to push their agenda, to justify their thoughts, to suit their own means. I understand why this can happen — it's usually because we might not like what we see and most of us don't know how to handle such situations. We go into shame and this in turn triggers our defences. There are a lot of 'shoulds' and rules in Subud — Lilliana Gibbs has written very eloquently on this. For example, we should do what Bapak has said, we should go to latihan twice a week, we should test, we should have a group chair and all the Wings, we should not eat pork, we should not drink alcohol.... Some of these 'shoulds' are old — but no doubt they have been replaced by new 'shoulds'. I also see an organisation that is scared of change, that won't examine itself. The current National Committee seems to be an exception and unfortunately is encountering considerable resistance from many parts of the organisation. But I can't see us reaching true community until all who are members are willing to explore this. With our current attitudes and structures, it seems almost unachievable. We tend to avoid conflict; we really try to be nice to each other (but that means we are not always honest). All of these features of our organization are indicative of what Peck calls the stage of pseudo-community.

Sometimes we display features of the next stage — Chaos; this is marked by unhealthy and unconstructive squabbling. A typical remark heard by members in this

stage of community is, 'This wouldn't happen if we had effective leadership.' But, according to Peck, another aspect crucial to achieving true community is total decentralization of authority; so we can't blame our 'leaders' — we must look at ourselves. A true community is a group of leaders, i.e. every member is a leader whose input is valued and considered by others. I don't have time to talk about how to achieve true community — it's all in Peck's book. We could learn a lot from it if that is what we want — if we want community; some members may not.

I want to continue with my latihan. This allows me to experience my own personal relationship with God — and, along with my psychotherapy, it is part of the process that allows me to be free and to become whole. But as humans we are also defined by others: we need company, we need community. I am also seeking this and I don't really experience this in the Subud community. I recently flagged my retirement as local Group Chair — this will happen after the weekend. I'm also withdrawing from other roles I have, such as SICA. So right now, I don't know how all this will pan out. I just know I am on this path and need to stay true to myself on this journey.

Footnote:

I'd just like to add that my intention in writing this article was not to offend or criticise anyone. I wanted to share my experiences and insight at a time when Subud seemed to be in decline with the hope that my experiences might assist the organisation in understanding why some people might leave.