**Learning Together: Reaching Out/An Outward Focus**

As human beings, it seems like we inhabit a space between the two extremes of an inward focus and an outward focus; or, to put in different words, between the settler and the traveller, or between the homebody and the adventurer. I think we move between these extremes, both in our day to day experience and over the course of our lives. We may be in a stage of life, stretching over a number of years, in which we’re restless or settled; similarly, within a single day, a week or a month we might feel the itch for the new or the urge for the safe and familiar. I think we need both; one wise writer, reflecting on the course of his life and the shape of the world, suggested that everything, every activity, every action is beautiful in its appropriate setting of time and place. Maybe that’s true of both an inward and outward focus.

But I find it interesting that an outward focus was suggested as an important guiding principle by some of us at the Poatina Weekend whilst an inward focus wasn’t! Now, that may be because we spent a fair bit of time on the Poatina Weekend talking about our own life together as a village and our concerns. But I wonder if it also reflects something of the social setting in which we live. Within our village there is, I would suggest, a natural pull towards the inward focus, to the people, things and events that are ‘front and centre’ in our field of physical and psychological vision. Mind you, I think for many of us our coming to live in the Village was in response to the whiff of adventure, and the vision of a new stage in our life’s journey, or a new way of doing life.

This oscillation between the inward and the outward is reflected in our human make up, I suggest. Some of us are more extrovert than others; some are more introverted; but wherever we lie on that continuum, we all move between those inward and outward poles within the course of a day, week, month and year. But even the most introverted of us would acknowledge that an essential part of our human nature is that we are social beings; we like the safety of the herd and we need the company of others. We acknowledge that loneliness has a negative effect on our physical and spiritual health as well as our mental health. In fact, the cruellest thing we can do to someone is to isolate them. We see it in our school playgrounds and neighbourhoods, and it’s a form of punishment that lies behind our prison system and the place of solitary confinement within prison walls for those who break prison rules. In Port Arthur, isolated human beings lost their sanity and reason; they became dehumanized.

So we need an outward focus for our physical, emotional, social, psychological and spiritual health. For although by nature we are gregarious beings it seems as if our default position is self-absorption. Although we thrive when we are part of a group working together we aren’t naturally co-operative and from our earliest days we need to be taught how to consider others. The person who isn’t able to look outside him or herself isn’t a healthy human being, and I would suggest the same applies to families, churches and social groups.

The image of a stagnant pool is often used in this context. Without both an inflow and outflow of water, a pool quickly becomes stagnant and eventually dries up; the Dead Sea on the border between Israel and Jordan has such high levels of salinity that it cannot support the normal life forms found in fresh water lakes because it has no outlet.

Psychologists (e.g. [*https://socialanxietyinstitute.org/focus-externally*](https://socialanxietyinstitute.org/focus-externally)*.)* suggest that an outward focus is a good way to combat anxiety. Viktor Frankl, Elie Wiesel, ‘Weary’ Dunlop and others who have recounted their experience in the death camps of the Second World War recognised the importance of an outward focus in their survival. And the life ethic of most of the religions of the world can be summed up in what’s often called *The Golden Rule “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”*.* Implicit in this ‘rule’ isa focus on the other, although it requires healthy introspection to be practiced.

So how do we overcome the natural tendency to shrink our world to the size of the picture we have of ourselves and to be concerned with only those things and people that have an impact on me? How do we as a community foster a focus on the world around us and not just what concerns us. My guess is that if each of us were active and committed members of a church and/or social/recreational group outside of the village that had an external focus themselves, that that would be a good start. But we probably also need to cultivate an outward emotional and psychological focus that wonders about the source of other people’s behaviour rather than just responding from the way that behaviour affects me.

Mark W. King founded an organization called *Outward Focus* because of his belief that *individuals and organizations that focus on serving others first, will be wildly successful themselves.* He describes in his blog the scene in a commuter train in the United States, carrying weary ‘regulars’ home after work one day. Perhaps it gives us an example to follow as we seek an outward focus…

Regulars on this particular route had their routines clearly defined.  Some would rest.  Others would relax with their favorite beverage.  Still, others would read their books or the day’s paper.  A few stops in, a young father boarded the subway with his four small children.  They all settled into their seats as the train pulled away.  This, however, did not last long.  The kids began to fuss and fight as kids often do.  The tension in the regulars began to rise.  Soon the kids were running up and down the car with the regulars looking on with disdain upon this unruly bunch.  Things hit a climax however when the kids began pulling books, newspapers and other items out of the regulars’ hands as they ran.  This was simply too much.  One “regular” who gripped his paper ever so tightly, turned to face this father whose disrespectful children were disrupting an entire car of hard-working, tired commuters.  “Sir, I would ask you to please control your children!”  The man looked up and spoke a weak apology.  “I’m sorry.  Kids, come here.”  As he gathered his brood, he went further with this.  “I do apologize.  We’ve just left the hospital where their mother died and we don’t know what to do.”  With that, the “regular’s” heart broke and he was filled with overwhelming compassion for this young father and his children.  He was now the one apologizing and gathered the children around him and began to tell them stories and fairy tales for the remainder of their journey. <http://outwardfocus.com/>

Questions for discussion over the back fence or in the workplace:

1. Where might you be most often found on the extrovert/introvert continuum?
2. At the moment, are you more of a settler or an adventurer?
3. What daily practices might help me cultivate an outward focus?
4. How might we as a village strengthen our outward focus?

### Bruce Dutton, January 2019