

A Word from Mack

A ludicrous philosophy will not work

I had the strangest thought the other day. I thought, “What would it be like to try and grow a tree from the top down?” I am looking out of the window of my study in Shreveport at the two huge trees in our front yard. I can’t even see the tip-top tip of the highest leaf. But imagine starting right there and then growing the tree downward all the way to the very end of the deepest root. I tried to do just that in as much detail as possible in my mind.

Beginning with a high point in the air, I started to grow my first leaf downward. Things came to me that have not even entered my brain since my freshman biology class in college. I thought of stomates and cellular osmosis. How do you build a tiny pocket that can make and hold the chlorophyll so that it can combine with sunlight in the miracle of photosynthesis mixing carbon dioxide and water together and thus self-manufacturing energy for the whole system we call a “tree?” While at the same time giving us oxygen? I obviously skipped over the details and moved on because it hurt my head to try to grasp this stuff.

Now in growing the tree top down, I had not even progressed past the beginning of the leaf and I was already in trouble. Think of all of the leaves and then all of the limbs and then the trunk and the bark and that xylem and phloem going on throughout the whole. (By golly, it’s all coming back!) Think of the roots we must grow out to the very end. And now think of having to grow the entire tree while it is suspended in midair as you grow downward!

Of course, this thought of growing a tree from the top down is not just impossible, it is ludicrous squared. But that is precisely that point I want to share with you! We keep thinking that we can grow our society and our cities and our communities and our neighborhoods and our people from the top down! How ludicrous. Thank goodness that it is from tiny acorns that mighty oaks do grow.

In 1981, sitting in another study far from Shreveport, I read the words of the matchless historian Arnold Toynbee as he sought to define society. “Society,” Toynbee wrote, “is a system of relationships.” I can remember it like it was yesterday. I remember saying out loud, “If society really is a system of relationships, then we can heal our society and our wounded world.” And now, after 33 years of digesting that simple sentence of Toynbee and the last 20 years of actualizing a process and a model that can systematically start, grow, and sustain safe and caring community with measurable results, I know it is true: “Society is a system of positive relationships.”

Growing cannot be legislated. We all know that it starts with a vital seed, planted in fertile soil, and then nourished with water and sunlight. And for human beings, we must start with a person, bring them into a loving relationship, then place that relationship within an intentionally caring community and all the while nourishing those nurturing conditions which

bring an exponential reproduction of wondrously growing human beings who are becoming ever more whole. And when we replicate that process over and over, then we experience the miracle of growth from the tiniest molecule, a loving relationship of two people in friendship, to the transformation of the entire landscape of life around us. Cities can be changed.

Our team at CRI has a motto. It is simply, “We must be the kind of community that we are seeking the world to become.” If we do not get this seed right, then the tree cannot be right, and if the tree is not right, then the fruit will be more than a nightmare.

We cannot fast forward growth, but we can create the best conditions where growth is optimized. And now, this year, as we all celebrate together twenty years of planting the seeds, and tending the soil, we are shouting with joy at the harvest. The landscape is transformed. No wonder Joyce Kilmer, the poet, sang out, “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree.”

God bless you all as we grow from the soil to the sky!