



## What is Our Role in a Social Connectedness Movement?

Paddy C. Favazza, Ed.D.

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Overcoming Isolation and Deepening Social Connectedness  
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As the days have unfolded here, and people talked of the multiple ways in which social isolation is manifested, it called to mind those in my immediate family, extended family and my community family - people I consider family - who have experienced exclusion and isolation related to one or more of these very human challenges: the impact of mental illness, disability, poverty, racism, struggles with gender identity, rape, abuse, neglect and institutionalization. I was a bit surprised that I could name someone who had experienced each of these human challenges. Clearly, it must be acknowledged, the universality of our shared social isolation. Beyond this realization, the symposium conversations stirred several observations

So, what have I gleaned from a front row seat at this symposium, from my front row seat in the lives of my children, from a front row seat observing the hundreds, maybe thousands of children I have seen in Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Romania, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela, Greece, Cyprus, South Africa, yes, even in the United States? How do we move them and ourselves forward – beyond this moment? How do we impact change? I have written a few reflections, that I would like to share. I am deeply touched by the insights and wisdom that has been shared over the last few days and humbly offer these observations.

First, there is so much to be gained from my elders and yours, from the land and the animals that inhabit it, from the aborigines of all lands, from the communal tribes of Africa, from the close-knit communities and cultures around the world that some have the good fortune to experience community. The first day we were at the symposium, I told John, my father and mother used to say, every time when we left the house, “Remember who you are.” They were not worried that I would forget my name or might lose our way home. They wanted to remind me and my siblings to stay grounded in the way we were raised and nurtured in that close first community we call family. They wanted me to remember the values that they were passing on to me, the lessons we all had to learn in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. We have so much to learn from all of our separate but same journeys.

Second, there is much to be learned from other countries, other cultures, from the knowledge and research that we already possess and, previous social inclusion movements. For example, in many African countries, the child with a disability and their family is isolated and shunned from their community and often, within their own family. And yet, in many of these same settings, the spirit of Ubuntu is embraced. Ubuntu describes an African worldview that a person can only find fulfillment through interacting with other people. Thus Ubuntu represents a spirit of kinship,

which unites humankind to a common purpose. "*Ubuntu implies that 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours'. (Tutu, 2000)*. Some say, Ubuntu is "*about living as one family, with an understanding that I am because we are.*" Indeed, there is certain self-assurance in knowing that we are all interconnected, belonging to a greater whole. Some would say Ubuntu is the essence of being human, for you cannot fully exist as a human being in isolation. It is not a new concept – nor is it one that is easily seen in the Western world or in more affluent parts of the world where it is more difficult to readily see our interdependence. But, because of this deep-rooted spirit of Ubuntu, the potential for a social inclusion movement in African cultures may find fertile ground in which to grow, in a place where the fulfillment of human potential is deeply rooted within a communal culture, where children are intimately tied to their families, their local community and wider society in which they live. In this special place, where a child with disabilities and their family are acutely isolated, Ubuntu may provide a passageway towards inclusion. They have so much to teach us, like those of the First Nations of Canada, and other communal cultures around the globe.

Third, I was struck by the fact that what we are talking about is a movement to build and to deepen social connectedness. But, no one has called it a movement. What is a movement? Have you ever spent time observing a movement; being in a movement? Thinking about what made it succeed? What made it fail? Perhaps we should be looking at aspects of previous social movements and determining if we can use such esteemed words with full understanding and a realistic view of our capacity to fulfill the promise of what it means. What does the word *movement* mean and what can be learned from earlier movements (the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Apartheid Movement) to illuminate the small and large steps taken that contributed to personal paradigmatic shifts, attitudinal shift and social change.

*A movement is a powerful expression, which connotes an intense and intentional forward momentum designed to impact the deepest aspect of whoever or whatever it encounters. It is not a term used lightly or without a comprehensive and enduring commitment. A movement possesses clear intentions of turning a perceived ideal, pregnant with action ideas, into a new reality which will ultimately reshape the internal and external landscapes of millions of people.*

There are many movements that come to mind such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Indian Independence Movement, the current Anti-Bullying Movement, and so on. Each of you could name movements within your own corner of the globe. And each of these movements would share a common vision, a desire for social change.

And, we have many visionaries who showed us a way, Nelson Mandela, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Sojourner Truth, Gandhi, Harvey Milk, Cesar Chavez, Eunice Kennedy Shriver and many more from your own community and country who had a desire for change. Surely, Eunice Shriver was driven by a similar vision. Like many other visionaries, she could see the less than ideal life and envision the ideal. She could imagine another place, far ahead of us. She undertook this vision within an unbending and rigid cultural context of segregation, exclusion and social isolation. In that context, life was very prescribed as each individual's present and future life was pre-determined by virtue of gender, race, socio-economic status (SES) and, disability. Each of these labels confined and defined human potential by pre-set parameters. Every aspect of life had limiting realities if, by chance, you were born with a disability, born the "wrong race", born a girl, or born into poverty. But, in the context of that very segregated world, she could imagine a different landscape; she could envision taking children with disabilities and their families to another place, a more inclusive place participating as a *part* of the world, not *apart* from the world. It was a place many could not yet imagine. It was a vision about social change.

*When a child becomes a part Young Athletes (fill it in with your program), change seeps into every aspect of their development, ushering him/her into adulthood, sure of his/her capacity to belong, to go to school, have a job, have a family, participate more fully in life.*

*That change comes to rest in families who develop new perspectives about the value and potential they now see in their child.*

*That change unsettles our collective conscious, demanding that we all rethink what it means to live included in, not excluded from, not isolated from all of the opportunities the world has to offer.*

- Surely, we are on the road to that more ideal place. But, is it a movement or a passing cause?
- Do we possess a comprehensive and enduring commitment to the ideal, despite all of the challenges and changing times?

- Do we fully appreciate the internal struggles that families face to be included in their family, their village or their local school, their tribe, their village, their community?
- Do we fully appreciate the extent to which external pressures restrain them?

We are reminded of another human rights movement that stirred in many, similar passions for simply wanting to belong. In an effort to be more inclusive in this moment, I ask that you close your eyes. Listen to this narrative with your heart, which sees far more than the human eye. Imagine yourself in this scene that unfolded years ago. In doing so, with closed eyes, we join our unsighted friends in seeing, hearing and sensing the world as they do every day.

*“...What drives the decision to live divided no more, with the risks it entails? How do people find the courage to bring inner conviction into harmony with the outer act, knowing when they do, that the force of the institution may come down on their heads?*

*.... The difference between the person who goes to the back of the bus and the one who decides to sit up front is probably lost in the mystery of the human heart. But in Rosa Parks and others like her, I see a clue to an answer: when you realize you can no longer collaborate in something that violates your own integrity, your understanding of punishment is suddenly transformed.*

*When the police came to Rosa Parks on the bus and informed her that they would have to put her in jail if she did not move, she replied, ‘You may do that.’ It was a very polite way of saying, ‘How could your jail begin to compare with the jail I have had myself in all these years by collaborating with this racist system?’*

*The courage to live divided no more, to face the punishment that may follow, comes from this simple insight. No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment.”\**

Like movements before, at the heart of a social connectedness movement is the notion that a people, people with disabilities (HIV/AIDS, mental illness, domestic violence, disabilities, and so on) and their families (their first community) make a decision to live divided no more.

It makes one wonder; is it like this when we bring Young Athletes (fill in your program) into places in the world where children with disabilities and their families live in the shadows,

shunned and isolated? Must mothers and fathers gather their inner strength and courage as in other movements to break out of their confines?

- *When a mom walks her previously hidden child down the street of her village in Tanzania for the first time to go to Young Athletes, it must require incredible courage as villagers stare and jeer unwelcoming comments*
- *When a mom enters the school in Kenya with her unschooled 10 year old child and sees her doing things she never thought possible, it must raise hopes that maybe one day, her child will be schooled.*
- *When a grandfather in Romania sees his grandchild participating a public group activity with university volunteers, it must expand expectations for his grandchild and raise expectations for his community.*

That is what we have seen when we bring our programs to the world, we help hope rise, we encourage courage to ignite. And then, what happens? Years from now when we look back to this moment in 2014 at this symposium on social isolation, will we be able to say, as in times past, that we had a comprehensive and enduring commitment to the ideal of social connectedness? When we revisit our memory of these moments we have shared here, will records show, that despite all of the shortages of human and monetary resources, the ideal of social connectedness prevailed and became a sustained reality? Will we look at our strategies and see the full utilization of the knowledge we possess about attitude development, about movements, about nurturing and sustainable communities, knowledge from our elders, knowledge from the land? – Will we have a strength-based ecological approach that uses our collective assets to change the course of human development? Will we use efficacious approaches influenced by echoes of other social inclusion and social connectedness movements? Change can and does happen. But it is not accidental. I'll ask you to close your eyes one more time, and imagine yourself in this narrative.

*In the Deep South, during the Civil Rights Movement, every aspect of life was made uncomfortable with the notion that anyone could be left out, deemed unequal or unfit. Our collective attitudinal psyche was intentionally inundated with the ideal of an equal and just world. Those who were moved by the movement felt the full impact of the direct experiences with people of color, people with differences; the indirect experiences as photographs and oral*

*histories circulated; the influence of social groups (our families, churches, synagogues, schools) who challenged local views as passé.*

*You could smell and feel the injustice, the sweat, the fear, just by riding a bus with people of color. You could examine closely the underlying layers of challenges when befriended by those from the other world. And you were changed by it all, clearly understanding, that if one of us is damned and diminished, all of society is damned and diminished. So, a new generation became the face of change by being a part of the conversations within families, schools and communities. And while the height of the Civil Rights Movement has long past, even today, efforts still persist because fear and ignorance prevails; prejudice and inequality still exist. Still, we invest in programs to combat exclusion and foster deeper understanding and celebration of human differences that move us further along the road to social inclusion together. We have yet to arrive at that sweeter inclusive place for people of all races, abilities, gender and social class.*

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To be a part of a movement means

- examining every aspect of the society for inroads to change;
- observing all that is still and bringing about movement;
- having your hands on the pulse of a community so as to detect small change and use it to create larger change and momentum;
- using everything (all of our assets) to change both internal and external landscapes;
- being an impetus for movement within people, within systems in ways that are culturally meaningful and responsive

Social connectedness movements need to be about multi-level change. Movements happen *within people* (the development of children, moms, dads, teachers, store clerks, bus drivers) and *within systems* (hospitals and schools who begin registering children with disabilities; universities who add the disability content and experiences to university classes for teachers, health care workers; local ministers of education who provide classrooms and teachers for children with disabilities, religious organizations who work with families, governments who have an active response to the conventions such as the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

And, of course, it requires returning over and over again, relentless in the commitment to turn a simple cause into a global movement, persistent in our efforts to understand, measure and act upon the big and small barriers after initial efforts yield tiny steps forward. It means

being collaborative in a network of partnerships with hospitals, ministries of education, university partners, policy makers, local and federal governments to ensure local ownership gives surety to the movement's forward trajectory.

Nelson Mandela provided an example of this with his words and actions. "As I walked out the door toward my freedom I knew that if I did not leave all the anger, hatred and bitterness behind I would still be in prison." He went on to use every avenue as an opportunity for impacting human and societal development with wide-spread change that included sports, music, art, education, young and old people, enemies and friends, churches, schools, imbuing in every effort, the knowledge that the fate of one is intimately tied to the fate of all. And so it is individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with mental illness, with HIV/AIDS and those who are marginalized and socially isolated by racism, abuse, neglect, poverty, and institutionalization. Anger and bitterness will paralyze and imprison all of us. Rising up and connecting to the human potential and development of one individual raises each of us; accelerates our development as a society. It is a possibility - for organizations to join together as a collaborative effort for social inclusion. But, it is just a possibility - unless each community is given careful attention and nurturance to grow a cause into a movement in ways that are salient and meaningful to them. And in doing so, they will make the Social Connectedness Movement their own.

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As in years past, we have the same moral imperative to move every aspect of our world towards the ideal of social connectedness, to "rock our world", so to speak. In doing so, we will not simply survive but thrive in harmonious and respectful coexistence. And, while the road to social connectedness and inclusion is well worn, it now has many new, smaller feet treading on it. Let's place these little ones and their families on a fresh path, with solid footing ensuring multi-level developmental impact on children, families and communities.

+Favazza, P.C. (1968). Excerpts from personal papers: White Girl Growing in the Deep South.

\* Palmer, P. (1998). "Divided no more: Teaching from a heart of hope" in *Courage to teach*. Jossey-Bass. p. 171.

Tutu, D. (2000). *No Future Without Forgiveness: A Personal Overview of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*.

## **Background on Paddy Cronin Favazza**

Paddy is a professor and research fellow at the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston with background in early childhood special education. She teaches people to work with young children with diverse abilities and their families and undertakes research and curriculum development related to inclusion and acceptance of differences and early motor development as a platform for school readiness and inclusion. Her work has primarily focused on understanding inclusion of children with diverse abilities; work that is grounded in our understanding of the attitude construct and attitude development and its implications for community attitude formation. Equally important to work experiences are her life experiences of growing up in the Deep South and Mid-South, during the Civil Rights Movement, volunteering in orphanages in Bolivia and Nicaragua and, parenting 4 children, 3 of who came from institutions in Romania.