

April 2022

Greetings Beloved Tacoma Pierce County Community,

I begin with a question: Why refer to Tacoma Pierce County as a Beloved Community?

It's obvious, to many, this is not a beloved community. To those unhoused, those experiencing physical and emotional health issues, students, parents, and educators under attack by angry folk for a variety of, often deceptive, reasons. We can agree, we are not currently living in the kind of beloved community Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. envisaged half a century ago. However, I see a parallel with the war torn, unequal, divided barely-United States of America Dr. King expressed a visionary hope for in the 1960's. Here we are again at a political inflection point with excessive political, social, and civil unrest which is often expressed in episodic violence, increased crime, distrust, and anger bordering on rage. In both era, those with different perspectives are polarized. Again, not the stuff of a beloved community. So what are the ingredients necessary for an elusive beloved community? Dr. King's expression of beloved community was a description of a vision, something that did not exist yet but could. Was his reference to a beloved community purely rhetorical, or aspirational intended only to stretch the imagination of those stuck in a no win situation? The visionaries that foretold the formation of the United States would disagree.

The definitions of the individual words give us a hint.

Webster's definition of Beloved: dearly loved : dear to the heart.

However Webster's definition is more complex for Community, but the first instance is adequate for our purposes: a unified body of individuals: Such as—the people with common interests living in a particular area.

One could argue that the combined definitions of the two words would look like this: A dearly loved unified body of individuals with common interests living in a particular area.

A famous 20th Century fast food restaurant commercial had a catch phrase; Where's the beef? Given our question, a beloved community could have the following catch phrase: Where's the love and common interests? A beloved community needs both. I will delve into how Covid stifled formation and sustainment a beloved community.

At the onset of the Covid-19 epidemic medical professionals discovered a new or novel rapidly spreading deadly virus. Scientific and medical experts agreed that first step was to limit the spread while they determine the best way to fight it. Just like all medicines and procedures, this approach had side effects. Practiced as prescribed, this necessary preventative measure had significant social and emotional side effects. Isolation impacts individual, community, and collective mental health behaviors. But the risk of the alternative, severe illness, or death, I believe was a wise choice. However, isolation stopped most normal physical and social interaction. The rapid loss of healthy social, religious, and physical interaction also interrupted many mental health and community building processes on which a beloved community depends. Thus, essential Isolation contributed to the breakdown of normal life interactions that help regulate and reset stress levels by connecting with others. In addition, the loss of public entertainment venues heightened already public anxiety.

Adding to the loss of work, education, and stress regulating activities, many attempted to fill huge daily life gaps by consuming more news. It was as if we were caught in a vortex of actions that took us out of control of our very lives. The plot thickens with essential workers being called to work under increasingly medically dangerous conditions as the numbers of Covid deaths climbed. Work and education were abruptly redefined requiring a rapid online adaptation. Life as we knew it required an online delivery system, manifesting even more stress for the technically uninitiated. The news and entertainment industries focused on our collective unease, boredom, social and economic insecurity and of course the elephant in the room, the mounting number of COVID-19 deaths. If we had them, our stress meters would have been overflowing.

Back to my question: Where was the love and the common interests during the initial phase of the pandemic?

During that phase, I believe, love began to focus, by necessity, on self and left little room for community. For many the fear of the disease and the evidence of death occurring all around increased worry. Isolation amplified the worry and increased levels of stress most were enduring while at the same time isolation was eroding community sustaining activities and rituals, such a smile or greeting for a familiar neighbor. Admittedly, isolation was a hard tradeoff for slowing the spread of Covid 19. However while we were in a fight or flight frame of mind love and community suffered.

In addition, long periods of isolation eroded normal interactions such as cordial interactions with those outside of our social comfort zones. I suspect most of us were and may still be operating in a state of hyper vigilance, one condition soldiers experience in time of war. Again, these conditions do not promote expanding interactions outside of our health conscious, mostly smaller social interaction bubbles made necessary by Covid-19.

This perfect storm of disorder in our work, education, social and entertainment placed increasing pressure on our ability to digest a vast amount of change with no guiding precedent in our lifetime. For many, isolated thoughts and observations without probative discussion and rational validation align with a ground swell of conspiracy theories repeated in the various media echo chambers. Providing a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy; If we can think it, it must be so.

So far I have discussed the impact of Covid-19 on development and sustaining a beloved community. I will continue my discussion in my May letter with a focus on another pandemic that was revealed to many at the onset of Covid-19 and continues to rage in many cities including in Tacoma. Until then consider the following:

What do you believe a beloved community could look like?

Would a beloved community enable some or all people to be successful?

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