THE ESSENCE OF INSIDE-OUT

“All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.”

(W.B. Yeats)

I have loved these words for decades. They bespeak the mystery and majesty of the human heart. And they convey, with quiet power, the experience of being turned inside- out. It is a quiet thing, something that happens in the deep places within, sometimes when we least expect. And it is a thing of power, a tectonic shift that realigns what we thought we knew – about ourselves, about one another, about the world, sometimes about life itself.

What is this thing called “Inside-Out?” On one level, it is a class – though not an ordinary one. In this class, roles are intermingled: everyone is the teacher, everyone is the learner. The process of investigation and discovery is a communal enterprise. We explore together, we grapple together, we create new knowledge together – and we challenge one another to go deeper, always deeper.

But there is more. In a most unlikely setting, Inside-Out provides a space of liberation, a place in which each person is recognized and celebrated for the unique contribution that he or she brings to the whole. In the face of the many forms of imprisonment that we bear in our lives – some internal, some external – this experience offers an intimation of freedom. In this shared space, we can be who we are, say what we know, and call forth the best in one another.

And in our wider social reality, Inside-Out is about walls – some of our own making, some made by others. Some walls are made of bricks – but all are held in place by the mortar of fear and ignorance. We fear what we don’t know – in others, in the world, in ourselves. We build walls, thinking we can keep ourselves safe from whatever we imagine is threatening us. But in this construction is our destruction.

Inside-Out moves through the walls – it is an exchange, an engagement – between and among people who live on both sides of the prison wall. It is through this exchange, realized through the crucible of dialogue, that the walls around us and within us begin to crumble. We are then brought closer to our truest nature. The words of Robert Frost are writ large: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down!” The hope is that, in time, through this exchange, these walls will become increasingly permeable and, eventually, extinct – one idea, one person, one brick at a time.

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