

## **Part One: Understanding Relationships**

### **Chapter 2: Common Ground**

*What we have in common constitutes a much  
more powerful bond than the differences we use  
against one another.*

Each one of our daily activities demands from us a skill and an effort to behave in a particular way. When we work, we are expected to carry out our obligations well and to behave in a way that is in keeping with our position. We have to treat clients in a certain way and supervisors in another. When we leave work and take the bus or train, we must behave in one way; if we speak with a stranger, we express ourselves in another.

We change the way we manifest ourselves according to a variety of different situations. We adapt so spontaneously and quickly that we think that we are always the same; we think we never change. One of the fundamental aspects of our education is precisely this: knowing how to

behave in an appropriate way in all circumstances and recognizing the difference between one situation and another. Thanks to this capacity, it is possible for us to maintain a system of relationships which is very complex but at the same time, it is not burdensome, it is not that hard to maintain.

Even so, many of us are not satisfied with the way we relate, not because it is bad, but because it is conventional. We would like to establish deeper relationships. It is obvious that we can't do this with everyone, but we wish we could at least with those who are close to us. But this is something that we don't find easy to do.

To achieve a good relationship within the framework of our daily activities, we need to exercise a lot of control over ourselves. We have to absorb annoyances and difficulties without appearing frustrated. We have to maintain a certain demeanor at work and with associates. And because we cannot release our tension, it begins to build up. What better way to release it than when we meet a friend or arrive home?

Releasing our tension rarely opens up good communications with others. On the contrary, it is often a source of misunderstanding and mutual pain. Our friend also may want to unburden his problems on us, and at home others, too, tend to release their tensions and frustrations. We cannot hope to have a good relationship with someone if we cry on his shoulder or make him the recipient of our frustrations and reactions. Our friends and family many very well expect different behavior from us.

What can we do to improve the situation and transform it into a means of communicating more deeply with one another?

We can do a lot. We can begin by observing ourselves as we relate. We can try to discover the degree to which we play a role in our relationships by

trying to manipulate or control others. We can see how we use others to release our frustrations or to get what we want. As soon as we see ourselves a little more clearly, we realize that it is not difficult to improve our relationships.

Let us begin with a very simple facet of relationship. When we are with other people, we tend to emphasize our differences--differences of opinion, customs, likes, objectives. When this happens, we usually defend our position and others defend theirs. It is but a short step from this stage to attacking others and defending ourselves. This seldom leads to a good relationship or a deep understanding. Rather, we find it is more beneficial to stress elements we have in common, what we could call "common ground." If we discover similarities, we find a common language, and through that common language a closer relationship begins, which can become as deep as we want.

Differences are relative to circumstances. Everyone undergoes different experiences. Some of our associates may be from different cultures and social stratum. Each personality was formed with its own characteristics. Even members of the same family are different from each other. But we are all human beings, we are all sensitive to pain and joy, we all have difficulties, we all yearn for happiness, and we all seek the way to unfold our possibilities.

This unites us. What we have in common constitutes a much more powerful bond than the differences we use against one another. In the end, what tends to separate us are elements of our own making which we ourselves can control and change. What unites us belongs to our human nature, to a history that is common to the whole human race and to the

possibilities all human beings have. When we remain conscious of this common ground, and when our relationship unfolds along this line, we instantaneously communicate better and find the channel by which we can understand one another deeply and permanently.