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EMPOWERED TO ACT

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It starts with the half-full cup. When we see our cup as half full, instead of half empty, we discover our gifts and strengths and assets, instead of our deficiencies or needs. Where before we thought of scarcity, we discover God's great abundance.

That's just the start. Because something amazing happens when we transform our thinking in this way. We discover new affinities with our neighbors, and we are empowered to use our own gifts by connecting them with the gifts of others. This generates new opportunities, and new assets, and so on, in an open-ended cycle of renewal and abundance.

We begin to recognize a new dynamic in faith and community. Where we had seen a fixed-sum game of "your gain is my loss," we now see an open-sum dynamic, where "my gain is your gain is our gain." We give up trying to control things, and give each other permission to follow our calls to use God's gifts. And when that happens, we experience surprising benefits beyond our narrow expectations. We feel part of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

What happens is that we face a powerful opening of opportunities. In short, we experience a form of creation. And our cup overflows.

Rural people are rightfully worried about our situation, and our future. Hard times are real in rural areas and small towns. Poverty is real. Losing a job is real. Farm and ranch consolidations are real, as are domestic violence and drug abuse. These things matter a great deal.

The more we tell ourselves how hopeless things are, the more hopeless things seem to get. We tell each other that rural areas and small towns are getting older and "dying," but that only drives young people away, and disregards the worth of our older community members. We say that, in this era of global economic competition, we are losing the war. But that doesn't create any economic opportunities.

Instead, negative, need-based thinking leads to fighting over a shrinking pie. The high-profile economic development news stories pit one community against each other, as a plant closes in one community to move to another, for example, or communities compete against each other for the location of a store or a stadium. Broader public funding for economic development also pits communities against each other, requiring that we fight over how needy and deficient we are in order to qualify for a grant.

But we don't have to play the fixed-sum game. We can look to each other in faith and community and find a powerful alternative, a growing, open-sum dynamic that releases the value of our assets and leads us to discover something bigger than all of us.

In the colonias along the border between New Mexico and Mexico, some homes are simple, some are even crude, and some are decorated with as much pride and investment as any home in the land. But in some colonias, local governments have not provided even basic water and sewer service to residents.

Residents of El Milagro recognized that they had assets to use, including their capacity to make modest monthly payments and their talents and will to work. Organized by the Colonias Development Council, and with the help of the local Diocese and the Border WaterWorks Development Corporation, residents organized to build their own infrastructure.

Faith is not a fixed-sum game. If you get more faith, do I get less? Of course not. Instead, your growing faith even strengthens mine.

Community is not a fixed-sum game. If I get more community, does it come out of your supply? Ridiculous. We strengthen each other in community, and our widening community strengthens us all.

God's grace is not a fixed-sum game. If I get more grace, do you get less? Of course not. God's gifts to us are abundant, and sufficient, and unfathomable.

Faith, community, and grace are open-sum. We escape from the fixed-sum game by taking an open-sum approach that grows and grows like a snowball. And the way to start that snowball is by looking at our half-full cup, at our abundant assets.

It is our gifts and assets that give us strength and hope. And rural areas and small towns are rich in community assets. We have talents and skills, associations, natural and physical assets, and yes, economic assets to build on. In fact, our very ruralness is a powerful asset that we can use right now.

Alma is a river town on the Mississippi in Wisconsin that has been working with the National Catholic Rural Life Council. Residents who came to do asset mapping together were most concerned about the closing of a local grocery store. But when they connected the dots and voted with their feet, they found that participants were excited about all sorts of projects.

The unexpected emerged, as residents created a first-ever festival celebrating the strengths of the community. No one has figured out a grocery store development yet, but they're working on even bigger food security projects, a major river dredging and shore improvement, and yes, the redevelopment of the grocery store building to house a new business in town.

Rural assets are everywhere. Believe it or not, a good place to look for assets is where we feel need. Inside every need is an asset.

When we say we "need" more things for young people to do, we are pointing at something we care about: our young people. Our young people contribute talent and energy and new perspective to our communities. The young people we do have are an asset to our whole community. That's something we can build on.

When we say we “need” more jobs and business, we are pointing at something we care about: our talented and resourceful people who want to produce and contribute to the life of our community. We can use those assets to create business, jobs and more economic opportunities.

When we say our rural economies are “needy” or even obsolete in the global economy, we are looking at the half empty part of the cup. But there is another sense in which the global economy is a rural economy. Think about it: we are connected in daily life to people who are far away from us. Since the ‘70s energy crisis, global businesses can no longer afford to operate as large, inflexible hierarchies that can’t shift with supply and demand. These days business works in “flexible networks,” where different component services and supplies are combined at different times and in different ways. These networks are comprised of independent businesses connected across distance for innovation and strength.

“Independent businesses networked across distance” – what’s that if not rural? Doesn’t this describe a rural grain or dairy cooperative, or a mutual insurance company, or even a small town chamber of commerce? For that matter, doesn’t this describe a rural United Way, or a little league, or a caregivers collaborative?

Maybe our real “core competency” as rural communities isn’t corn or beans or cattle or timber. Maybe our core competency is managing and developing flexible networks across distance. Maybe our ruralness actually gives us an advantage in the current economy.

In Green County, Tennessee, residents faced conflict between traditional commercial farming interests and the proponents of sustainable development. Community members working with an English professor and college students started an oral history project called “Stories on the Land,” in which they interviewed a variety of residents about their connections to the land.

When these stories were excerpted and performed as a kind of readers’ theatre, listeners were impressed to discover they had similar interests with each other, and were even more impressed to find that they could understand and appreciate their differences.

Think about *why* Rural matters to us. It’s not the half-empty cup that motivates our compassion and interest; it’s the half full cup. It’s not the things we don’t have that we care about; it’s the things we do have, and cherish, and value, that move us to act.

We have to use what we’ve got to get what we want. Isn’t that the rural way? What else have we ever done, but made our gifts more valuable by using them in combination with each other for the common good? Really, what else can we do?

We already know how to build on our assets, because we experience this in faith and community every day. We respond to a crisis with love and generosity. As we pray for each other, we widen our idea of who “us” is. We’re all God’s children, and there’s a little bit of rural in each of us.

So we transform our thinking to see the abundance of God’s gifts to us. We recognize the worth of every individual, and we realize that each of us makes a difference.

Then we connect the dots. We recognize that other people have assets and interests, and we discover new opportunities by putting our assets together in new ways. In action together, we grow

to understand and appreciate both our likenesses and our differences. We love our neighbors as ourselves.

Finally, we let go. We follow our calls to get things done, and trust that others will do the same, because we are all part of something bigger. Unexpected benefits come back to us, and we see ourselves as part of a whole that is larger than the sum of the parts.

We are part of God's creation, and it is good.



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