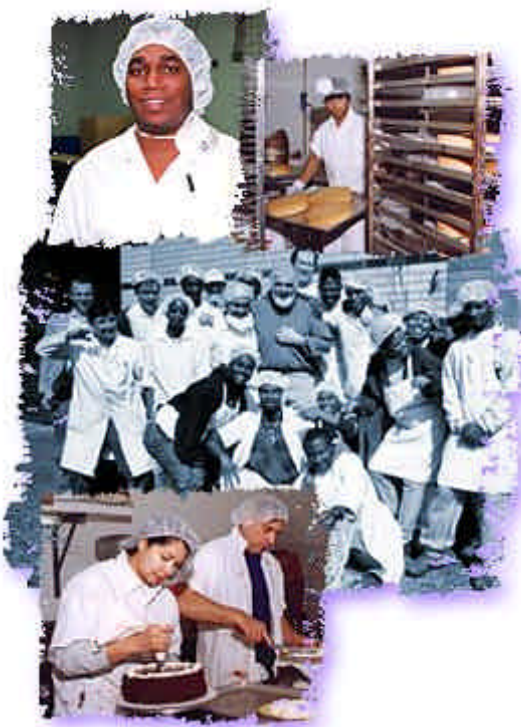


Healing Society, Healing Ourselves at Greyston Bakery

A Conversation with David Rome & Julius Walls

D i n a h W a k e f o r d



In January, TV's popular *60 Minutes* showcased Greyston Bakery, saying, "Of all the bakeries in America, this one takes the cake." Located in Yonkers, New York, the bakery uses the profitable business of supplying "baked ingredients" to Ben & Jerry's and other companies, and gourmet cakes to upscale restaurants in New York, to offer jobs to people who are the otherwise unemployed or hard-to-employ residents of an inner-city community. As an integral component of Greyston Foundation, a system of non-profit and for-profit organizations, the bakery offers the support needed to help people visualize and realize their path to self-sufficiency in a healthy and diverse community.

Greyston believes offering jobs isn't enough for individuals who lack skills and education, and who come from histories of homelessness, drug addiction, and incarceration. Housing, job opportunities, and a sense of community need to co-exist in order for individuals and families to break the cycle of poverty and achieve their goals. To support this social mission, the Greyston community-development foundation serves the economically disenfranchised through housing development, jobs and enterprise creation, social services, child care, education, and HIV-related healthcare.

Greyston Bakery was founded in 1982 by Roshi Bernie Glassman, dharma successor to Zen master Maezumi Roshi, as a means to employ a handful of his students. Roshi Glassman later expanded his mission to include providing jobs to residents of the neighboring inner city areas. This month the bakery is proudly moving into a newly built facility three times its original size. From

its modest beginnings, Greyston has grown to a \$14-million organization with 180 employees. Although Roshi Glassman has since left Greyston to found the Peacemaker Circle (<http://www.peacemakercircle.org>), his influence is still felt strongly at Greyston today.

The following phone interview with Julius Walls, CEO of the Greyston Bakery, and David Rome, Senior VP for planning at the Greyston Foundation, sheds further light on Greyston's Buddhist underpinnings, its social mission, and its current challenges and successes.

Dinah Wakeford for Fieldnotes: How have the Buddhist roots of the Greyston Foundation influenced its organizational structure and culture?

David Rome: I can speak to this from the perspective of being a Buddhist myself. I think Greyston's mission and values grow out of a fundamental perspective that comes from our founder, Roshi Bernie Glassman, about the interdependence of all life. In a way, we can look at everything we do as flowing from that view. Then, a little more specifically, we see ourselves as a *mandala*,

which is a Buddhist concept related to the notion of a living system or self-organizing system. The closest English word is “holism.” Greyston was one of the first organizations to approach community development in a holistic way, bundling together all job creation, health, social, and educational issues, and trying to address the fundamental causes of urban poverty.

We also emphasize the idea of *path*, which again is not unique to Buddhism, but which is a strong theme in that tradition. This is the idea that one embarks on a path toward enlightenment, or a path of development, both as an individual and as a community. This is an important, cross-cutting theme that applies to our clients, staff, and board of directors. Everyone is on a path. This is a basic shared view.

Julius Walls: I am not a Buddhist, but I’ve tremendously enjoyed learning about Buddhism, particularly from Bernie and David. Bernie had three tenets: (1) not knowing, (2) bearing witness, and (3) healing action. These have become important to me. I’m a Christian by faith and practice, so I’ve adapted them a little.

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Not knowing is the idea that you come into a situation without full knowledge of either what is happening or what is needed. This was contrary to my previous understanding—that you were supposed to be able to come into a situation, assess it quickly, and come up with a solution. The notion of experiencing a situation without preconceived ideas was new to me. Now, as one of the prayers I say during my Christian worship service, I ask God to give me an understanding of what He is trying to deliver rather than my preconceived notions. Not knowing is also about being open to what God’s will is for me in my life.

The idea of *bearing witness* also struck me deeply. I went on one of Bernie’s bearing witness retreats in ‘97 and will never forget the experience of living on the street—not with the notion of fixing the problem, but simply to bear witness. I’m going on a similar excursion next week, not to the same extreme, but simply to bear witness with a few other business people in a poor section of Texas. Our intention isn’t to come back with a solution, but simply to see what will arise out of our being there together and our conversation. There are others who are growing with this approach, as well as with “plunges,” where you walk in another man’s shoes for some amount of time. We’ve talked about this as something we’d like to experience here at Greyston.

Healing action is about putting your social and spiritual motivations into action. Bernie obviously did that with Greyston, and the opportunity to do that is what motivated me to come to Greyston. When I learned what Greyston was about, I became very eager to be a part of it.

Fieldnotes: David, you have been on the faculty of the Shambhala Institute, contributing in the areas of meditation, deep listening, and focusing. How are you applying these processes in your work at Greyston?

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David Rome: The strategic plan we developed about seven years ago might have been the first place I made use of the term “deep listening” or “deep attention.” We have explored this theme at Greyston for a long time and in different ways. The practice of council and talking circle have been used for large community meetings as well as small business-focused discussions. I have introduced focusing one-on-one, and it has also been part of how I operate. For many years we have started our meetings with a moment of silence. Our leadership team is committed to a quarterly one-day, off-site retreat.

For me, it is all about being able to shift gears, slow down, step back, and be contemplative. Your posing this question makes me realize we haven’t had much opportunity to do this lately. The organization is under a lot of day-to-day pressure. We are undergoing a leadership change and coming to the end of a budget cycle. Also, because of developments in our external environment, we’ve had to be more stringent in our budget than in the past, so there has not been a lot of time. However, anything we can do to slow down has been effective in helping people become more present in themselves and more present to the group.

Fieldnotes: Julius, you previously attended the Systems Thinking module at the Shambhala Institute's Summer Program. What aspects of systems thinking are you using in your planning and development work at Greyston?

Julius Walls: The biggest piece has been to see that everything is part of a system and to move beyond the assumption that inputs are only from an internal source—to see that we are part of an external environment as well, and to incorporate all that into our thinking. So we no longer simply look at what might seem like the quick and obvious solution to a problem. At the very least, we try to consider total inputs and look for ways to go more toward the root of an issue.

Fieldnotes: What do you see as the foundation's current challenges and burning questions?

David Rome: We are right in the middle of the fire. In a general sense, our question is how to take the whole thing to the next level. With the opening of our big new bakery facility, especially, we've become a much more visible player—within the community in which we work, Yonkers and Westchester, certainly, but also nationwide. That, in itself, is a big challenge—how to go to the next level in our business operations and in our human services. We're at a place where we must look much more carefully at the external environment and what services are already in place, where the gaps are, and where we can develop collaborations. We are already doing this, but there are further opportunities.

Because of the economy and the ideology of the current administration, there is a lot of shake-out occurring around nonprofit organizations and the funding streams that support this line of work. That is a challenge for all nonprofits. Because Greyston is now a mature and well-established organization, we are in a good position to meet these challenges, and we are already involved in making certain adjustments.

Julius Walls: For the past 10 years, the fire has been stoked by the excitement of growth. Now that we aren't growing at the same pace, we are asking, What feeds the excitement of the organization as a whole? What is stoking the fire? This is something we need to take a look at.

The growth connected with the new facility and what it means for each of us in terms of our role in the organization is an issue. It's a particular issue for an organization like ours, because the business is so closely related to our mission and who and what we are. It's not simply, Do you have the same small business feel? It's also, Can you figure out how to become more corporate, make money as fast and as much, and have the same feel for taking care of people and being engaged with their lives?

David Rome: The biggest challenge in terms of the Shambhala Institute's field of inquiry is, As you grow as an organization, how can you bring contemplative or spiritual practice and values to bear in a way that is integral and applicable? We're very early on in that exploration. I don't think we have seen major successes yet, so that continues to be a big challenge.

Fieldnotes: What do you consider to be Greyston's biggest success to date?

David Rome: The bakery was and remains our biggest success, because it was one of the pioneers—and continues to be one of the leaders—in the field that has come to be known as social entrepreneurship. It is a successful business that has employed many hundreds of the chronically unemployed or difficult to employ. That's what we're best known for and why we were featured on the *60 Minutes* show in January.

Julius Walls: The unusual aspect of the Greyston bakery model is that it is *not* a program. It offers permanent employment. Some who started on the bakery production floor 15 years ago with no skills have worked their way up to management positions. Many have moved on to other jobs

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with the skills they learned here. Some have stayed for multiple years. We provide training and an opportunity for employment—a true opportunity that comes with the resources to be successful and support the move from unemployment to employment. It’s not a program; it’s a job. Today we have 50-plus employees. The largest percentage has been with us one to five years. Twenty percent have been with us over nine years, and that number continues to grow. Over 20 years, hundreds have been supported through the bakery or have moved on to jobs that better reflect what they would like to pursue in their life.

When I meet new employees I say to them, “I realize very few of you at age 14 thought that what you wanted to do was to work for a bakery. But now that you’re here, what do you want to do with your life and how can Greyston support you?”

David Rome: I also want to add that it isn’t just about helping the disadvantaged. This project actually helps all of us. There has also been tremendous growth among the so-called professionals, many of whose lives have been turned around from working here. Our mission talks about healing the rejected parts of society as well as the rejected parts of ourselves, so we try not to play into the class system of “us helping them.” It’s nowhere near perfect, but at least we apply a conscious effort in this direction.

Julius Walls: This goes back to David’s comments about the importance of path and mandala. We believe the way to overcome social and economic problems, fundamentally, is by building strong community. So Greyston, itself, has to be a strong community. This is different from the way people think of a traditional nonprofit, where a group of professionals provide services to a group of unfortunates. We are all involved together in creating healthy community.

Fieldnotes: Based on your pioneering experience at Greyston, what are your recommendations to those interested in developing social enterprise missions? Where do they start?

Julius Walls: I advise people to be very clear on what they are trying to accomplish and to understand the subtle differences between a mission of delivering profit to a parent company, a mission of delivering a particular service to the community, and a mission of employing a certain population. Be clear in your mission statement, because these different intentions impact decisions in different ways. To drill down further, it’s important to develop guiding principles that set your direction prior to the point where you need to make decisions. You need to set up your culture and values as you want them to be, right from the beginning. It’s too difficult to do it midstream, when you need to make decisions around questions like whether you automate and possibly eliminate a job. It’s better to establish guidelines and values before you come to the decision.

Fieldnotes: What is your most important learning from your work at Greyston?

David Rome: Hang in there; things take longer than one would expect or like.

Julius Walls: What goes around comes around. What energy you put out will come back to you.

David Rome will be leading a module, with Otto Scharmer and Arawana Hayashi, on “The Practice of Innovation: Learning from the Future as it Emerges” at the 2004 Summer Program. See http://www.shambhalainstitute.org/2004/module_snandr.html

To find out more about the Greyston Foundation and Bakery, go to <http://www.greyston.org>

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