BUILDING COMMUNITY

by John W. Gardner

We know that where community exists it confers upon its members identity, a sense of belonging, and a measure of security. It is in communities that the attributes that distinguish humans as social creatures are nourished. Communities are the ground-level generators and preservers of values and ethical systems. The ideals of justice and compassion are nurtured in communities. The natural setting for religion is the religious community.

The breakdown of communities has had a serious disintegrating effect on the behavior of individuals. We have all observed the consequences in personal and social breakdown. The casualties stream through the juvenile courts and psychiatrists' offices and drug abuse clinics. There has been much talk of the breakup of the nuclear family as a support structure for children. We must remind ourselves that in an earlier era support came not only from the nuclear family but from extended family and community. The child moved in an environment filled with people concerned for his future - not always concerned in a kindly spirit, but concerned. A great many children today live in environments where virtually no one pays attention unless they break the law.

We have seen in recent years a troubling number of very successful, highly rewarded individuals in business and government engage in behavior that brought them crashing down. One explanation is that they betrayed their values for some gratification they couldn't resist (e.g., money, power, sensual pleasure). Another possible explanation is that they had no values to betray, that they were among the many contemporary individuals who had never had any roots in a framework of values, or had torn loose from their roots, torn loose from their moorings. Shame, after all, is a social emotion. Individuals who experience it feel that they have transgressed some group standard of propriety or right conduct. But if they have no sense of membership in any group, the basis for feeling ashamed is undermined. And there is an

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African proverb, "Where there is no shame, there is no honor."

In World War II studies of soldiers in combat, the most common explanation given for acts of extraordinary courage was "I didn't want to let my buddies down." Reflect on the number of individuals in this transient, pluralistic society who have no allegiance to any group, the members of which they would not want to let down.

We know a great deal about the circumstances of contemporary life that erode our sense of community. And we are beginning to understand how our passion for individualism led us away from community. But so far there has been very little considered advice to help us on the road back to community. Many of us are persuaded of the need to travel that road and have no doubt that it exists; but finding it will require that we be clear as to what we're seeking. We can never bring the traditional community back, and if we could it would prove to be hopelessly anachronistic.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY

The traditional community was homogeneous. We live with

heterogeneity and must design communities to handle it.

The traditional community experienced relatively little change from one decade to the next and resented the little that it did experience. We must design communities that can survive change and, when necessary, seek change.

The traditional community commonly demanded a high degree of conformity. Because of the nature of the world we live in, our communities must be pluralistic and adaptive, fostering individual freedom and responsibility within a framework of group obligation.

The traditional community was often unwelcoming to strangers and all too ready to reduce its communication with the external world. Hard realities require that present-day communities be in continuous and effective touch with the outside world, and our system of values requires that they be inclusive.

The traditional community could boast generations of history and continuity. Only a few communities today can hope to enjoy any such heritage. They must continuously rebuild their shared culture, must consciously foster the norms and values that will ensure their continued integrity.

In short, much as we cherish the thought of traditional community, we shall have to build anew, seeking to reincarnate some of the cherished values of the old communities in forms appropriate to contemporary social organization.

Most Americans who endorse the idea of community today have in mind communities that strive to exemplify the best of contemporary values, communities that are inclusive, that balance individual freedom and group obligation, that foster the release of human possibilities, that invite participation and the sharing of leadership tasks.

A glance at the contemporary scene reveals diverse kinds of community. Most familiar to us are territorially bounded communities such as towns, suburbs, neighborhoods, and so on, but we must look also at other kinds of community.

Some congregations create what I regard as genuine communities though their members may be scattered over a large metropolitan area. The workplace may constitute a community even though it draws its members from a wide area. Some of the smaller professional and academic fields and some religious orders are communities even though they may be very widely dispersed geographically. Some public schools are communities
in the best sense of the word while others are simply geographical locations where young people spend a certain number of allotted hours performing required activities. The same appears true of congregations. Some are authentic communities, others are simply locations where unconnected people come together on Sunday. The same contrasts may be found in the workplace.

WHOLENESS AND BELONGING

In seeking to explain such differences one is driven to think analytically about the ingredients or characteristics of community. I shall list eight ingredients. The reader is invited to add to the list or define the ingredients in other ways. The important thing at this stage is to get past the generalized idea of community to an understanding of what conditions or circumstances make it real. In order to focus my study I chose four areas for special attention - the city, the workplace, the school, and the church. I shall draw examples from all four, trying not to confuse the reader in the process.

Wholeness incorporating diversity. A community is obviously less of a community if fragmentation or divisiveness exists - and if the rifts are deep it is no community at all. Schools in which faculty and students carry on a kind of trench warfare, congregations divided into cliques, cities in which people of diverse ethnic origins form mutually hostile groups - these are obviously not healthy communities.

We expect and want diversity, and there will be dissension in the best of communities. But in vital communities, cooperation, compromise, and consensus building will be widely shared pursuits. In the best circumstances such communities will have instruments and processes for conflict resolution. Some cities have created special boards to deal with disputes between groups of citizens. Others have interracial councils and provisions for citizens from one segment of the community to know and work with citizens from other segments. Healthy communities respect diversity but seek common ground and a larger unity.

I have long advocated that in cities, leaders from all segments of the community come together in *networks of responsibility* to set goals and to tackle the city's most pressing problems. The community has a better chance of achieving wholeness if local government collaborates closely and continuously with private sector institutions, profit and nonprofit.

The skills necessary to the resolution of group conflict should be taught in both high school and college. All men and women in positions of leadership, government or private sector, should be schooled in dispute resolution and all of the antipolarization arts.

A shared culture. The possibility of wholeness is consider-ably enhanced if the community has a shared culture; i.e., shared norms and values. If the community is lucky (and fewer and fewer are), it will have a shared history and tradition. It will have symbols of group identity, its "story," its legends, and heroes. Social cohesion will be advanced if the group's norms and values are explicit. Values that are never expressed are apt to be taken for granted and not adequately conveyed to young people and newcomers. The well-functioning community provides many opportunities to express values in relevant action. If it believes, for example, that the indivi-dual should in some measure serve the community. it will provide many opportunities for young people to engage in such service.

To maintain the sense of belonging and the dedication and commitment so essential to community life, members needs inspiring reminders of shared goals and values. A healthy community affirms itself and builds morale and motivation through ceremonies and celebrations that honor the symbols of shared identity and enable members to rededicate themselves. This doesn't mean that they suppress internal criticism or deny their flaws.

One or another form of education about the community, its history, and its purpose is necessary to introduce young people to the shared past and present.

"WE" AND "THEY"

Good internal communication. Members of a well-functioning community communicate freely with one another. One of the advantages of the small group is that frequent face-to-face communication is possible. In large systems (cities, corporations) much conscious effort is needed to keep the channels of communication open among all elements of the system, and to combat the "we-they" barriers that impede the flow.

There must be occasions when members gather, there must be meeting spaces. In cities or neighborhoods there must be organizations willing to serve as meeting grounds.

Whatever the type of community, people have to believe that they can have their say. Between manager and worker, governing body and citizens, teacher and students, pastor and parishioners, there must

be honest and open two-way communication. Each must understand what the other needs and wants.

In cities, much of the communication will be through the media. Civic leaders and institutions must urge the media toward responsible coverage, but it is a mistake to depend entirely on such urging. Leaders should create an information-sharing network among a wide variety of institutions and organizations. Maximum use should ne made of institutions that can serve as neutral conveners - e.g., community foundations, community colleges, universities, churches. A community is strengthened if there are occasions (celebrations, retreats, outings, etc.) on which extensive informal interaction is possible.

Caring, trust, and teamwork. A good community nurtures its members and fosters an atmosphere of trust. They both protect and give a measure of autonomy to the individual. There is a spirit of mutuality and cooperation. Everyone is included.

Such attitudes make it possible to work together on necessary common tasks. Undergirding the teamwork is a widely shared commitment to the common good, an awareness by all that they need one another and must pool their talent, energy, and resources. There is a feeling that when the team wins every-body wins. Tasks that require the sharing of skills and resources foster the habit of collaboration, mutual support, and a willingness to put the good of the team first.

A healthy community deals forthrightly with dissension and "we-they" polarities, accepting diversity and dissent but using all the various mediating, coalition-building, and conflict resolution procedures to find common ground.

It is necessary to add that a community can be too tightly knit, suppressing dissent and constraining the creativity of its members.

LEADERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

Group maintenance and government. A functioning community has institutional provisions for group maintenance or governing. In a corporation it is the board of directors, management, and the chain of command. In a college it is the trustees, administration, faculty council, and student government. In a town or city it is not only the formal governing mechanisms but the nongovernmental leadership exercised through various nonprofit institutions.

One task is the maintenance of some reasonable measure of order and adherence to respected customs and norms. Violence, vandalism, crime, and drugs can destroy every vestige of community - as some urban public schools have discovered to their sorrow. Healthy communities ensure a safe environment for their members.

No less important is the reasonably efficient performance of community services. Community leaders may have the highest of civic ideals, but they also have to ensure that the garbage is collected, the streets maintained, the children educated, and so on. Collaboration between public and private sectors is essential to the performance of some of these tasks.

In a swiftly changing environment, communities and organizations must look ahead. The best of them engage in one or another form of strategic planning and priority setting, not through occasion one-shot "futures" reports but on a regular continuing basis. In cities, governments and the private sector must collaborate on such forward planning.

Participation and the sharing of leadership tasks. The culture of the healthy community encourages individual involvement in the pursuit of shared purposes. Cities can get significant participation from nongovernmental leaders through hearings, advisory boards, and citizen commissions. Strong neighborhood groups are important; and a wide range of nonprofit civic groups and institutions can play a role.

It is not uncommon in our towns and cities today that the groups most involved in the affairs of the community all come from one or two segments of the community. All segments must participate. In a city or an organization, the possibility of effective participation is increased is everyone is kept informed, and if individuals feel that they have a say. That means the system cannot be autocratically run or excessively centralized. Leaders must devolve initiative and responsibility widely throughout the system. We must never forget that our conception of community involves the participation of mature and responsible individuals. We don't want "community" bought at the price of the individual's mindless submission to the group. The good community will find a productive balance between individuality and group obligation.

Everyone need not participate actively with respect to any given community. We must guard the *right* to participate while recognizing that some will choose not to do so. Individuals expending enormous energies holding their families together may be thankfully passive members of their church congregation. The individual who is an activist in the workplace community may be a passive member of a neighborhood association.

LINKS TO THE FUTURE

Development of young people. In a community of the sort we would applaud, the opportunities for individual growth will be numerous and varied for all members. And mature members will ensure that young people grow up with a sense of obligation to the community. Beginning in elementary and high school, boys and girls will learn to take responsibility for the well-being of any group they are in - a seemingly small step but without doubt the first step toward responsible community participation, and for that matter the first step in leadership development. On the playing field, and in group activities in and out of school and college, they will learn teamwork. Through volunteer and intern experiences outside of school they will learn how the adult world works and will have the experience of serving their society. And they will learn that responsible dissent and creative alternative solutions may also serve the community. Every organization serving the community should find ways of involving young people.

Links with the outside world. The sound community has seemingly contradictory responsibilities: it must defend itself from the forces in the outside environment that undermine its integrity, yet it must maintain open, constructive, and extensive relations with the world beyond its boundaries. The school, for example, must be in some respects a haven for its students, capable of shutting out some of the most destructive aspects of city life, but it can maintain itself as a strong institution only through extensive community relations.

FRAGMENTATION AND COMMON GROUND

In listing these eight attributes of an ideal community, my interest is not in depicting Utopia. My interest is to get us away from vague generalizations about "community" and to identify some ingredients that we can work on constructively.

I've mentioned cities, neighborhoods, schools, churches, and the workplace. Many universities are to a deplorable degree "non-communities." Government agencies and a great variety of nonprofit institutions - museums, charities, cause organizations - have the same problem. The generalizations I have offered apply most easily and readily to social entities of moderate size. Obviously it is difficult to think in the same terms about a huge city, or a nation, or the world. Yet in those far-larger settings the need is even more desperate.

The problem of the typical American city today is fragmentation. The list of the substantive *problems* of the city does not define the city's problem. The city's problem is that it can't pull itself together to deal with any item on the list. It is not a coherent entity. It is broken into segments that have sharply differing purposes, segments that have shown little talent for understanding one another. Or willingness to try.

Any effort by the city to accomplish some larger purpose gets mired in the tensions, cross-purposes, and ultimate stalemate among the segments. The city cannot think like a community nor can it act like one.

The soundest solution to the problem is for leaders from all segments, government and private sector, profit and nonprofit, to come together in what I call *a network of responsibility* to think about, to talk about, and act in behalf of their city. It happened in Pittsburgh in the 1950s and the modern Pittsburgh was born. It happened in New York City in the mid-1970s and the worst fiscal crisis in New York history was solved.

When it happens, there does indeed emerge a constituency for the

whole. People come to realize that if the city goes downhill all segments suffer. Obviously all disagreements do not get settled, but the search for common ground achieves some success, and the very fact of searching creates a better climate.

Every institution in the city should have concern for the whole city, and not just concern for its segment of the city or, more commonly, concern solely for itself. Often even the most high-minded organizations have little regard for the community around them. I described the situation facetiously at a national meeting of voluntary organizations recently by saying: "A voluntary group may be profoundly and high-mindedly committed to care of the terminally il and never notice that the community of which it is a part is itself "terminally ill." We must seek to restore a sense of community in our cities; but it may be that the most fruitful approach will be from the ground up, through the more familiar settings I discussed earlier - the school, the church, the workplace, and so on.

How can people work to make their metropolis a community when most of them have never experienced a sense of community in any familiar setting? Men and women who have come to understand, in their own intimate settings, the principles of "wholeness incorporating diversity," the arts of diminishing polarization, the meaning of teamwork and participation will be far better allies in the effort to build elements of community into the metropolis, the nation, and the world.

GHETTOIZED BY BLACK UNITY

by Shelby Steele

There are many profound problems facing black America today: a swelling black underclass; a black middle class that declined slightly in size during the Eighties; a declining number of black college students; an epidemic of teenage pregnancy, drug use, and gang violence; continuing chronic unemployment; astoundingly high college and high school dropout rates; an increasing number of single-parent families; a disproportionately high infant mortality rate; and so on. Against this despair it might seem almost esoteric for me to talk about the importance of individual identity and possibility. Yet I have come to believe that despite the existing racism in today's America, opportunity is still the single most constant but unexploited aspect of the black condition. The only way we will see the advancement of black people in this country is for us to focus on developing ourselves as individuals and embracing opportunity.