

# THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY IN AMERICA; THE SEARCH FOR ORDER AND STABILITY

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Even before the first settlers arrived in the new found land, America had come to stand for opportunity and a new beginning for many Europeans. Here was a place, they thought, where an ideal community could be established which would serve as a model for the rest of the world. From the establishment of the New England town, down through American history, one of the most persistent and pervasive themes has been the search for community as the anchor of stability in an otherwise chaotic and changing world. Community education represents another attempt to make the idea of community meaningful; but not within the context of an urban, post-industrial America—which is always in process.

## The Puritan Town

The prototype ideal community was the New England town. It represented the utopian goal which helped drive the Puritans across the Atlantic. As Governor John Winthrop noted in his famous lay sermon, delivered while still on board the flagship, *Arabella*, the colony they were about to establish in America was "as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."<sup>1</sup> The first Puritans were consciously setting out to fulfill God's purpose by creating a society which would be perfect, which would be based on peace, unity and order and which could be emulated by others. Winthrop's sermon title, "A Model of Christian Charity," succinctly epitomizes the goal: a truly Christian community, rooted in shared love of one another. It was a dream; they sought to make it a reality, and they almost succeeded.

From the beginning, the New England town was a covenanted community, resting on an agreement among the members and between the members and God. The secular covenant was usually written and signed by all the individuals who wished to remain in the community. The Covenant of the town of Dedham, Massachusetts, was typical. The first article of the town covenant pledged each

signatory to "mutually and severally promise amongst ourselves and each other to profess and practice one truth according to that most perfect rule, the foundation thereof is everlasting love."<sup>2</sup>

In the then wilderness of New England, small, rural and often isolated communities expanded. Once they grew to a certain size, new communities were founded in other places—equally rural and equally isolated. For a time, at least, it seemed possible that the ideal could be realized, so long as the community remained homogeneous and exclusive. Outside influences were to be kept at bay, change was to be resisted; authority, order and harmony would prevail under the aegis of Christian love.

But the dream faltered, as the people of Dedham had feared it might. The second article of their covenant warned of people who were "proud of spirit"<sup>3</sup> and it sought to keep out of the community those that were "contrary minded."<sup>4</sup> Internal dissension led to the expulsion in other communities of such major individuals as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. Within a generation, in most of the towns, the religious zeal of their founders was under attack by their own children. Modifications in the hierarchical and restricted institutions and practices of these towns had to be made—but the desire for community still remained.

A more severe challenge to the community came from outside when settlers who were "contrary minded" sought to enter. Newcomers were often resisted, Quakers and Anglicans driven out of town—sometimes by violent means. It is now believed that the Salem witchcraft trials, which led to a number of executions, were partially touched off by outsiders who were taking up homes in that area.<sup>5</sup> It was clear by the end of the seventeenth century that the Puritan town could not remain exclusive and static, but had to begin to cope with change or fail as a community. The New England experiment may have ultimately waned, but it has been emulated by other groups in our country's

history who have believed in a perfectible community.

### **Successful Small Communities**

Most of the successful communities in America have been small, rural and fairly isolated from the mainstream growth of the rest of the United States. The nineteenth century witnessed a multiplicity of these societies. Among the best known were the Shakers, New Harmony, Zoar, Oneida and Amana. Not all were religious communes, but as Rosabeth Kanter found in her comparative study of them, they shared common characteristics. The successful nineteenth-century communities were communitarian in operation, under strong executive leadership. In each case, 100 percent of the members knew each other before the society was started, all property was signed over at admission, there was no compensation for labor, no charge for community services, no skill or intelligence distinctions were made among the members and the top leaders were either the founders of the commune or persons they had trained. A very high proportion of the members had a common religious background, a common ethnicity, wore similar uniforms and shared basic values. Conversely, unsuccessful, short-lived communities failed because they lacked shared characteristics and values and did not have strong, effective leadership.<sup>6</sup> In modern America, the ideal of the perfectible community still exists, as in the case of the Amish, but for the most part the idea of community as a small enclave of like-minded individuals resisting change has been lost.

### **A Successful Large Community**

Probably the best example of a small community which has grown and prospered in America is the one founded by Joseph Smith: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons). Established in the 1820's, harassed and persecuted, the Mormons drove steadily westward until they found their Zion in the deserts of Utah. Even then outside forces pushed in relentlessly upon them; they fought back, but gradually the community accommodated to change and has now become an accepted, yet distinctive society in many parts of the world. The Mormons, from the beginning, had many of the characteristics which Rosabeth Kanter found in the smaller communities: shared property, work, values, and strong hierarchical leadership. But there was one important difference; the Mormons were a missionary community, reaching out for new and rejuvenating members. They have not been afraid to grow in size and locality. When faced with intense opposition, the Mormons modified

some of their practices and institutions, while maintaining the core of their faith in the importance of service and sense of obligation to each other. To the rest of America, they demonstrated one way that the forces of change could be met without destroying the importance of community.

### **Change and Community**

The earlier communities in America sought to resist change, believing it to be the main threat to peace, stability and order. But, paradoxically, from its beginning America has been made up of people committed to growth, development, expansion, progress, perfectibility: in short, a people dedicated to change.

Four major forces have been at work in America which have facilitated change and been welcomed even though many have also seen these forces as major threats to the importance of community. Within a startlingly short time, urbanization, technology, privatism and pluralistic democracy changed the American physical, institutional and social landscapes. From a nation of farmers, the United States became a land of city dwellers in little over a century. By 1860 there were 103 cities of over 10,000 population and the 1920 census recorded that for the first time more Americans lived in cities than on farms. The old, walking cities, where rich and poor, older settlers and newer immigrants, lived close to each other were transformed into sprawling urban areas, served by mass transit and characterized by social and economic segregation. Suburbs of the rich, who could afford transportation to work, while living partially in a rural retreat from the noise and disorder of the city, began to obliterate the clear distinction between city and country, which in the past had helped to clearly define the physical community. Massive immigration replaced homogeneity with heterogeneity. The American city became a place of diversity, variety, fear, opportunity and, above all, change. Instead of a community inhabited by like-minded people, it had become one of "contrary minded" and often contentious individuals.

Technology increased the pace at which the transformation took place. The first horse-drawn trolley system operating on a fixed route and schedule began in 1816. It was quickly followed by the railroads which had an explosive force on the shape of the city. The automobile greatly accelerated the process, virtually eliminating recognizable community boundaries. Communications technology, in particular the telephone, almost rendered the older definition of community obsolete.

Technology offered Americans the opportunity to form new communities with little regard to spatial or even temporal considerations, but it also strengthened another force which threatened community.

"Privatism" is a term used to describe the importance Americans attach to personal, individual choice. In its most extended form, privatism refers to the decisions Americans make to satisfy their own needs, or those of the immediate nuclear family, with little regard to their obligations to the larger community around them. The city offers diversity; the automobile, mobility; the telephone, almost instant communication anywhere in the world. With a multiplicity of choices, Americans are free to engage in a variety of community activities, but they are also free not to engage in any activities. The bonds of social conformity which were so strong in smaller communities have been virtually eliminated. The taking over of social welfare responsibilities by the state has further released Americans from their obligations, except through taxation, for caring for others. Indeed, the contemporary flight to the suburbs and the decay of the inner city are seen by many as an escape from responsibility for the needs of the minority or the poor. In this sense, privatism, bolstered by technology, is the twentieth-century outcome of another traditional American value system, individualism and self-reliance—which are also perceived as threats to the idea of community.

The earlier American emphasis on collective community responsibility was challenged by the Jacksonian revolution in the nineteenth century. With a major stress on equality, democracy and pluralistic decisionmaking, the autonomous American—individualistic, alone and self-determining—made his appearance. Thoreau in solitude at Walden Pond and the mountain man trapping in the Rocky Mountains epitomized, in a romanticized way, the transcendent individual. The question was whether or not society was a hindrance to the individual. Achievement and success were personal matters. In modern moral terms, to be inner-directed was good; to be outer-directed, bad. In political terms, individual participation as a citizen in pluralistic decisionmaking is desirable; obedience to hierarchical decisions is not.

Taken together, the forces of urbanization, technology, privatism and pluralistic democracy have been viewed as destructive of the basic ideal of community and a threat to order, yet, the need for community has been persistent and the dream has not died.

## Community and Adaptation

The challenges to the idea of community have been and still are real. But the pessimism of a Henry Adams, or even more so of his brother, Brooks, that America is like a dynamo hurtling toward oblivion, has not been borne out.<sup>7</sup> Recent community studies of American towns that grew into cities have shown the ability of these communities to adapt to change. Numerous examples abound of cities that fought the disruptive forces which threatened their sense of community and emerged at the end of the process stronger in basic communal institutions and values than they had been before. One illustration of this is Stuart Blumin's investigation of the transformation of Kingston, New York, from a rural, homogeneous community to a small, diverse city during the first half of the nineteenth century. As industry and transportation expanded and intercity rivalry intensified, Kingston faced fragmentation and a loss of itself as an identifiable community. Individuals in the town responded by strengthening organizations which emphasized pride in the community, citizen responsibility and power of the town to control its own destiny. Instead of allowing the winds of change to destroy their community, the citizens of Kingston adapted, with the result, as Blumin concludes, "urban growth and regional integration strengthened communal sentiments and processes that earlier had been only weakly developed."<sup>8</sup>

The same was true in the larger urban areas. Thomas Bender found that in New York City the agrarian values of the eighteenth century could be utilized by urban reformers to meet the needs of a large, diverse metropolis. Led by individuals such as Charles Loring Brace, who founded the Children's Aid Society, new urban social organizations came into existence to deal with the problem of the urban poor and disadvantaged. Similarly, Frederick Law Olmsted was the leading pioneer in the parks and recreation movement in the United States, stressing the need for open space for the urban population and, in particular, using parks to help define the physical boundaries of neighborhoods in the city.<sup>9</sup>

In the name of community, then, numerous attempts were made to redefine it in terms of a rapidly changing physical and social environment. But the rate of change was so rapid that by the end of the century there were many intellectuals who felt that the meaning of community in America was being lost.

## The Loss of Community

In the Gilded Age of American big business, corporate

capitalism and rapid industrialization, private greed and individual accumulation of wealth appeared to indicate an abdication of any feeling of community or social responsibility. Pittsburgh was described as the worst industrial city in the western world, existing on the outer fringes of hell. Lincoln Steffens decried the *Shame of the Cities* and Joseph Riis pointed to some of the horrors of social life and crime in New York, while Robert Hunter revealed the extensiveness of poverty in the United States.<sup>10</sup> For those who feared the collapse of a stable and orderly community as they knew it, there was the possibility of an intellectual retreat to the twelfth century, or with Edward Bellamy, the dream of a utopian and socialist community by the year 2000. Others sought a different definition of community. The philosopher, Josiah Royce, looked for a community of individuals against war; James Mark Baldwin, a peripatetic philosopher, wanted an intellectual community of inquiry, while sociologist E.A. Ross hoped for some form of natural and pre-industrial commune.

What was common to all of the intellectuals and reformers, however, was a feeling that Americans still wanted and needed the idea of community, if only they could find the right model for a heterogeneous and changing America. But, as R. Jackson Wilson found in his study, many intellectuals pessimistically concluded that "there probably *was* no form of community which could be efficient and powerful enough to cope with modern America and still be spiritually bound together by what Pierce called love and Royce loyalty."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the search went on.

### The Twentieth Century

The search for the meaning of community took on a new dimension when, after the Spanish-American War, the United States became a world power. No longer could Americans regard themselves as members of an enclaved community, cut off from any responsibilities to the larger world community. However, full recognition of this did not come quickly. Woodrow Wilson's idealism was repudiated in the refusal of the United States to join the League of Nations. It has only been since World War II that we have begun to understand the implications of belonging to an interdependent world community, and the responsibilities that entails. A new formulation for community has evolved which transcends the older spatial, temporal and social definition of community. Just as cities have had to adapt institutions and values to changes in and

threats to their communities, contemporary Americans will have to find ways and means to accommodate this new and greatly expanded idea of community—if community is to have any true meaning. Community education is one response.

### Community Education

Community Education is a fairly new movement. It was begun about forty years ago when there was a growing feeling that schools were becoming too enclaved and isolated from the rest of society. The American industrial revolution forced individuals to segment their time in separable units, radically dividing "work time" from "commuting time" from "free" or "leisure time." Education became something that took place in specific periods during the day and during a designated time in one's life and at a place, called a school. Once the individual left the schoolroom at the end of the day, or upon graduation, the presumption was that education stopped. One of the effects of this division of time into "periods of learning" and "periods of not learning" has been to diminish the role and responsibility of education and the educational system to those who are in the system. Conversely, those outside the system tend to feel that education, especially formal education, has little to offer them. In an attempt to deal with this perception of education, community education seeks to broaden educational goals and strategies and the meaning of community at many levels.

In 1978 the federal government passed the Community Schools and Comprehensive Community Education Act. The Act reflects both the older idea of community and a newer one. In the first, the school, as a physical place in which education takes place, has its responsibilities enlarged to service the surrounding neighborhood by engaging in diverse activities of need and interest to those in a fairly spatially-defined area. Recognition is given to the fact that an area of a city will include many individuals who will go outside of their area to find a community to join, if their interests cannot be met within the area. By establishing a community school it is felt that a sense of community can be enhanced among those who reside in a particular place. This, in turn, will lead to greater reciprocal responsibilities between the school and the surrounding community and, hopefully, recapture the traditional idea of community as a place of stability, peace and order.

Implementation of this idea of community requires

that the city, state, and federal governments be able to coordinate their resources and services across the whole community. Under this wider definition, community education refers not only to a school and neighborhood, but also to a much larger spatial area in which there will be multiple subcommunities, many of which share common needs and interests though not located in close proximity to each other. This sense of community permits community education to reach out over a large area and strengthen smaller communities and, thereby, hopefully improve the quality of the overall community.<sup>12</sup>

But community education goes even further by recognizing that technology, mobility, individualism and pluralism offer opportunities to define community apart from spatial and temporal limitations. The great diversity that exists in the total urban or world environment can be utilized as a lifelong learning laboratory. If technology threatens to fragment society, it can also be used to identify and bring together people with like interests and needs wherever they may be located. Mobility, rather than being destructive of community, can expand educational horizons by allowing people to directly experience differences which do not exist in their own specific community. Individual choices and decisions are, thereby, greatly enhanced. By drawing upon the broader implications of a global definition of community, diversity and change become assets rather than liabilities. This is a goal of community education but it is also a hope—perhaps a utopian one—which, if realized, would fulfill the dream of John Winthrop's band of Puritans: that of establishing a society based on peace, order and stability. But it would be a world society which would accept difference and change as necessary and important to human growth in a global community.

## Conclusion

The idea of community that came to America with the first settlers has persisted to the present, despite numerous challenges. There are still communities which strive to hold on to the traditional idea that they should be made up of like-minded people who fear change and want to make their physical place a fortress against the encroachments of the outside world. However, the idea of community began to change when urban and technological advances, combined with changes in American values, demanded adjustment to diversity and growth. America's involvement in the larger world forced yet another expansion of the idea of community to embrace even greater change and diversity.

As response to the belief that education was becoming less important to the society outside the educational system, the community education movement began. Reaching out first through the community school to the immediate neighborhood, the movement is now seeking ways to make education a life-long process, utilizing the world, with all of its differences, as the laboratory. It is an important new direction for education, but it recalls the earlier goal of community and is testimony to the deep and enduring American desire for a sense of community.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Perry Miller, ed. *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956, 83, 78-84.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth A. Lockridge. *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1970, 4-5.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974.

<sup>6</sup>Rosabeth Moss Kanter. *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972.

<sup>7</sup>Henry Adams. *The Education of Henry Adams and Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. Also, Brook Adams, *The Law of Civilization and Decay*.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart M. Blumin. *The Urban Threshold: Growth and Change in a Nineteenth-Century American Community*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976, 222, 212-222. See also, Michael H. Frisch, *Town Into City: Springfield, Massachusetts and the Meaning of Community, 1840-1880*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Bender. *Toward an Urban Vision: Idea and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America*, Lexington, Kentucky: University Press, 1972.

<sup>10</sup>Lincoln Steffens. *Shame of the Cities*. Also, Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*; Robert Hunter, *Poverty: Social Conscience in the Progressive Era*.

<sup>11</sup>R. Jackson Wilson. *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the States, 1860-1920*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, 174 and *passim*.

<sup>12</sup>"The Community Schools and Comprehensive Education Act of 1968," in *Community Education Journal*, VI, July 1978, 2-3.

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