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The “Simple Gifts” of Community

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“. . . and when we find ourselves in the place just right, ‘Twill be in the valley of love and delight.’ - from “Simple Gifts,” an old Shaker Hymn

To be able to live in a real community is a privilege. It is not the same as a feeling of home, but home fits somewhere within community. It is broader than home; it is broader than a circle of friends. The authentic experience of the arts has always been closely aligned with the experience of community. Just after World War II, author, educator and philosopher, Baker Brownell, was invited into Montana to work with small communities there, helping to identify various aspects which made each of them unique, to consider problems which those communities would be facing, and to develop a framework within which to respond to those problems. From Brownell’s work in those small Montana communities came his classic study, *The Human Community*, published in 1950. At the beginning of the book, Brownell states his purpose:

If I can bring their attention to bear - and I hope their conscience - on the decline of the human community in America, I shall be justified. I shall ask why the community is so little the concern of philosophers and educators. I shall aim at them and at other governing minds of our society what shafts I can command and, hoping to disturb them somewhat and to convict them of negligence, if not worse, in regard to the major problem of America. That problem is the disintegration of the community and its slow extinction in the western world The decline of the human community is . . . the primary problem, the germinal problem so to speak, in all this modern complex of disaster. (Baker Brownell, *The Human Community*, 1950)

Brownell was concerned that with the disintegration of community would follow a weakening in the fabric of the family structure, a rise in divorce rates, an increase in problems relating to juveniles and children, and resulting complexities with passing on positive aspects of our heritage and traditional cultural values. His concern was justified and supported in the data recently summarized by Robert Putnam in his book, *Bowling Alone*:

Americans have been dropping out in droves, not only from political life, but from organized community life more generally. . . .

During the first two-thirds of the century Americans took a more and more active role in the social and political life of their communities—in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around committee tables and card tables and dinner tables. Year by year we gave more generously to charity, we pitched in more often on community projects, and (insofar as we can still find reliable evidence) we behaved in an increasingly trustworthy way toward one another. Then,



mysteriously and more or less simultaneously, we began to do all those things less often.
(Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000)

What has happened to community during the second half of the 20th century? Where are we now? What will happen to the concept of community during the next generation? Why are we even interested in considering this issue? As a writer, I am passionately concerned about proper word usage, and I believe we hear the word, community, used in absurd ways. This first caught my attention several years ago while perusing a fund raising blurb for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The notice invited me to an event sponsored by the gay community (which caused me to wince), the lesbian community (which caused me to wince again), and the trans-gender community (which twisted me into contortions). I reacted, not because I have anything against these groups, but because of their misuse of the word, community. Why do we feel such a need to describe any conceivable group as a community? Frequently you can hear on public television one of the businesses supporting The News Hour described as “an innovator in the medical device community.” Now think about that: what do the members of the medical device community look like? What do they do when they congregate? What do they talk about? Do they get together for breakfast on weekends? Do they know each others’ children? Do they even know each other? Are we in such desperate need to connect with other human beings that we must describe whenever and wherever two or three (or more) are gathered together as a community? (As an aside, I think we direct the concept of community toward groups with a positive public image. I have never heard reference to “the Nazi community,” or “the Klan community,” or “the anti-Semite community.”) I believe that Max Harris has stated it well in the Wisconsin Humanities Council newsletter: “. . . community has become the latest buzz-word, a kind of feel good goal . . . (offering) a hint of nostalgia with a pleasant taste of apple pie.” But community is far too important a concept to let it remain as simply the latest buzz-word in the arts and the humanities, and in the lives of all of us. We must resist the shallow and flippant misuse of the concept. When we misuse words, when they come to mean anything, they mean nothing, and eventually they drop from our vocabulary, from our consciousness and from our memory. We know that our language at once reflects and forms our perceived reality, and therefore the loss of the real meaning of community can have disastrous results. Contemporary poet and essayist, Wendell Berry, has warned us:

. . . When a community loses its memory, its members no longer know one another. How can they know one another if they have forgotten or have never learned one another’s stories? If they don’t know one another’s stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another? People who do not trust one another do not help one another, and more over they fear one another. (Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*, 1990)

His concern is echoed by novelist and shortstory writer, Wallace Stegner, who layers a sense of community with a sense of place:

Indifferent to, or contemptuous of, or afraid to commit ourselves to our physical and social surroundings, always hopeful of something better, hooked on change, a lot of us have never stayed in one place long enough to learn it, or have learned it only to leave it. In our displaced condition we are not unlike the mythless man that Carl Jung wrote about, who lives “like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society. He . . . lives a life of his own, sunk in a subjective mania of his own devising, which he believes to be the newly discovered truth. . . . Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we stop raiding and running, and learn to be quiet part of the time, and acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging. (Wallace Stegner, *The Sense Of Place*, 1986)

And poet and essayist, Patrick Overton, adds to these our need to dialogue, to talk with one another—to communicate within the context of friends and neighbors in community:

For the most part, our community front porches - our social gathering opportunities - sit in disrepair Unused and unrecognized for their important place in our lives, many of them have simply ceased to exist. And we increasingly find ourselves not getting together anymore, losing touch with each other. We are forgetting what it means to be a neighborhood, a community. Many of us live with a longing to return to the way community used to be, even if we don't know for sure what that really was. What we do know is our sense of community isn't what we want it to be. (Patrick Overton, *Rebuilding The Front Porch Of America*, 1997)

And so we must come to what we mean by community. Let us describe its elements and define our terms. Let us approach this definition, not to limit the concept, but to provide a more lucid framework for clearer communication. The word, community derives from the Latin cum (with) and unitas (unity) which in turn comes from unus (one). Webster defines community as: 1. common possession or enjoyment. 2. a society of people having common rights and privileges, or common interests, civil, political, etc., or living under the same laws and regulations.. 3. society at large; the public, or people in general.. 4. common character; similarity; likeness. 5. commonness; frequency. 6. the people living in the same district, city, etc. under the same laws. 7. the district, city, etc. where they live.. 8. a group of animals or plants living together in the same environment. Although this may give us certain broad parameters to frame the concept, I believe we need much more than Webster to help us. When it comes to the idea of living in a common, limited area, we once again look to Wendell Berry, who differentiates between community and nation or state:

A community knows itself and knows its place in a way that is impossible for a public (a nation, say, or a state). A community does not come together by a covenant, by a conscientious granting of trust. It exists by proximity, by neighborhood; it knows face to face, and it trusts as it knows. It learns in the course of time and experience, what and who can be trusted. It knows that some of its members are untrustworthy, and it can be tolerant, because to know in this matter is to be safe. (Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, 1992)

Wallace Stegner adds a time element to learning one's sense of community and sense of place:

He (Wendell Berry) is talking about the knowledge of place that comes from working in it in all weathers, making a living from it, suffering from its catastrophies, loving its mornings or evenings or hot noons, valuing it for the profound investment of labor and feeling that you, your parents and grandparents, your all-but-unknown ancestors have put into it. He is talking about the knowing that poets specialize in. (Wallace Stegner, *The Sense Of Place*, 1986)

But the clearest, most comprehensive, definition of community I have been able to find comes from Baker Brownell's *The Human Community*. I present it, not as the only definition possible, but as one developed from thoughtful experience, the elements of which deserve careful consideration.

I am aware that no fixed lines can be drawn in such a fluid situation. Nevertheless I can indicate to what I refer when I speak of the community. It has five essential characteristics: (1) A Community is a group of neighbors who know one another face to face. (2) It is a diversified group as to age, sex, skill, function, and mutual service to each other. (3) It is a cooperative group in which many of the main activities of life are carried on together. (4) It is a group having a sense of "belonging," or group identity and solidarity. (5) It is a rather small group, such as the family, village, or small town, in which each person can know a number of others as whole persons, not as functional fragments. When the group under consideration is so large that the people in it do not know one another, the community disappears.

These five characteristics overlap, and all might be incorporated in a single statement: *A community*

is a group of people who know one another well. But this is satisfactory only when “knowing well” means the full pattern of functional and social relationships which people may have with one another. (Baker Brownell, *The Human Community*, 1950)

Considering the context within which each of us continues our work in the arts, in the humanities, in education, and in our local communities, let us keep in mind our work’s focus, so well described by Patrick Overton:

Community arts development focuses on encouraging, developing, and celebrating the unique gifts and creative abilities of individuals. In this process, the arts are not viewed as a product, a performance, or an event, that citizens attend or support. They are viewed as a process, providing an opportunity for citizens to participate in and experience them on a personal basis. What this does is to invite individuals to discover who they are, what they believe and why they believe it. It provides an opportunity for “life-long learning” that can result in individual change and transformation. (Patrick Overton, *Rebuilding The Front Porch Of America*, 1997)

As artists, this is our work; this is what we do. Art, if it has any value, communicates within the context of community. Art is an integral part of life. When art is separated from life and community, Brownell says, “. . . Withdrawn by too much naming and sophistication it becomes (a) sick culture . . . , the segregated, self-contemplating purpose, the enclaves of words and cultural narcissism. To these things men turn who have repudiated the vitalities and assimilations of their native context.” Where can the healing of cultural sickness occur if not in community? People cannot heal alone; only in community can art be reintegrated into the social fabric of everyday life, making us whole again. The pace of our lives moves with such velocity, and we are bombarded by so many distractions, that the time for reflection necessary to experience metaphor easily slips through our fingers and we grow blind and deaf to subtlety and innuendo. We all possess the innate tools from which springs creative, imaginative, and artistic expression, which is first validated within the individual artist, but then transcends the individual as it communicates and connects with other human beings. This sharing of perception forms a nucleus of delight which is the essence of the artistic experience. We cannot contain it; we cannot hold it within ourselves. So let us move forward, inspired by the admonition of community arts pioneer, Robert Gard:

The arts as I see them are central to community life. The arts as I see them are central to community development in this time of change The frontier and all that it meant in economic development, and in the utter necessity of building a nation, is certainly being replaced by the frontier of the arts. In no other way can Americans express the core and blood of their democracy. For in the communities, lie the final tests of the acceptance of the arts as a necessity in everyday life. In terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone If we are seeking in America, let it be seeking for the reality of democracy in the arts. Let art begin at home, and let it spread through the children and their parents, and through the schools and the institutions and through government Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live. (Robert E. Gard, “Altering the Face and Heart of America”, 1992)

These comprise the simple gifts of community: the gifts of coming together and sharing who we are with one another, the gifts of delight we all share as artists.