

Galvanizing Community

Platform address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, November 6, 2005
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Galvanizing Community: Dictionaries describe community in various ways, as dictionaries tend to, reflecting common usage as they do. But among those various descriptions is a characterization that nicely fits our purpose this morning: “A group of people having a common interest or identity and sharing participation and fellowship.” And, in dictionary-speak, to galvanize is to arouse awareness or spur action.

So what I want to accomplish this morning is to arouse your awareness of the intentional community of the New York Society for Ethical Culture and of the common identity and interests we share, and perhaps to even have those interests spur a bit of action, or at least greater participation and fellowship. After all, we are a religion of deed rather than creed, and that itself is very much a part of our identity.

But before getting into intentional community, consider briefly some reasonably recent shifts in the larger community, what the dictionaries call our society as a whole. Not our global culture, but what we’ve experienced here in our own country.

There was a time, not all that long ago, at least not all that long ago in the greater scheme of things—perhaps a generation or two, depending upon your generation—when our concept of community was vastly different than it is today. And that’s what I want to get at this morning, more than a definitive description of community I want to address our concept, our sense of community.

At the time Felix Adler founded the Ethical Culture movement in the late nineteenth century, the industrial revolution was well underway, science and reason were replacing revelation and divination as our way of understanding the world and our place in it, and a rural, agrarian way of life was giving way to a more urban existence

Change was definitely afoot at the dawn of the twentieth century, but the central elements of community remained essentially the same for a good long while yet. And those central elements were localized and multi-generational—a community in which children grew up with their grandparents and where you worked and retired with those you went to school with. A community in which everyone pretty much knew everyone else’s business—for good or for ill.

There were periods when that seemed to shift. But even during the great migration of the depression, those scattered in search of jobs and those fleeing the dustbowl, were generally not lone travelers but the uprooted nub of community—the nuclear family. And wherever they settled, they almost inevitably landed in the middle of a community surprisingly similar to the one they left—at least dynamically. The inhabitants of company towns, tent cities, and itinerant camps formed instant bonds based on lifelong habits shaped over generations.

Two world wars, a devastating depression, and a litany of natural catastrophes couldn’t change what humankind had constructed over the course of its advancement. Adversity couldn’t destroy it. Natural and our own devastation could displace but not fundamentally alter it. It took prosperity to do it in. A post World War II prosperity that

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker’s presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

segued into the carefree fifties and that rocked and rolled into the sixties before we awoke to a strange new world.

While we were distracted, while we weren't looking, traditional community snuck away and gone was the close proximity of that multi-generational family, gone to the solitude and sometimes sequester of urban, single-family homes far away.

Gone were the childhood friends, scattered to far and distant places, out of reach, technology not yet having spanned long distances. Better jobs brought the wherewithal to uproot and relocate in pursuit of still better jobs. Sometimes family followed but, as the prismatic effect of relocation eventually scattered us in increasing directions, that became impossible.

Gone was that sense of community that had once seemed so stable, so dependable, and so enduring. The American pie was suddenly missing a piece—and that piece was our familiar sense of community.

Over the course of a couple of decades our culture shifted and we grew distant from one another. By the time the seventies arrived we had so little connection with each other it's a wonder there was enough contact to spur a sexual revolution!

There was a period in this transition when we thought government might be able to replace what prosperity had displaced—remember *The Great Society*?—all those things formerly provided by extended family and close-knit society were to become the responsibility of government. But we quickly saw the limitations of the state which is, pretty much by definition, an emotionless, dispassionate provider of services rather than a caring, compassionate supporter of people.

In the intervening decades, government has attempted and accomplished much in the areas of health care, education, housing, and jobs. Yet much remains to be done in these and other areas and we now have a much better idea of the limits of government and the obligations of a committed citizenry.

Don't get me wrong; over four decades later many of us still share the optimism and commitment expressed by Lyndon Johnson in [May 22,] 1964, when he said “We have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but toward the Great Society...”

I think that an essential ingredient of community is a collective response born of individual need and carried out through a cooperative initiative. The state—local, regional, national, and, should it ever come to it, international or global—has a role. But what has been displaced at the grassroots level must be replaced at the grassroots level.

Notice I said replaced, not recreated. There are those who maintain that the only way to recapture a sense of community is to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. That didn't work in the nursery rhyme and it doesn't work in reality. But a growing number who view the world in static, fundamentalist ways, are trying to put it back together, trying to make a fractured past whole again, still trying to recreate in the present what irretrievably belongs to history.

You've heard them, how could you not, with their continual harangue of “family values.” I have to confess; I don't know what they're talking about. And I have to wonder if they do.

The underlying message seems to be, “be like me and let's all be like we were and everything will be all right.” I understand the desire for what was for many serene, stable,

dependable, and productive times—especially if you happened to be a white, Anglo Saxon, protestant male—but I don't understand the conclusion that if we recreate society as it was then it will function in the same way today. It won't. Even if it were possible to recreate that fantasy, it wouldn't work the same way. The world has changed, we change with it, and we must continue to change.

So where does that leave us? Well, I'm a big believer in the simple approach—in starting where you are and working with what you have. And where we are this morning is here, with each other. Look around you. Go ahead, turn in your seats, look around. Look at the people you greeted this morning. This is where we are, and we are what we have.

And that seems to me to be an excellent place to begin—right here with each other.

Our relationships with each other—inspired by compassion and guided by ethics—is what community is built on, and it always has been.

The New York Society for Ethical Culture, with its attitude of intentional community, has made a religion of ethical relationships. Ahead of its time at the moment of its founding but now ready for prime time, Ethical Culture offers a reasoned, compassionate, and respectful response to those who would have you believe that there's only one way to do community, only one way to be a family, only one way to live your life. There are alternatives. And for me, and, I would venture, for everyone here this morning, this is it—community based on natural, compassionate, ethics.

Call it community, call it extended family, call it your personal support circle, call it what you will, it has changed over the last half-century. But the minds of many are stuck on how it was rather than how it could be. We need to affect a mind shift on this one simple point, a mind shift that will in turn have great social impact and considerable cultural consequence.

The power to do that lies with us. And the way to exercise that power is through the way we live our lives, and the way we intentionally form and galvanize community. There is a connection between the way we lead our individual lives and the way our culture operates. The way we conduct ourselves, especially in the small matters of living, influences the thinking of others. And when people change their minds, cultures shift.

As the multi-generational, localized personal communities of yesterday give way to a modern mobile society, the question we're left with is what void is left in our lives and how do we replace it? Who and what have we come to depend upon through the highs and lows of the stages of life? What brings us together, what keeps us together, and what makes us most aware and appreciative of the intentional community we've formed?

Also, we should ask, what were some of the traits, the good traits, of that bygone sense of community that we might learn from and perpetuate in our own, small, intentional community? The past, while past, should inform the present so that we might build a better future.

Well, it was close living, both in that multi-generational, little house on the prairie as well as in that close-knit, stable neighborhood, so it was beneficial to get along. Today we're all too often prone to rudeness and can be dismissive of those we find irksome. We preach tolerance but often practice the opposite, forgetting that troublesome others are part of the fabric of our community and add to the texture of our lives.

We used to help each other in meaningful ways just because that's what we did. People watched out for each other and that watchfulness led others to do better. There was a sense that if we did wrong we would suffer, perhaps not punitively but in the esteem of others and that was hurtful to us.

About ten days ago, while I was waiting in the holding room just behind this stage—what we call, in a fit of ostentation, the “green room”—waiting to do my two-minute stand up for Ethical Culture before the latest program in the Ethical Edge Series, *Is A Fairer Globalization Possible*—if you missed it you missed something special—I was talking with a representative from our cosponsor of the event, the Carnegie Council on Ethics And International Affairs. He expressed dismay and wonder that our fellow citizens are willing to casually accept the most egregious ethical transgressions by our elected officials, by our role models, and by our authority figures, and take them in stride as “business as usual.”

I was surprised that he was surprised. We live in a culture where the majority of our college students think it's acceptable to cheat on an exam. Where right and wrong are increasingly determined by whether you get caught or not. Where the attitude of responsibility and trust that was once a hallmark of our society, and that is entwined in the ethical life, has eroded.

All those virtues, virtues we once thought resided in our society's structure, we now see exist in us and are expressed in our sociality—through our interactions and in our relationships. And it's that understanding that empowers us to intentionally form community—binding, meaningful community—with those with whom we do not share a common history or heritage or geography.

And if you think it arrogant or grandiose or downright foolish to think a group, a community as small as our can affect our national culture, let me remind you of the woman we paused to honor this morning—Rosa Parks. Just one woman who changed the face and fabric of our nation because, in her own words, she learned early on “that I was a person with dignity and self-respect, and I should not set my sights lower than anybody else's.”

And we should not set our sights any lower just because we are few in number. Even one person can make a large difference. We may be few but we are a community and we are doing so much together. We don't have to while away our lives in wait of great opportunities or extraordinary circumstances to do good, to help others, or to make a difference. The circumstances surround us continually, the opportunities are there daily, and we are responding to them with the understanding that how we act in small, ordinary circumstances matters. How we react to the deeds of others matters, too. That's what shapes our culture.

Let me give you a couple of illustrations of what I'm talking about.

In the seventies, when we were awakening to this cultural shift in community that I've been talking about, I visited a friend in Grant County, Kentucky, not all that distant from Cincinnati geographically but a long way away culturally. Change hadn't come so much to Grant County and it still had that old-time sense of community. People sat on porches and waved when you drove past; spoke to you on the street and in the stores; stopped and chatted with you.

A storm had just torn through this serenity and my friend, Alan—who later went off to Katmandu to find himself, returned, married a Presbyterian minister, and disappeared

into a small town in Indiana never to be heard from again—Alan pointed out a dozen or so pickup trucks gathered around a barn and explained, “His roof was damaged in the storm last week and those guys, his neighbors, are there to help fix it.”

They had given up their Saturday afternoon to help another in need. An admirable act of kindness but, when lumped together with all the waving and howdying, it seemed a bit confining to me. I came from Indianapolis, hardly a mighty metropolis, but a place where you didn’t have to love your neighbor to give them some living space.

So I asked the soon-to-be-found Alan, “what Happens if you want to be left alone around here?” He matter-of-factly explained, “You get yourself a place off the beaten path, preferably up a ridge a ways, and if anyone comes around you blast off your shot gun a time or two and word will get around that that crazy guy up the hill will shoot at you if you get too close.”

I thought about that a while and asked, “Then what happens if your roof blows off?” “Oh,” said Alan, “They’ll still come around and help you fix it. That’s just the way they are.”

That’s community. And those acts of kindness born of our compassionate and another’s need, and not necessarily on how much we might like them, is one of the things that galvanizes community. And any community has those we don’t for care all that much. It easy to muster the compassion to love humanity, but it can be pretty challenging to love it one at a time.

Which brings me to my next and last story, I promise. It took place in an Ethical Culture Society. After the platform address, a sweet curmudgeon—and, yes, there is such a thing—with under developed social skills and an over developed need to express himself, unintentionally insulted the speaker. That’s what sweet curmudgeons do.

He then wandered away leaving a heavy silence in his wake, a silence that was filled by one of the greatest acts of tactful gentleness I have ever seen. A woman, who I didn’t think had it in her, said simply, “I hope he didn’t upset you. Every family has one and he’s ours.”

She did not apologize for the offense, after all it wasn’t her offense, but she did claim the offender on behalf of the community. She accepted him while at the same time caring for the speaker who had that expression people wear when they don’t know what to do. With a simple act of kindness he was put at ease and assured he didn’t need to do anything.

That, too, is community, a place where you can be comfortable and not personalize the slights of those who could behave better. A place where you yourself can behave better. ...

Like any group, no matter how large, our community has many smaller groups within it, many ways of connecting to the community as a whole, many programs that appeal in different ways to different members of our community, and of course numerous relationships that cross and weave the fabric of our community.

These form and reform in a continuing expression of our creativity. They arise from our progressive common interest, and together they form our identity. It is through small numbers of us actively sharing specific interests and activities, through our participation in the many programs and activities, through the companionship and fellowship of our

interactions and ethical practices that bring us together on equal terms, it is within this congenial atmosphere that community is formed and galvanized.

And it is through the very practice, the intentional practice of community that we become aware of the community we are a creative part of. And that is what galvanizes community—our commitment to each other and to the ideals we hold in common. And if it sounds simplistic or circular to say that what galvanizes community is our commitment to do so, it's not. It's a spiral, an upward spiral that is always exciting and fulfilling.

Just as community's opposite—loneliness, bitterness, and depression—can be a downward spiral of seemingly endless depth, so, too, can community take us to new heights and has. Our commitment to bringing out the best in each other, to overlook the frailties and failures of others in hope and expectation that they will be as generous toward our own, is a truly uplifting experience. It's what makes us who we are and the best that we can be. It's what forms community and what galvanizes community.

We can best learn and develop the good habits of ethical living in community. But, as community no longer comes pre-packaged, we must create it intentionally. That's our work here at the Society for Ethical Culture—to intentionally create and galvanize community for ourselves and for others.

So, when you take part in the various activities offered here, when you participate in the programs of the Society, when you see and experience the relationships that comprise our community, stop every now and again to be aware of them and to experience that sense of calm contentment that comes from being with others with whom you share so much, with others who have the courage to accept you as you are and to live in faithful accord with their shared sense of ethics and equality.

It is, in no small measure, our avowed moral ambition to bring out the best in each other that arouses our awareness and that spurs us to action.

Get close to that experience, it's what galvanizes community.



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