

The Trumpeter (1998)

ISSN: 0832 6193

True Community is Founded on a Sense of Place, History and Trust



Chris Maser

*This article is adapted from *Setting the Stage for Sustainability: A Citizens Handbook* by Chris Maser, Russ Beaton, and Kevin Smith. 1998. Lewis Publishers, Boca Raton, FL.

Community, as English historian Arnold Toynbee said of civilization, "is a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor." But "community" is a deliberately different word than "civilization" or even "society." Although "community" may refer to neighbourhoods or workplaces, to be meaningful it must imply membership in a human-scale collective, where people encounter one another face to face.

Community is thus a group of people with similar interests living under and exerting some influence over the same government in a shared locality. Because they have a common attachment to their place of residence, where they have some degree of local autonomy, they form the resident community.

People in such a community share social interactions with one another and organizations independently of government, and through such participation, are able to satisfy the full range of their daily requirements within the local area. The community also interacts with the larger society, both in creating change and in reacting to it. Finally, the community as a whole interacts with the local environment, moulding the landscape within which it rests and is in turn moulded by it. In this sense, community is about the oneness of the whole and the wholeness of the one.

Community is rooted in a sense of place through which the people are in a reciprocal relationship with their landscape. As such, a community is not simply a static place within a static landscape, but rather is a lively, ever-changing, interactive, interdependent system of relationships. Because a community is a self-organizing system, it does not simply incorporate information, but changes its environment as well. Thus, as the community, in its living, alters the landscape, so the landscape, in reaction, alters the community.

Reciprocity is the self-reinforcing feedback loop that either extends sustainability to or withholds it from a community and its landscape. We, therefore, create trouble for ourselves in a community when we confuse order with control. Although freedom and order are partners in generating a viable, well-ordered, autonomous community, a community is, nevertheless, an open system that uses continual change to avoid deterioration.

A community also has a history, which must be passed from one generation to the next, if the community is to know itself throughout the passage of time. History is a reflection of how we see ourselves and thus goes to the very root by which we give value to things. Our vision of the past is shaped by, and in turn shapes, our understanding of the present - those complex and comprehensive images we carry in our heads and by which we decide what is true or false.

When the continuity of a community's history is disrupted, the community suffers an extinction of identity and begins to view its landscape not as an inseparable extension of itself, but as a separate commodity to be exploited for immediate financial gain. When this happens, community is destroyed from within, because trust is withdrawn in the face of growing economic competition.

It seems clear, therefore, that true community literally cannot extend itself beyond local place and history. "Community," says Wendell Berry, "is an idea that can extend itself beyond the local, but it only does so metaphorically. The idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities."

For a true community to be founded in the first place and to be healthy and sustainable, it must rest on the bedrock of mutual trust among its members, as eloquently penned by Wendell Berry:

...a community does not come together by 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. A community member can be trusted to be untrustworthy and so can be included. But if a community withholds trust, it withholds membership. If it cannot trust, it cannot exist. ¹

"Trust," according to the American Heritage Dictionary, "is firm reliance on the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing; confident belief; faith." But trust cannot really be defined, because it is based on faith that a particular person is "trustworthy" or faithful to his or her word. Trust can only be lived in one's motives, thoughts, attitude, and behaviour.

Trust versus mistrust is the psychosocial crisis in the first of Erik Erikson's eight stages of human development. Trust versus mistrust is the dominant struggle from ages zero to one. Erikson assigned hope as the virtue of this stage in which the mother-baby relation lays the foundation for trust in others and in oneself. But as everything has within itself the seed of its opposite, this stage also presents the challenge of mistrust in others and a lack of confidence in oneself.

Hope, as the virtue of trust, is the enduring belief that one can achieve one's necessities and wants. Trust in human relationships is thus the bedrock of community and its sustainable development.

If trust is not developed, none of Erikson's other stages of development can take place: *autonomy* versus shame and doubt, *initiative* versus guilt, *industry* versus inferiority, *identity* versus identity confusion, *intimacy* (relationship) versus isolation, *generativity* versus stagnation, and *integrity* versus despair - all of which are part and parcel of community sustainability. Community is, therefore, the melding of how people in different developmental stages relate to both themselves as individuals within a community and with others as a community.

In sum, community is relationship, and meaningful relationship is the foundation of a healthy, sustainable community. In this connection, Ralph Waldo Emerson felt that, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." William James said it thusly: "Wherever you are, it is your own friends who make your world."

Community also reminds one that the scale of effective organization and action has

always been that of small local groups. As anthropologist Margaret Mead says: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

It is, therefore, logical that community not only is a way of valuing the independent voluntary or nonprofit organization but also relies for its expression on such institutions as neighbourhood schools, family centers, and volunteer organizations. Further, creating sustainable communities strengthens one's fidelity to a sense of place and is the best possible immigration policy, because it raises the value of staying home. These things top-down government cannot fulfil.

With the current disintegration of family and local community in American life, it is unlikely that most people in this country really have an intimate sense of trust and belonging. We have largely lost our sense of connection to community that once impressed the French political figure and traveler Alexis de Tocqueville to the point where he wrote in the 1830s: "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations...religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons and schools." ²

He went on to argue that it was no accident that "the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have, in our time, carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desire." Why then the progressive disintegration of trust?

Consider that in 1966 only thirty per cent of the people surveyed said they did not trust the government in Washington, D.C., some of the time or all of the time, and in 1992 seventy-five per cent of the people surveyed responded in the negative. What has happened to the most democratic country on Earth? Why have we lost our sense of trust, our sense of community? There are at least three possibilities.

One reason for this loss may be our lopsided expansionist economic world view in which material possessions and the incessant push for continual economic growth take the place of spirituality, as once manifested in quality relationships and mutual caring. The economic world view translates into both adults having to work at paying jobs outside the home in many households just to make ends meet, which raises the question, "Who is left at home to act as a parent and forge community ties, when both adults are too busy?" If, however, human society and its environment are ever to become sustainable, it is necessary to rediscover or recreate our sense of local community in order to balance the material with the spiritual, the piece within the whole.

The second reason is summed up by Abraham Maslow: "We [as human beings] fear our highest possibilities (as well as our lowest ones). We are generally afraid to become that which we can glimpse in our most perfect moments, under the most perfect conditions, under conditions of greatest courage. We enjoy and even thrill to the god-like possibilities we see in ourselves in such peak moments. And yet we simultaneously shiver with weakness, awe, and fear before these same possibilities." Is it, as Maslow says, our fear of our own greatness and success that is the inner enemy made manifest in the moral decay that is consuming communities in this country?

The third reason may be that we have lost sight of the meaning of community itself as we enter an era of naked competition in the global market place. Here, it is instructive to consider communities of birds in a given area as ornithologists think of them. First, there is the resident community, which is that group of birds inhabiting the area to which they have a strong sense of fidelity all year. In order to stay throughout the year, year after year, they must be able to meet all of their ongoing requirements for food, shelter, water

and space. These requirements become most acutely focused during the time of nesting, when young are reared, and during harsh winter weather.

Then there are the summer visitors, who overwinter in the southern latitudes and fly north to rear their young. They arrive in time to build their nests, and in so doing must fit in with the yearlong residents without competing severely for food, shelter, water, or space, especially space for nesting. If competition were too severe, the resident community would decline and perhaps perish through overexploitation of the habitat by summer visitors, which have no lasting commitment to a particular habitat.

There are also winter visitors, who spend the summer in northern latitudes, where they rear their young, and fly south in the autumn to overwinter in the same area as the yearlong residents, after the summer visitors leave. They too must fit in with the yearlong residents without severely competing with them for food, water, shelter, and space during times of harsh weather and periodic scarcities of food. Here, too, the resident community would decline and perhaps perish, if overexploitation of the habitat through competition were too severe. And like the summer visitors, the winter visitors are not committed to a particular habitat but use the best of two different habitats (summer and winter).

On top of all this are the migrants, which come through in spring and autumn on their way to and from their summer nesting grounds and winter feeding grounds. They pause just long enough to rest and replenish their dwindling reserves of body fat by using local resources of food, water, shelter and space to which they have only a passing fidelity necessary to sustain them on their long journey.

The crux of the issue is the carrying capacity of the habitat for the yearlong resident community. If the resources of food, water, shelter and space are sufficient to accommodate the yearlong resident community as well as the seasonal visitors and migrants, then all is well. If not, then each bird in addition to the yearlong residents in effect causes the area of land and its resources to shrink per resident bird. This, in turn, stimulates competition, which under circumstances of plenty would not exist. If, however, such competition causes the habitat to be overused and decline in quality, the ones who suffer the most are the yearlong residents for whom the habitat is their sole means of livelihood.

Here, I might anticipate your question concerning what a resident bird community has to do with a resident human community. It has to do with Wendell Berry's notion that a true community can extend itself beyond the local, but only if it does so metaphorically. This means that, if the resident community is rendered nonsustainable by outside influences - as through clearcutting a forest by a large absentee corporation to the detriment of a local water catchment - then the trust embodied in the continuity of a community's history is shattered, as is the self-reinforcing feedback loop of mutual well-being between the land and the people over time.

Another more subtle way outside influence can destroy community is transients in its population. In one small town in Idaho, where I asked people how they felt about the fairly large number of employees of the U.S. Forest Service living in their community, they replied that they tried not to get to know them.

When asked if they avoided getting to know the folks from the Forest Service, because they were transients who felt no sense of place within the community, the answer was only partly in the affirmative. They said it was just too painful to become friends with Forest Service employees and to learn to trust them, only to have them leave in two or three years. That kind of continual loss was too much like perpetual grieving for the death of friends and was more than the community could abide.

When a community loses (for whatever reason) the cohesive glue of trust embedded in its

fundamental values, it loses its identity and is set adrift on the ever-increasing sea of visionless competition both within and without, where "grow or die" becomes the economic motto driving the cultural system. Such visionless competition inevitably rings the death knell of community.

We must remember that we are, first and foremost, creatures who need to share in order to know that we exist and have value, for it is through sharing our life's experiences on a day-to-day basis that we define our personal identities. If, therefore, in the hurry-worry of today's materialistic world we lose sight of our need for one another as human beings, we will find in the end that we have nothing of real value after all, regardless of how much material wealth we have gained through our frantic activities garnered unto ourselves.

Endnotes

1. Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

2. Joanne Jacobs, "American's civic involvement still strong, but changing," *Corvallis Gazette-Times* (Corvallis, OR, July 25, 1966).

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