Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
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Community

CHALICE LIGHTING

Words of Parker Palmer: “Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” To which Henri Nouwen adds: “That person is always in your community somewhere; in the eyes of others, you might be that person.”

CHECK IN

How is it with your soul?

DEFINING MOMENT

community (n). from Latin *communitatem*, meaning “fellowship, *community* of relations or feelings” [OED], but in Medieval Latin it came to be used concretely to mean “a society, a division of people.” In English, the meaning “common possession or enjoyment” is from c. 1400. Sense of “a society or association of persons having common interests or occupations” also is from c. 1400. From late 14c., "a number of people associated together by the fact of residence in the same locality," also "the common people" (not the rulers or the clergy). Related to *common*.

common (adj). c. 1300, “belonging to all, owned or used jointly, general, of a public nature or character,” from Old French *comun* “common, general, free, open, public” (9c., Modern French *commun*), from Latin *communis* “in common, public, shared by all or many; general, not specific; familiar, not pretentious.”

READINGS

from "Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing"

Parker J. Palmer[1]

Twelve years ago, my own yearning for community in education led me out of the mainstream of higher education to a small place called Pendle Hill, a 55-year-old Quaker living/learning community near Philadelphia. It is a place where everyone from teachers to cooks to administrators receives the same base salary as a witness to community. At Pendle Hill, rigorous study of philosophy, nonviolent social change, and other subjects, goes right alongside washing the dishes each day, making decisions by consensus, and taking care of each other, as well as reaching out to the world. Out of that long, intense experience, what might I share that would somehow be hopeful and encouraging? I learned, of course, that community is vital and important, but it is also terribly difficult work for which we are not well prepared; at least I was not. I learned that the degree to which a person yearns for community is directly related to the dimming of memory of his or her last experience of it.

> Q. Do you yearn for community? If so, does it seem true that your yearning is "directly related to the dimming of memory of [your] last experience of it"? How so?

Quest for Community

Parker J. Palmer[2]

Much has been made about the quest for community in our day, but our rhetoric is not reflected in our actions. While we honor community with words, the history of the twentieth century has been a determined movement away from life together.

For at least three generations Americans have been in conscious flight from the communities of family and town. Both the extended family and the small town slowed our progress toward a goal we cherish more deeply than we cherish life together: the goal of economic mobility. The small town cannot contain a range of jobs wide enough or tall enough to permit us freedom of movement. And when we do get a chance to move onward and upward, the extended family holds us back.

So we have been drawn toward cities large and complicated enough to meet our economic desires, and toward families small and portable (and even disposable) enough to make mobility possible. Popular sociology portrays us as victims of these "movements" and "trends," as if the woes that accompany modernity had been forced upon us. But no. The destruction of intimate community has been at our own hands. It has corresponded to our own hierarchy of values. My point is not that large cities and small families are wrong; both clearly have their values. My point is that those values stand largely in tension with the

[1] *Change*, Sep-Oct 1987.
[2] From *A Place Called Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 212, 1977.

value of total and intimate community. As much as we yearn for community, we yearn even more for the social and economic prizes individual mobility can bring.

We can take a first, crucial step away from romance about community by recognizing that it is a value in conflict with other values we hold—and that in our decisions, community usually loses out. How many of us would pass up a job promotion which involved relocation in favor of deepening our local roots? How many of us would want to trade the anonymity of the city (no matter how lonely at times) for the cloying, gossipy, parochial place we imagine smalltown America to be? We must begin by recognizing that our verbal homage to community is only one side of a deep ambivalence that runs through the American character—the other side of which is a celebration of unfettered individualism.

> Q. How has this tension between yearnings – for community vs. for social and economic prizes – played out in your life?

The Resurgence of Individualsim

Parker J. Palmer[3]

In times past, this American ambivalence was anchored strongly on two sides, for both individualism and community seemed possible. The settlers of the American frontier had to possess both the strength of individuality and the capacity for community. They needed to stand alone and to stand together, and there seemed to be no contradiction between the two. But in our time, individualism has run amok. We remain ambivalent, but one anchor has been tugged loose, and we find ourselves drifting dangerously toward the rocks of autonomy and the isolated self because we can no longer be certain that community is available to us.

The breakdown of confidence in community has been explored by Philip Rieff in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic.* Rieff argues that community itself once prevented disintegration of the individual personality, for in community each self had its boundaries and its place. Absent were anxieties about whether one was needed, and where; the answers were woven into the very fabric of society. And in the event that a personality did crumble, community itself was the therapy. In community one could find the confining but comforting role which brought life back together.

But with the breakdown of the common life came growing personal disintegration and the need for a therapy which did not depend on community! So, Rieff points out, a new mode of therapy emerged (notably Freudian) aimed at creating individuals who could function without the sort of community embeddedness that had supported humans for thousands of years before the industrial age. As Rieff notes, these are not only the goals of therapy, they are themes reinforced by the therapeutic process itself. For example, the "crisis of transference'' is that point at which the patient must learn to become independent even of

[3] From *A Place Called Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 212, 1977.

the therapist. And the sheer expense of therapy is a constant reminder to the patient that aid will not come freely from the community but must be purchased in the market place. Much of modern therapy is premised on the notion that community is no longer available and we had better learn to go it alone.

This theme pervades other areas of modern life. Education is a notable example. Historically, education and community were inseparable. The content of education reflected the community consensus, and at the same time helped the community evolve and perpetuate itself. Today education has become a training ground for competition, rooted in the assumption that community is gone and we must learn to stand on our own two feet. In fact, more than a training ground, education itself has become a competitive arena where winners and losers are determined even before the contest is scheduled to begin.

It is not only that isolated practices in the schools—like grading on the curve—are so obviously rooted in Social Darwinism. It is not only that when students get together to cooperate on their work, most schools call it "cheating"—so suspect are the communal virtues. Nor is it only that most of us, deep inside, feel that children who are trained to cooperate rather than compete are not well prepared for the “real world.” Beneath these surface symptoms is a fundamental fact: our schools perform an economic function more than an educational one; they exist not so much to teach and learn as to play a role in the distribution of scarce goods and resources. Their function, that is, no longer involves reflecting and renewing the community but providing the means by which society can decide who gets what, and how much of it.

The same premise—that community is gone and we must learn to stand alone—can be found in much that passes for spirituality these days. For in religious life, too, community has disappointed and failed us. Many who understand themselves as religious, or who are open to religious experience, cannot tolerate the church in any of its forms. So new religions, with their emphasis on the solitary journey of the inward-seeking self, have found many followers.

At their worst, these new religions have made the self not only the vehicle but also the object of the religious quest. In these quarters, psychology is praised for having cut through centuries of theological obfuscation. And lost is the sense that the self is defined by participation in communities of covenant. It is no accident that contemporary religious jargon so frequently refers to “getting in touch with one’s self.” We have lost confidence that anything beyond the self exists or can be trusted.

> Q. “Most of us, deep inside, feel that children who are trained to cooperate rather than compete are not well prepared for the ‘real world.’” Is this how you feel, “deep inside”? Do you think it’s how most people feel?

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Community
(With a Fourteenth Thrown in for Free)

Parker J. Palmer[4]

1. Whether we know it or not, like it or not, honor it or not, we are embedded in community. Whether we think of ourselves as biological creatures or spiritual beings or both, the truth remains: we were created in and for a complex ecology of relatedness, and without it we wither and die. This simple fact has critical implications: **community is not a goal to be achieved but a gift to be received.** When we treat community as a product that we must manufacture instead of a gift we have been given, it will elude us eternally. When we try to "make community happen," driven by desire, design, and determination—places within us where the ego often lurks—we can make a good guess at the outcome: we will exhaust ourselves and alienate each other, snapping the connections we yearn for. Too many relationships have been diminished or destroyed by a drive toward "community-building" which evokes a grasping that is the opposite of what we need to do: relax into our created condition and receive the gift we have been given.

> Q. Have you had experience of something like "a drive toward 'community-building'" getting in the way of "relax[ing] into our created condition and receiv[ing] the gift we have been given"?

2. Of course, in our culture—a culture premised on the notion that we must manufacture whatever we want or need—learning to relax and receive a gift requires hard work! But the work of becoming receptive is quite unlike the external work of building communal structures, or gathering endlessly to "share" and "solve problems": **receptivity involves inner work.** Community begins not externally but in the recesses of the human heart. Long before community can be manifest in outward relationships, **it must be present in the individual as "a capacity for connectedness**"—a capacity to resist the forces of disconnection with which our culture and our psyches are riddled, forces with names like narcissism, egotism, jealousy, competition, empire-building, nationalism, and related forms of madness in which psychopathology and political pathology become powerfully intertwined.

> Q. How would you assess your "capacity for connectedness"? Do you engage in the inner work to develop receptivity? If so, what forms does this work take for you?

[4] *The Inner Edge,* Aug-Sep 1998.

3. **We cultivate a capacity for connectedness through contemplation.** For some, this might mean sitting in half-lotus, chanting a mantra or following the breath. Others may find a different approach works better for them. By contemplation I mean any way one has of penetrating the illusion of separateness and touching the reality of interdependence. In my life the deepest forms of contemplation have been failure, suffering, and loss. When I flourish, it is easy to maintain the illusion of separateness, easy to imagine that I alone am responsible for my good fortune. But when I fall, I see a secret hidden in plain sight: **I need other people for comfort, encouragement, and support, and for criticism, challenge, and collaboration**. The self-sufficiency I feel in success is a mirage. I need community—and, if I open my heart, I have it.

> Q. What is your form of contemplation – your way of "penetrating the illusion of separateness and touching the reality of interdependence"?

4. **The most common connotation of the word "community" in our culture is "intimacy," but this is a trap.** When community is reduced to intimacy, our world shrinks to a vanishing point: with how many people can one be genuinely intimate in a lifetime? My concept of community must be capacious enough to embrace everything from my relation to strangers I will never meet (e.g., the poor around the world to whom I am accountable), to people with whom I share local resources and must learn to get along (e.g., immediate neighbors), to people I am related to for the purpose of getting a job done (e.g., coworkers and colleagues). Intimacy is neither possible nor necessary across this entire range of relationships. But a capacity for connectedness is both possible and necessary if we are to inhabit the larger, and truer, community of our lives.

> Q. Have you harbored a hope or expectation that community would entail intimacy? Is Palmer's explanation for why community needs to not connote intimacy persuasive?

5. **The concept of community must embrace even those we perceive as "enemy."** In 1974, I set off on a fourteen-year journey of living in intentional communities. By 1975, I had come up with my definition of community: "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives." By 1976, I had come up with my corollary to that definition: "And when that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place." The reason is simple: relationships in community are so close and so intense that it is easy for us to project on another person that which we cannot abide in ourselves. As long as I am there, the person I least want to live with will be there as well: in

the immortal words of Pogo, "We has met the enemy and it is us." That knowledge is one of the difficult but redeeming gifts community has to offer.

> Q. What has been your experience of being in community with people with whom you don't want to be in community?

6. **Hard experiences—**such as meeting the enemy within, or dealing with the conflict and betrayal that are an inevitable part of living closely with others—**are not the death knell of community: they are the gateway into the real thing.** But we will never walk through that gate if we cling to a romantic image of community as the Garden of Eden. After the first flush of romance, community is less like a garden and more like a crucible. One stays in the crucible only if one is committed to being refined by fire. If we seek community merely in order to be happy, the seeking will end at the gate. If we want community in order to confront the unhappiness we carry within ourselves, the experiment may go on, and happiness—or, better, a sense of at-homeness—may be its paradoxical outcome.

> Q. How does the idea of "being refined by fire" land with you? Would you sign up for that?

7. **It is tempting to think of hierarchy and community as opposites, as one more "either-or."** But in mass society, with its inevitable complex organizations, our challenge is to think "both-and," to find ways of inviting the gift of community within those hierarchical structures. I am not proposing the transformation of bureaucracies into communities, which I regard as an impossible dream. **I am proposing "pockets of possibility" within bureaucratic structures, places where people can live and work differently than the way dictated by the organizational chart.** The most creative of our institutions already do this: e.g., those high tech companies that must organize efficiently to protect the bottom line and get product out the door, but must also create spaces where people can collaborate in dreaming, playing, thinking wild thoughts, and taking outrageous risks, lest tomorrow's product never be imagined.

> Q. Have you had any experience with the sort of thing that Palmer is calling a "pocket of possibility" within a bureaucratic structure?

8. Contrary to popular opinion, **community requires leadership, and it requires more leadership, not less, than bureaucracies.** A hierarchical organization, with its well-defined roles, rules, and relationships, is better able to operate on automatic pilot than is a community, with its chaotic and unpredictable energy field. But leadership for community

is not exercised through power (i.e., through the use of sanctions) that is the primary tool of bureaucratic leadership. Leadership for community requires authority, a form of power that is freely granted to the leader by his or her followers. *Authority* is granted to people who are perceived as *authentic*, as *authoring* their own words and actions rather than proceeding according to some organizational script. So **the authority to lead toward community can emerge from anyone in an organization**—and it may be more likely to emerge from people who do not hold positional power.

> Q. Does this linkage of authority, authoring, and authenticity make sense to you? How have you experienced it?

9. **Leadership for community consists in creating, holding, and guarding a trustworthy space in which human resourcefulness may be evoked.** A critical assumption is hidden in that definition—the assumption that people are resourceful. Standard organizational models assume that people have deficits and scarcities rather than resources: people do not want to work, so the organization must surround them with threats; people would not know what to do with the unexpected, so organizational life must be routine; people will try to cheat if given half a chance, so the organization must build walls of security. When we act on the scarcity assumption it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy through a process called resentment (small wonder!), and people are rendered incapable of receiving community, at least temporarily, sometimes permanently.

> Q. "Leadership for community," says Palmer, "consists in creating, holding, and guarding a trustworthy space in which human resourcefulness may be evoked." How is that done? What does that look like? If it's possible for a space to evoke such resourcefulness, could business forego the threats, routinization, and walls of security upon which they have heretofore relied?

10. **Ironically, we often resist leaders who call upon our resourcefulness.** We find it threatening when leaders say, "I am not going tell you how to do this, let alone do it for you, but I am going to create a space in which you can do it for yourselves." Why threatening? Because many of us have been persuaded by institutions ranging from educational to industrial to religious that we do not have the resources it takes to do things, or even think things, for ourselves (which, to the extent that we believe it, expands an institution's power over our lives). Many people have been convinced of their own inadequacy, and any leader who wants to invite them into a community of mutual resourcefulness must see this invisible wound and try to heal it.

Q. "Many people have been convinced of their own inadequacy." Have you found that to be true? Palmer says leaders who call upon the people's resourcefulness are resisted. Have you found that to be true?

11. **Seeing and treating that wound takes courage and tenacity:** while the leader is calling followers to fullness, the followers are accusing the leader of not doing his or her job. Every teacher who has tried to create a space for a self-sustaining learning community knows this story: students resist on the grounds that "we are not paying tuition to listen to John and Susie talk, but to take notes from you, the person with the Ph.D." It takes a deeply grounded leader—a leader with a source of identity independent of how popular he or she is with the group being led—to hold a space in which people can discover their resources while those same people resist, angrily accusing the leader of not earning his or her keep.

Q. Does this paragraph ring true for you?

12. **In the face of resistance, an ungrounded leader will revert to bureaucratic mode**: the teacher will revert to lecturing rather than inviting inquiry, the manager will revert to rule-making rather than inviting creativity. In the face of resistance, leaders will do what they are taught to do: not create space for others, but fill the space themselves—fill it with their own words, their own skills, their own deeds, their own egos. This, of course, is precisely what followers expect from leaders, and that expectation prolongs the period during which leaders of community must hold the space—hold it in trust until people trust the leader, and themselves, enough to enter in.

13. **There is a name for what leaders experience during this prolonged period of patient waiting. It is called "suffering"** (which is the root meaning of the word "patience"). Suffering is what happens when you see the possibilities in others while they deny those same possibilities in themselves. Suffering is what happens when you hold in trust a space for community to emerge but others lack the trust to enter the space and receive the gift. Suffering is what happens while you wait out their resistance, believing that people have more resources than they themselves believe they have. But leaders do not want to suffer. So we create and maintain institutional arrangements that protect leaders from suffering by assuming the worst of followers and encouraging leaders to dominate them by means of power.

14. **I have yet to see a seminar in suffering as part of a leadership training program**. I can think of three reasons why. One, we train leaders for bureaucracy rather than community, no matter what we say we are doing. Two, the idea of leadership is still so steeped in *machismo* that we do not want to acknowledge a "weakness" like suffering. Three, suffering is a spiritual problem, and we want to keep leadership training in the orderly realm of theory and technique rather than engage the raw messiness of the human heart.

Q. Does this use of the word "suffering" seem insightful? Useful or helpful? How so?

But leadership for community will always break our hearts. So if we want to lead this way, we must help each other deal with that fact. We might begin by viewing the problem through the lens of paradox, that spiritual way of seeing that turns conventional wisdom upside down. Here, "breaking your heart" (which we normally understand as a destructive process that leaves one's heart in fragments), is **reframed as the breaking open of one's heart into larger, more generous forms**—a process that goes on and on until the heart is spacious enough to hold both a vision of hope and the reality of resistance without tightening like a fist.

If we are willing to embrace the spiritual potentials of suffering, then both community and leadership, human resourcefulness and the capacity to hold it in trust, will prove to be abundant among us—gifts we have been given from the beginning but are still learning how to receive.

Old Thinking	**New Thinking**
Community is a goal.	Community is a gift.
We achieve community through desire, design and determination.	We receive community by cultivating a capacity for connectedness.
Community requires a feeling of intimacy.	Community does not depend on intimacy and must expand to embrace strangers, even enemies, as well as friends.
Community is a romantic Garden of Eden.	Community that can withstand hard times and conflict can help us become not just happy but "at home."
Leadership is not needed in communities.	Leadership and the authority to lead toward community can emerge from anyone in an organization.
Suffering is bad and should be avoided.	Suffering lets our "hearts break open" enough to hold both a vision of hope and the reality of resistance without tightening like a fist.

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Community, says Parker Palmer, is not a project to build. We are inherently embedded in community, no matter what. The question is: are we able to receive the gift of community? Have we cultivated capacity for connectedness? To receive the gift takes inner work. It takes practice and discipline to "penetrate the illusion of separateness and touch the reality of interdependence."

Your spiritual exercise this month – and for the rest of your life – is to take up a spiritual discipline to cultivate your capacity for connectedness. Here are just a few of the options:

1. Mindful Walking / Nature Practice: regular, intentional time spent outdoors with the sole aim of remembering one's place within the larger web of life. Paying attention to soundscapes, patterns of light, bird calls, tree textures, clouds. It's both grounding and connective.

2. Lovingkindness (Metta) Meditation: a non-theistic, accessible practice of intentionally sending well-wishes to oneself, loved ones, strangers, those with whom one has difficulty, and the wider world. It softens the heart, dissolves barriers, and awakens felt interdependence.

3. Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading): not just with scripture, but with poetry, essays, even visual art. A practice of slowly, contemplatively engaging a text/image, listening for what it evokes in oneself, how it connects to others, and what call it places upon one's living.

4. Sabbath Practice: a spiritual discipline of regularly ceasing production, consumption, and busyness to *be* — alone and with others. It's a way to re-tether ourselves to the rhythms of life and to community.

5. Ethical Reflection: regular extended reflection on one's participation in systems of harm and care: Where am I contributing to disconnection? Where am I fostering belonging? This could be part of a journaling practice.

6. Contemplative Art Practice: mandala-making, collaborative painting, communal altar-building. Such practices that de-center the ego's control and invite collective creation.

7. Dreamwork or Collective Imagination: gather with others to share dreams, images, or visions — not to analyze, but to listen to what communal wisdom might emerge. Dreams dissolve ego boundaries and can reveal deep connection.

And, of course, you there's always:

8. Join Meredith for Morning online Zen practice. It's offered 5 days a week (Tue-Sat), but you could start off with selecting just one day a week to join the early zoom at OneEarthZen.org. Or try the Monday Evening online Sangha. When it comes to penetrating the illusion of separateness and touching the reality of interdependence, that's what Zen training is all about.

FAITHYNA'S FAMILY PAGE

Faithyna Leonard

As we continue nurturing our children's growth—not just academically, but socially and emotionally—we want to take a moment to reflect on the value of community.

Community is more than just a place—it's a feeling of belonging, connection, and shared responsibility. A community is made up of people who care for one another, help each other grow, and work together to create a safe and welcoming environment.

While school and church are often the first places children experience a sense of community, it's important to help them recognize and build connections in everyday spaces—like at the playground, the grocery store, during family gatherings, or while helping a neighbor. Teaching children to be kind, inclusive, and respectful in these spaces helps them see how they can contribute to a caring world, no matter where they are.

To support this learning, we've been exploring the theme of community through stories that offer important lessons about belonging, giving, and working together. These books are wonderful tools for starting meaningful conversations at home:

- Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman, *All Are Welcome*. A celebration of diversity and inclusion, this story shows children from many backgrounds learning and playing together in a school where everyone belongs.
- Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*. A classic and moving tale of unconditional giving and love, showing the importance of generosity and the balance in caring relationships.
- Sam Apple and Julie Robine, *The Day the Kids Took Over*. A playful story that turns the tables, imagining a world where kids run the show. It sparks discussion about empathy, fairness, and shared responsibility.

These stories provide more than just entertainment—they are invitations to think, feel, and grow together as a family. We hope you enjoy them and use them as a way to deepen your own family's conversations about what it means to be part of a loving, supportive community.

Thank you for being our partners in creating a world where all children can thrive.

CHECK OUT

From everything we've shared and discussed, what overall message stands out for you?

EXTINGUISHING THE CHALICE

Words of George Eliot: "What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?"

Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Text not otherwise attributed is by Rev. Meredith Garmon. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme.