

Our ideal in the real world:

'Only then will we be satisfied'

I HAVE FOUND WHEN I TALK to people about the possibility of making their dream of community come true, they respond very positively. According to the sociologists Bell and Newby, it seems 'everyone — even sociologists — has wanted to live in a community'.¹

* COMMUNITY IS MORE THAN A WARM FUZZY:

'The way it ought to be'

Some say it is because community is a touchy feely word, like 'love', 'romance', 'friendship', 'marriage' or 'family', and the concept has warm fuzzy connotations. Certainly, according to Williams in his book *Keywords*, the word *community*, 'unlike all other terms of social organisation (such as "group", "party", "network", "association" or "institution") is never... used unfavourably...'.²

Some say that the reason the word 'community' is never used unfavourably is that we have forgotten how parochial and oppressive communities can be. According to Bryson and Mowbray: 'In drawing on the historical notion of community, the Nelsonian touch is

applied by communitarians [turning a blind eye] to the tensions... and conflicts that were ordinary parts of their archetypal communities. Gross inequalities, rigid status... blood feuds... intolerance, bondage and ignorance are carefully forgotten, so that "real community" is seen only in terms of cooperation...'.³

And, for some, that may be so.

But the reason the word 'community' is never used unfavourably by the people I talk to is not that we have forgotten how parochial and oppressive 'communities' can be. Quite the contrary. We remember very acutely the tensions and conflicts that so often have characterised our 'communities'.

Yet, for us, the word 'community' is essentially a qualitative term which refers to 'the way we ought to be', liberated from 'intolerance, bondage and ignorance', rather than 'the way we are', circumscribed by 'gross inequalities, rigid status, and blood feuds'.

According to Nisbet, our use of the word is quite typical. Whether we are talking about Confucius, Aristotle, Ibn Khaldun or Thomas Aquinas, the notion of 'community' has always been a 'normative prescription' of an ideal for the world, rather than an 'empirical description' of the real world.⁴

According to Bellah, this notion of 'community', which we speak about in qualitative terms, may be 'resisted as absurdly utopian... But the transformation of which we speak is both necessary and modest. Without it, indeed, there may be very little future to think about at all'.⁵

So, for us, 'community' is not merely a warm

fuzzy; it is actually a framework for building a better world.

* COMMUNITY IS A FRAMEWORK FOR OUR LIVES:

'A commitment to common mutual concern'

In the spectrum of social science research, the term 'community' is not only one of the most common, but also one of the most crucial concepts for the welfare of our society.

Yet there is a lot of confusion about the meaning of the term 'community'. As long ago as 1955, Hillery noted no less than ninety-four different definitions of 'community'. And more than a decade later, Stacey stated that 'certainly confusion continues to reign over the uses of the term'.⁶ So much so, Gowdy once said in frustration, 'it is doubtful whether the concept of "community" refers to a useful abstraction'.⁷

After much study, however, Hillery was able to distinguish three distinctive common elements among the myriad of definitions that he had tabulated. Later Wirth, then Gowdy, confirmed Hillery's findings.

They found that, to increasing degrees of significance, a common physical location, a common social connection and a quality of common reciprocal interaction were the components most likely to constitute 'community'.⁸

Clark, picking up on the quality of conscious reciprocal interaction as the most important component in community, says in his study of *Basic Communities*: 'Community [is] essentially a sentiment which people have about themselves in relation to themselves: a senti-

ment expressed in action, but still basically a feeling. People have many feelings, but there are two essentials for the existence of community: a sense of significance and sense of solidarity... The strength of community within any given group is determined by the degree to which its members experience both a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance within it'.⁹

Toennies argues that while the quality of interaction required to produce a society involves only transient, impersonal, uni-dimensional, secondary relationships, the quality of interaction required to produce a community involves permanent, personal, multi-faceted, primary relationships.¹⁰

Toennies thinks that community is probably only possible for people in kinship groups. But Daley and Cobb think that while community may be easier in homogeneous groups, community may be broader, deeper, higher and wider in heterogeneous groups.¹¹

Certainly that's my experience.

My concept of community involves 'a group of people who share a quality of life which reflects a commitment to common mutual concern in the context of faithful, personal, multi-faceted, relationships'. In his book on community, psychologist Scott Peck says:

If we are going to use the word [community] meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together', 'delight in each other, make others' conditions our own'.¹²

After researching five different intentional communities in depth, sociologist Luther Smith writes in his report:

The primary indicator of communal well-being is that members feel their . . . fellowship approximates the qualities of a caring family. Hardship and failures . . . will be the occasion for creative solutions and increased resolve. They do not break the spirit of a community. . . But loss of mutual respect and steadfast caring strikes a deathblow at the very heart of a community.

The prevailing sense of family is not always easy for these communities to determine. The division of labour which pleases some members is the very issue which oppresses others. . . Members can have opposing reactions to the same communal realities.

Communities . . . thrive when able to create a fellowship not dependent upon conformity, but which encourages members to remain enthusiastically involved even when they disagree with decisions. While decision-making may not always reflect a member's [understanding], it must indicate that the member's ideas have been . . . respected.

Life in community is never all good or bad — it is life, with the full range of joys and frustrations. . . Community, however, tends to accentuate conflicts that might ordinarily be overlooked in the locality. The interrelatedness of communal life causes a decision about one matter to have an impact on most other realities of communal life.

Communities must therefore address intense feeling about the quality of . . . life together without fragmenting their fellowship. This is accomplished when members accept deep struggles as necessary and healthy.

Community is only possible when a sufficient number of members persevere through the turmoil that is part of sustaining community. They must believe that community is worth the struggle and that continuing in

relationship is more promising than leaving. This is not merely persisting because one believes that a community's escutcheon of happiness is near.

It is giving oneself to a fellowship because community is the means through which [their] vocation is fulfilled.¹³

My concept of community includes the following:

- * it is a safe space
- * there is acceptance of people as part of a group
- * there is respect for the unity and diversity of people in the group
- * there is responsibility for the welfare of each person in that group
- * every person participates in the decisions of the group
- * there is support for processes that do justice to the most disadvantaged — not only those inside the group, but also those outside the group.

□ First, community is a safe place

Community is a safe space. It is not a place where there is no fear, but it is a place where there is no reason for fear — because, as Henri Nouwen says, it is a place where hostility is confronted and transformed into hospitality:

We can say that during the last years, strangers have become more and more subject to hostility than to hospitality.

In fact, we have protected our apartments with dogs and double locks, our buildings with vigilant doormen, our roads with anti-hitchhike signs, our subways with security guards, our airports with safety officials, our cities with armed police and our country with an omnipresent military.

Although we might want to show sympathy for the poor, the lonely . . . and the rejected, our feelings toward a stranger knocking on our door and asking for food and shelter is ambivalent at the least.

[But] fear and hostility are not limited to encounters with [strangers]. In a world so pervaded with competition, even those who are very close to each other, such as classmates, teammates. . . colleagues at work, can become infected by fear and hostility when they experience each other as a threat to their . . . safety.

Many places that were created to bring people closer together and help them form a peaceful community have degenerated into [psychological, if not physical] battlefields.

Students in classrooms, teachers in faculty meetings, staff members in hospitals and co-workers in projects often find themselves paralysed by mutual hostility, unable to realise their purposes because of fear, suspicion and even blatant aggression. Sometimes institutions explicitly created to offer free time and free space to develop the most precious human potentials have become so dominated by hostile defensiveness that some of the best ideas and some of the most valuable feelings remain unexpressed. . .

We are called to move [from hostility to] hospitality. The German word for 'hospitality' is *Gastfreundschaft*, which means friendship for the guest. The Dutch word for 'hospitality', *gastvrijheid*, means the freedom of the guest. It shows hospitality wants to offer friendship without binding the guest, freedom without leaving [the guest] alone.

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy.

Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom

not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbour into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good work, but the liberation of fearful hearts. . .

The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness — not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness, where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free — free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find [their] own.¹⁴

Hostility destroys community. Hospitality restores community. For community is nothing, if not the creation of free, friendly, safe space.

□ Second, community means acceptance of people as part of a group

If people are forgotten, rejected, or ignored, they don't feel part of a group. It is only if people are actually remembered, acknowledged and recognised as people that they feel part of a group. According to Jean Vanier, community is all about the constant practice of unconditional acceptance over and above the erratic byplay of petty sympathies and antipathies:

The two great dangers of community are friends and enemies. People very quickly get together with those who are like themselves; we all like to be with someone who pleases us, who shares our ideas — our ways of looking at life. . . Human friendships can very

quickly become a club of mediocrities, enclosed in mutual flattery. . .

Friendship is then no longer a spur to grow, to go further, to be of greater service to our brothers and sisters. . . Friendship then becomes a barrier between ourselves and others. . .

There are always people with whom we don't agree, who block us, who contradict us. We seem incapable of expressing ourselves, or even of living peacefully, when we are with them. Others ask too much of us; we cannot respond to their incessant demands and we have to push them away.

These are the 'enemies'. They endanger us and, even if we dare not admit it, we hate them. Certainly, this is not deliberate. But even so, we just wish these people didn't exist!

These. . . affinities and aversions between different personalities are natural. They come from an emotional immaturity and from many elements from our childhood over which we have no control. It would be foolish to deny them.

But if we let ourselves be guided by our emotional reactions, cliques will form. . . It will no longer be a community, a place of communion, but a collection of people more or less. . . cut off one from another.

When you go into some communities, you can quickly sense tensions. . . People don't look each other in the face. They pass each other in the corridors like ships in the night.

A community is only a community when most of the members have consciously decided to break these barriers and come out of their 'friendship(s)' to (reach) out. . . to their 'enemies'.¹⁵

Both affinities and aversions create cliques. Only acceptance creates community.

□ *Third, community means respect for the unity and diversity of people in a group*

If there is no respect for unity, there is no group. But if there is no respect for diversity, there is no place for various people in a given group. According to Scott Peck, community is all about the constant practice of dedicated inclusivity over against dismissive exclusivity:

Community is, and must be, inclusive. The great enemy of community is exclusivity. Groups that exclude others because they are poor or doubters . . . or sinners or of some different race or nationality are not communities: they are cliques — actually defensive bastions against community.

Inclusiveness is not an absolute. Long-term communities must invariably struggle over the degree to which they are going to be inclusive. Even short-term communities must sometimes make that difficult decision.

But for most groups, it is easier to exclude than include. Clubs and corporations give little thought to being inclusive unless the law compels them to do so.

True communities, on the other hand, if they want to remain such, are always reaching to extend themselves. The burden of proof falls upon exclusivity. Communities do not ask: 'How can we justify taking this person in?' Instead the question is: 'Is it at all justifiable to keep this person out?' In relation to other groupings, communities are always relatively inclusive. . .

The inclusiveness of any community extends along all its parameters. There is an 'aliveness' to community. It is not merely a matter of including different sexes, races and creeds. It is also inclusive of the full range of human emotions. Tears are as welcome as laughter, fear as well as faith. And different styles: hawks and doves, straights and gays. . . the talkative and the silent. All human differences are included.

How is this possible? How can such differences be absorbed, such different people coexist? Commitment — the willingness to coexist — is crucial. Sooner or later, somewhere along the line (and preferably sooner), the members of a group in some way must commit themselves to one another if they are to become or [continue to be] a community.

Exclusivity, the great enemy to community, appears in two forms: excluding the other and excluding yourself. If you conclude under your breath, 'Well, this group just isn't for me — they're too much this or too much that — and I'm just going to quietly pick up my marbles and go. . .', it would be as destructive to community as it would be to a marriage. . .

Community, like marriage, requires that we hang in there when the going gets a little rough. It requires a certain degree of commitment.

If we do hang in there, we usually find after a while that 'the rough places are made plain'. A friend correctly defined community as 'a group that has learned to transcend its differences'. 'Transcend' does not mean 'obliterate' or 'demolish'. It literally means 'to climb over'. The achievement of community can be compared to the reaching of a mountaintop.¹⁶

Exclusive unity creates conformity and exclusive diversity creates incompatibility. Only a unity and diversity that is truly inclusive creates community.

□ *Fourth, community means having a sense of responsibility for the welfare of each person in the group*

If the group is to fulfil its function, it cannot exist as an end in itself. The group exists as a means to the end of helping people to grow as people. According

to Jean Vanier, community is all about the constant practice of conscious responsibility for empowering people, enabling them to realise their potential:

In community people care for each other and not just for the community in the abstract — as an institution or as an ideal way of life.

It is *people* that matter; to care for the people that are there, just as they are. . . And it is not just caring in a passing way, but in a permanent way.

So many people enter groups in order to develop a certain form of spirituality or to acquire knowledge about humanity.

But that is not community. It becomes community only when people start truly caring for each other's growth.

Esther de Waal, writing about the Rule of St Benedict (guidelines for the religious living together in community), says:

It is noticeable how the abbot and the cellarer are concerned about the [people], caring for each singly in all their uniqueness, rather than with the community *en bloc*, that ideal which seems to haunt so much contemporary ideology. The common life never becomes a piece of abstract idealisation or idealism.

St Benedict would probably have appreciated Dietrich Bonhoeffer's aphorism: 'Those who love community destroy community, those who love people build community.'

Some communities — which are more sects — tend to suppress the individual in the interest of a greater unity.

They tend to stop people from thinking. . . Everyone must think alike. Unity here is based on fear

— the fear of being yourself. Community must never take precedence over people.

It is for people and for their growth. In fact, its beauty come[s] from the radiance of each person [as they grow] in their truth [and their] love. . .¹⁷

Individual concern creates individuality and collective concern creates collectivity. Only care for people that is really personal creates community.

□ **Fifth, community means every person participating in the decisions of the group**

People do not expect to make every decision that affects them. But if they are part of a group, people expect to play a part in every decision the group makes that affects them. According to John Cobb, community is all about the constant practice of conscientious participation by every member of a group in the decisions that affect their lives:

To have a communal character. . . does not entail intimacy among all the participants. It does entail that membership in the society contributes to self-identification (and self-development).

To illustrate, for the alienated youth in large cities, those cities remain the societies of which they are members, but they do not constitute, for them, communities.

A society should not be called a community unless there is extensive participation by its members in the decisions by which its life is governed. . .

By [this] definition, there can be a totalitarian society but there can be no totalitarian community.

Community is a matter of the extent to which [a society] participate[s] in its governance. . .¹⁸

Scott Peck contributes this:

We are so unfamiliar with genuine community that we have never developed an adequate vocabulary for the politics. . . When we ponder on how individual differences can be accommodated, perhaps the first mechanism we turn to (probably because it is the most childlike) is that of the strong individual leader. Differences, like those of squabbling siblings, we instinctively think can be resolved by a mummy or daddy — a benevolent dictator, or so we hope.

But community, encouraging individuality as it does, can never be totalitarian.

So we jump to a somewhat less primitive way of resolving individual differences which we call democracy. We take a vote, and the majority determines which differences prevail.

Majority rules.

Yet that process excludes the aspirations of the minority. How do we transcend differences in such a way as to include a minority?

It seems like a conundrum.

How do you go beyond democracy? In the genuine communities of which I have been a member, a thousand or more group decisions have been made and I have never yet witnessed a vote.

I do not mean to imply that we. . . should discard democratic machinery any more than we should abolish organisation. But I do mean to imply that a community, in transcending individual differences, routinely goes beyond even democracy.

In the vocabulary of this transcendence we thus far have only one word: 'consensus'.

Decisions in genuine community are arrived at through consensus, in a process that is not unlike a community of jurors for whom consensual decision-making is mandated.¹⁹

Autocracy creates a satisfied minority at odds with a dissatisfied majority. Democracy creates a satisfied majority at odds with a dissatisfied minority. Only consensus can create community.

□ **Sixth, community means support for processes that do justice to the most disadvantaged**

This means not only the disadvantaged inside the group, but also those outside the group. People do not expect all their needs to be met. But they do expect a group that is ostensibly concerned for people to do all they can to meet unmet needs.

According to Amatai Etzioni, community is all about the constant practice of consistent support for processes that do justice to the most disadvantaged, whether they are part of the group or not:

A communitarian position on social justice (for all groups) includes the following elements:

First, people have a moral responsibility to help themselves as best as they can.

At first, it may seem heartless to ask, say, disabled people, older people who have lost their jobs and minority young people who have suffered discrimination to participate actively in improving their lot.

There is a valid sense that we owe them, that they are entitled to our help. But the laying of a claim to participate actively in advancing their lives on those who are disadvantaged in one form or another. . . [is] based on the concept of human dignity. It is respectful of human dignity to encourage people to control their fate the best they can. . .

For some, taking responsibility for themselves may

mean. . . learning to feed themselves following a stroke. For still others, it may mean admitting illiteracy and learning how to read. For others, it could mean continuing to look for a job following several rejections.

But people should not be exempt from responsibility for themselves. . .

The second line of responsibility lies with those closest to the person, including kin, friends, neighbours and other community members.

They are next in line because they know best what the genuine needs are. . . and are able to tailor the help to what is required.

When the government provides meals on wheels, everybody either eats the same meals or must choose from a limited menu. But when neighbours take turns bringing food to a needy person, they can take into account personal tastes. When a friend or neighbour provides counsel, it is likely to be based on more personalised knowledge.

One reason many homeless people prefer the streets over government-run shelters is that they tend to be cavernous hangers with a strict regimen, in which everyone has to be in bed by a certain time, lights are turned down on cue and so on.

When neighbours take in a new immigrant they tailor their assistance to the specific person. Moreover, in close relations with one's community, reciprocity is most sustainable. Not the cold-blooded calculations that economists presume drive human exchanges, but the open-ended mutual support among neighbours. . .

For the same reason, as a rule, every community ought to be expected to do the best it can to look after its own. . . Society, as a community of communities, should encourage the expectation that attending to welfare is the responsibility of the local community.

We follow this rule already when there is a fire. The local fire company is the first one to be called in; only

if it cannot handle the blaze are companies from other communities mobilised. Likewise, whether the problem is mounting garbage. . . drug abuse, or any of the well-known host of social problems that beset us, the [primary] social responsibility lies with those who share a community.

Last but not least, societies, which are nothing but communities of communities, must help those communities whose ability to help their members is severely limited. Charity ought to begin at home, but not end at home. Indeed, one of the gravest dangers in rebuilding communities is that they will tend to become insular and indifferent to the fate of [others]. Each community must be expected to reach out to members of other communities that are less well endowed and hence less well able to deal with their own problems.

The ways are almost endless, from sending food [to] sending volunteers when a neighbouring community is overwhelmed [and] housing refugees. . .

Social justice is an inter-community issue, not only an intra-community matter.²⁰

As the beloved Bengali social justice activist and academic, Sugata Dasgupta, once said:

We do not want the rise
of the few,
not even of the many,
nor for that matter the rise
of the greatest number.

We are not satisfied
with the greatest good
of the greatest number.

We can be satisfied only
with the good of one and all,
of the high and the low,
of the strong and the weak;
only then will we be satisfied.²¹